

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 the process of making close friends and avoiding isolation among individuals who use their facilities and participate in their 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-based research in February and March of 2014 at 15 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 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 they offer. These include services such as child care groups, English as a second language courses, tutorial groups for students, and employment counseling. These service oriented programs alone are not what make the houses unique. The houses also combine these services with cultural and other expressive activities, such as art

classes and displays, local music groups and performances, and mutual help groups for women and seniors.

Neighbourhood houses are ideal locations to make 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 reported making more than one close friend at a neighbourhood house. A majority of our sample made at least one close friend through their 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 their involvement in the neighbourhood house.

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Table 1. Close Friends and Isolation among Neighbourhood House Users

	Total		Age Groups			
			25 to 35 yrs		55 yrs or older	
	<i>One or two friends</i>	<i>Three or more friends</i>	<i>One or Two friends</i>	<i>Three or more friends</i>	<i>One or Two friends</i>	<i>Three 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
Do you find yourself alone more often than you would like?	67	33	68	32	68	32

All figures shown are percentages. * 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 a neighbourhood house. The findings are presented in Table 1. The table shows that nearly all respondents (93%) have at least one close friend and 59% have three or more close friends. It is particularly interesting that 60% of respondents made at least one close friend through a neighbourhood house.

Most neighbourhood house users did not encounter problems making friends or feeling lonely. When asked, 66% disagreed that it is difficult to make new friends at a neighbourhood house, 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%). Among both our senior and young adult respondents, 32% said they are lonely more often 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 a neighbourhood house is common for young adults (66%), but seniors are more likely to make friends through a neighbourhood house (72%).

About the Author

Sean R. Lauer is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia and a member of the NHIMV research team.