

Neighbourhood Houses in Metro Vancouver www.nhproject.ca

MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE INVOLVEMENT

BY SEAN R. LAUER

Funded by SSHRC (Grant No.: 435-2012-1276), the NHiMV project explores the contributions of neighbourhood houses to local communities. Neighbourhood houses have a long history of operation in Vancouver, dating back to 1938. They began as part of the Settlement House Movement made famous in North America by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House. While time and distance have created differences to that early model, the houses remain neighbourhood-based, locally governed, multi-service, community development oriented organizations. Visit www.nhvproject.ca for more information.

This research brief asks if neighbourhood houses contribute to making close friends and avoiding isolation among individuals who use their facilities and participate in programs and activities. We look at young adults (25 to 35 years old) and seniors (55 years and older), in particular because of their potential vulnerability to isolation. As part of the NHiMV project we conducted survey research in February and March of 2014 at fifteen Neighbourhood Houses located in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Respondents were recruited through requests made on the premises of the Neighbourhood Houses on randomly selected days in order to reach a target population of all neighbourhood house users in the Metro Vancouver area. In total we collected questionnaires from 687 users.

Neighbourhood Houses and Social Connections

Neighbourhood houses are a hub in the local community where people can meet their neighbours and develop new friendships. Their doors are open to everyone in the community, and they keep their doors open for many hours so that all members of the community can drop by to use their facilities. Use of the neighbourhood house is often free or carries a minimal charge.

Neighbourhood houses also attract a wide variety of community members to their facilities due to the variety of programs and activities. These include services like childcare groups, English as a Second Language courses, tutorial groups for students, and employment counseling.

Alone, these service oriented programs are not what make the Houses unique. They also combine these services with cultural and other expressive activities like art classes and displays, local music groups and performances and mutual help groups for women and seniors.

Neighbourhood houses are ideal locations for making connections in the community due to their open doors and the variety of programming and activities of interest to all.

Key Findings

A majority of our sample report more than one close friend. A majority of our sample made at least one close friend through involvement at a neighbourhood house.

Seniors in our sample are more likely to have at least one close friend and to have made a close friend through involvement in the neighbourhood house.

Table 1. Close friends and Isolation among Neighbourhood House Users

	Age Groups					
	Total		25 to 35 yrs		55 yrs or older	
	<i>1 or 2 friends</i>	<i>3 or more friends</i>	<i>1 or 2 friends</i>	<i>3 or more friends</i>	<i>1 or 2 friends</i>	<i>3 or more friends</i>
How many really close friends do you have?	34	59	37	56	32	63
Of your close friends, how many did you meet through the neighbourhood house?*	31	29	30	36	34	38
	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>
It is difficult to make new friends here.	66	34	65	35	69	31
I find myself alone more often than I would like.	67	33	68	32	68	32

All figures shown are percentage. * Differences between Age Groups are statistically significant.

Close Friends and Feeling Alone

We asked respondents how many close friends they have, and how many of their close friends they made through the neighbourhood house. The findings are presented in Table 1. The Table shows that nearly all respondents (93%) have at least 1 close friend, and 59% have 3 or more close friends. Particularly interesting, 60% of respondents made at least one close friend through the neighbourhood house.

Most neighbourhood house users do not express problems making friends or feeling lonely. When asked, 66% disagreed that it is difficult to make new friends here, and only 33% find themselves lonely more often than they would like.

A Focus on Age Groups

Loneliness and isolation can be particularly prevalent among young adults and aging seniors. In our sample, 46% of seniors are

currently living alone. Only 31% of seniors say it is difficult to make new friends in Vancouver. Young adults are slightly more likely to find making friends difficult (35%). For both our senior and young adult respondents, 32% say they are lonely more than they would like. Regardless of age, most of our respondents have at least one close friend, but older respondents are slightly more likely to report them. Making friends through the neighbourhood house is common for young adults (66%), but seniors are more likely to make friends through the neighbourhood house (72%).

About the Author

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