



**TRUST FOR
PUBLIC
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The Common Ground Framework

**BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER
THROUGH PARK AND GREEN
SPACE ENGAGEMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



The country currently faces several interacting social crises for which parks and green spaces can be an important part of the solution. First, the nation is deeply polarized along political, economic, racial, and ethnic lines. For example, only 20 percent of Americans trust the federal government to do what is right most of the time. Second, the nation still struggles to reckon with its history of racism, discrimination, and white supremacy. One study found that 81 percent of major metropolitan areas were more racially segregated in 2019 than they were in 1990. Third, many trends point to a fraying of the nation’s social fabric. A study in 2018 found that one in five Americans report often or always feeling lonely or isolated, and recent studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated what some health professionals have called a “loneliness epidemic.”

For parks and green spaces to address these issues, we propose a three-part Common Ground Framework (henceforth, “the Framework”). The Framework comprises the formation of community *relationships*, the elevation of community *identity*, and the development of community *power*. The Framework builds upon decades of discourse on social capital and contributes new evidence to the emerging field of social infrastructure. The Framework, which can be downloaded [here](#), offers key definitions, expansion on the three-part model, an illustrative case study, actionable community engagement strategies, and discussion of evidence gaps and policy implications.

As promising as parks and green spaces are for cultivating community relationships, identity, and power, the parks field and related sectors need to make bold investments in three key areas: evidence generation; education and training; and policy advocacy. After all, the Framework is exactly that: a foundation for park advocates to build their own practice of putting community at the center.



Community relationships facilitate the development of **community identity**, which is a foundation for building **community power**.

Community Relationships



Community relationships are social bonds between people and are measured by neighborhood social ties and social networks. Compared to previous decades, fewer Americans today feel that people can be trusted or that they have close confidants, which raises the alarm of a loneliness epidemic. Evidence links community relationships to several positive outcomes, including:

- Individuals with strong social relationships have a remarkable 50 percent lower mortality rate than those with few social relationships, making social ties as strong a predictor of mortality as smoking cigarettes
- People who are part of a strong network of community relationships report feeling less depressed, safer in their neighborhoods, and a greater sense of belonging and security
- Neighborhoods with stronger social networks endure and recover from natural disasters better, largely due to the good will of neighbors who act as first responders and share resources in a disaster's wake

Parks and green spaces can promote stronger social ties, reduced loneliness, place attachment, greater social cohesion, and improved rates of community trust in local government. Still, authentic community engagement around parks planning and programming can improve outcomes related to community relationships. Community engagement in parks settings is linked with increasing sense of ownership, trust among neighbors, social cohesion, feeling welcome, and belonging.

Community Identity



Community identity refers to the ways that people who share common spaces may identify as members of a group. It is measured by four concepts: social cohesion, sense of community, place attachment, and sense of ownership and is linked with several positive outcomes, including:

- Individuals with greater community identity are more likely to report increased feelings of safety, overall well-being, interpersonal trust, and social cooperation
- Communities with greater reserves of community identity are more likely to have greater access to social, cultural, and financial capital, increased rates of civic participation and a willingness to approve of investment in the public realm
- Cultivating a greater sense of community identity is especially effective at mitigating green gentrification

When parks function as social infrastructure, they contribute to shared sense of belonging, place attachment, and social cohesion among users. Indeed, parks can link diverse communities that share a mutual appreciation of the park, even if their demographic identities do not strongly overlap. Deep community engagement is an important measure to ensure that communities from all background feel safe and included. For instance, designing and programming public space with resident-led arts and culture can increase a community's sense of belonging, social cohesion, inclusion, and trust.



The case study in the Framework highlights how a Latino agricultural community in Wenatchee, WA, developed community relationships, identity, and power through the parks engagement process. © Jorge Rivas

Community Power



The Framework ultimately builds towards community power, which refers to a community's ability to use democratic processes to develop, sustain, and perpetuate an organized base to achieve their self-determined vision, regardless of identity or status. The benefits of community power, as reflected in social capital, civic participation, and collective efficacy, are profound:

- Community- and population-wide benefits to reduce crime rates, increase GDP, and more equitable recovery following natural disasters.
- Individual-level benefits to physical and mental health, reduced social isolation, greater community pride, and increased sense of purpose.
- Perpetuation of community power through increased engagement in civic processes (greater rates of voting, campaigning, volunteering, etc.) that unlocks public resources and social capital

Parks and greenspaces are proven drivers of community power. One study found that simply living with a park nearby can account for a 27 percent increase in social capital. The true efficacy of parks for community power, though, resides in their community activation, engagement, and stewardship. For instance, individuals who consistently volunteer for environmental groups—such as park stewardship groups—are more likely to be civically engaged across a number of civic activities and feels stronger neighborhood attachment than those who do not volunteer.