



## HEALTH & THIRD PLACES

As pervasive feelings of loneliness and isolation persist for millions of Americans in today's post-pandemic landscape, the need for belonging – particularly outside of one's home and workplace— has reached an all-time high. Perhaps now more than ever, communities across the country are relying upon third places – defined as physical spaces designed for gathering, connecting, and sharing resources – to promote social interaction and build community trust, which supports health and well-being for all.

The social support garnered in third places has been shown to protect health and wellbeing across one's lifetime (Finlay, Esposito, Kim, Gomez-Lopez, & Clarke, 2019). Still, it takes a wide range of third places to cultivate healthy conditions within communities. From libraries and laundromats to barbershops and bars, "third places have long been an important part of American culture, and their role continues to evolve" (Finlay et al, 2019).

That Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy recently prescribed an antidote to our nation's newest public health crisis, an epidemic of loneliness and isolation, is no coincidence: "There is a medicine hiding in plain sight: social connection" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

### KEY CHALLENGES

#### *Decline of Third Places*

Where we choose to live impacts our access to key factors of health including third places which are on the decline across the country, especially in rural communities, as the landscape of Main Street America continues to change. Research shows that, "living in neighborhoods with limited access to resources is associated with poorer physical and mental health" which means that, in addition to losing access to dedicated spaces to socialize, connect, play, and care for one another, residents of these 'deserts' remain at increased risk of poor overall health and wellbeing (Finlay et al, 2019). The decline of brick-and-mortar third places, coupled with the increase of online communities that continue to grow at an alarming rate, pose devastating public health consequences for communities in the very near future.

### WHAT WORKS

Decades of research has shown that third places, that are neither work nor home, play a key role in contributing to a healthy and flourishing society. Third places have been shown to play vital and life-saving roles in our communities, especially among marginalized and vulnerable populations (Finlay et al, 2019).



### Emergency Use

When temperatures plummet and winter storms knock out power, third places like community centers and high school gymnasiums become the first line of defense in providing shelter and warmth for those in need. Collaboration between private and public third places, like local restaurants and/or food purveyors providing meals for distribution at emergency warming locations, can serve to generate social surplus — an urban planning term for “collective feelings of civic pride, acceptance of diversity, trust, civility, and overall sense of togetherness within a locale through sustained use and connection among residents” (Finlay et al, 2019).

### Everyday Use

In their day-to-day lives, healthy communities depend upon regular and continued interaction among those with shared interests — despite myriad underlying differences — whether that be a love of coffee, exercising or art (Low, 2020). Third places such as cafes, fitness centers and art galleries (just to name a few) have been shown to serve as prime venues for the types of interactions that create meaningful connections among individuals from all walks of life. And, while social connection is understood to be a primary benefit to individual health, research points to it improving the resilience of our communities — resulting in a win-win for all.

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT



*Inside The Center on Main during one of its community programs. Photo courtesy of Brook Martinez.*

At [The Center on Main](#) in Falls Village, cultivating connections around the arts has been integral to this vital third place since its inception in 2006 as The Falls Village Children’s Theatre. What began with a professionally produced Spring production continues year-round for youth from the tri-state area.

“While we should be looking everywhere [for connection], we should especially be looking at the places humankind has put its energy over millennia, which is into the arts and creativity,” said Board President Adam Sher, underscoring what sets The Center on Main apart: empowering community members to see themselves as producers, rather than simply consumers, of art.

Since 2010, when the FVCT purchased the physical building (itself an historic reuse project), The Center on Main has become an integral resource for not only building but also evolving itself as a community.

A grant from the Foundation for Community Health funded the nonprofit's strategic planning process, one Sher called transformative. As to the result?

"Clarifying that we're about promoting participatory creativity in the community, and [explaining] the benefits that come from engaging in self-exploration as well as social fabric and cultural organizing," said Sher. Looking ahead, The Center on Main aims to fulfill another role of third places: providing a physical space for people to engage with challenging issues across differences of ideology, priorities, and socioeconomic status.

"Class divides in this area are stark, and to be able to do [this work] in a way that's well-facilitated is not only aligned with our mission but also imperative to moving forward as a community."

## COMING UP

Next up, we'll take a closer look at how broadband – a term that refers to various high-capacity transmission technologies that deliver data, voice, and video across long distances and at high speeds – is an increasingly important contributing factor to the health and wellbeing of both individuals and communities across Connecticut's Northwest Corner and beyond.

### Learn More About

Third Places

**Podcast:** How to Talk to People, [The Infrastructure Community](#)

**Surgeon General's Advisory:** The [Surgeon General's Advisory on our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#) which outlines a framework for a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection

**Brief:** Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, [Social Infrastructure \("Third Places"\) is Not Distributed Equally Across the U.S.](#)



## References

- Finlay, J., Esposito, M., Kim, M. H., Gomez-Lopez, I., & Clarke, P. (2019). Closure of 'third places'? Exploring potential consequences for collective health and wellbeing. *Health & place*, 60, 102225.
- Low, S. (2020). How cafes, bars, gyms, barbershops and other 'third places' create our social fabric. *The Conversation*.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States. <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>