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ARTS
FOR
EVERY
BODY

One Nation/One Project
RESEARCH BRIEF #3

JUNE 2024

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Arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing

An Integrative review and conceptual model - JUNE 2024

One Nation/One Project + Arts for EveryBody

Arts for EveryBody is a national arts and health communications campaign, led by One Nation/One Project (ONOP), a national initiative designed to engage the arts to strengthen the social fabric of communities in the United States on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ONOP initiative leverages collaborations between the arts, public health, and municipal sectors to build health, health equity, and wellbeing, and the campaign is designed to communicate the relationship between the arts and health to the general public.

Why was this study needed?

Today, half of American adults experience loneliness, which poses health risks that are greater than obesity or inactivity and equal to smoking 15 cigarettes per day¹. In his 2023 report on loneliness, the US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, called for “a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation”. This notion of social fabric refers not just to social relationships, but also to social cohesion, or the strength of relationships and sense of solidarity that helps community members work together for common good². Social cohesion helps communities respond to challenges and creates conditions in which people can be well and thrive.

One Nation/One Project believes that as we continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the arts can be a powerful way to help re-build social cohesion and, in turn, enhance wellbeing in communities. We designed this integrative review of the literature to find and to help us learn from research that articulates relationships between arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing in communities and to describe those relationships in a way that may help guide design of future programs.

What did we do in this study?

This study was designed to contribute to how we answer the primary research question of the ONOP research agenda, which is “How can arts participation influence social cohesion and wellbeing in US communities?”

We conducted an integrative review (an inclusive and holistic type of literature review) of published research articles that investigate arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing

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in communities. To guide our search, we used the broad and inclusive definition of arts participation previously developed by the One Nation/One Project Research and Impact team⁽³⁾, the definition of social cohesion described above, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation definition of wellbeing, which is “the comprehensive view of how individuals and communities experience and evaluate their lives, including their physical and mental health and having the skills and opportunities to construct meaningful futures”⁴.

We searched ten research databases, along with organizational websites, to find a broad range of research studies and reports from around the world. We screened 1,278 studies and found 18 that described relationships between all three of our concepts - arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing. We analyzed the articles using a mixed-methods approach that included both quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (words) analysis. The quantitative analysis looked at study designs and populations studied, as well as modes and forms of arts participation utilized in the programs studied. We also conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to describe what the studies help us understand the relationships between arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing.

What did we learn?

We analyzed 16 research articles and two literature reviews from 12 different countries across North and South America, Asia, Europe, and Australia. Collectively, the 16 research articles included 11,621 total research participants. The populations studied included geographic (place-based) communities as well as communities of public housing residents, women, migrant communities, college students, domestic violence survivors, Indigenous youth, people living with dementia, youth living in poverty, and older adults.

Sixteen of the articles reported on studies of participatory arts programs – those that include creating, practicing, performing, or sharing art as the mode of participation. Social, civic, spiritual, and cultural arts practices were also common among the studies. The most common art forms used were music (mostly choirs), gardening, and programs that included multiple arts forms, such as visual arts and craft, music, dance, theatre, literary arts, spoken word, film, concerts, and cultural programs. We also found studies of single art forms, including dance, magic, and circus arts programs.

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In our thematic analysis of the 18 included articles, we found four themes that together represent what we learned from the articles.

Theme 1. Arts participation in community spaces that includes creative physical or tactile engagement can build social cohesion.

Physical engagement in community spaces may help facilitate social relationships, solidarity, belonging, and social capital. One study⁽⁵⁾ reported that utilizing public squares in China for dancing fostered a shared sense of belonging among middle aged and elderly Chinese women. Physical creative activity within these public squares cultivated relationships between identity and the historical context of the spaces, which positively associated with social cohesion. Participants in this study reported that through their interactions, they experienced increased satisfaction and fulfillment, which also increased their wellbeing.



Photo by: Scout Tufankjian, Oakland

Theme 2. Culturally rooted arts programs can enhance individual and shared cultural identity, belonging, solidarity, and cooperation.

Community-based arts participation that is rooted in cultural identities, traditions, and practices may be a particularly effective means for engaging people in shared activities that can build social cohesion. For example, a study of how a community arts center can serve an ethnic enclave found that the center and its creative activities played a significant role in maintaining social cohesion. This occurred despite the threat of gentrification and cultural displacement, underscoring the importance of the arts center in fostering security, belonging, and cultural identity for wellbeing⁽⁶⁾. Theme 2 also highlights ways that arts participation creates spaces for cross-cultural exchanges that can build social cohesion among people of diverse cultural backgrounds.



Photo by: Scout Tufankjian, Edinburg

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Theme 3. Co-creation and social relationships cultivate commitment to a group and program, which can result in more regular participation and, in turn, enhanced health benefits.

Several articles highlighted that co-creation - such as community members working together to create a performance or exhibit - can cultivate a commitment to fellow program participants and to a program, resulting in more regular participation in the program. In turn, more regular participation was shown to result in more benefits to social cohesion, health, and wellbeing. For example, in a program involving co-creation of visual arts exhibits and performances, participants felt connection and commitment to each other and a stronger sense of belonging to the larger community. This sense of belonging drew them back to the program consistently, increasing opportunities for health and wellbeing benefits.



Photo by: Scout Tufankjian, Tucson

Theme 4. Social cohesion, and its various components, may serve as a mechanism to enhancing wellbeing.

Six articles presented studies that suggest that social cohesion may act as a mechanism to wellbeing in communities – meaning that when arts participation builds social cohesion, wellbeing is enhanced. Studies of community gardening, dance groups, choirs, and mixed arts programs described relationships between arts participation, social cohesion and wellbeing in ways that suggest that social cohesion may act as a mechanism for enhancing wellbeing in communities. While this theme emerged in our analysis, it is important to note that more research is needed to explore this relationship before conclusions can be made.



Photo by: Scout Tufankjian, D.C.

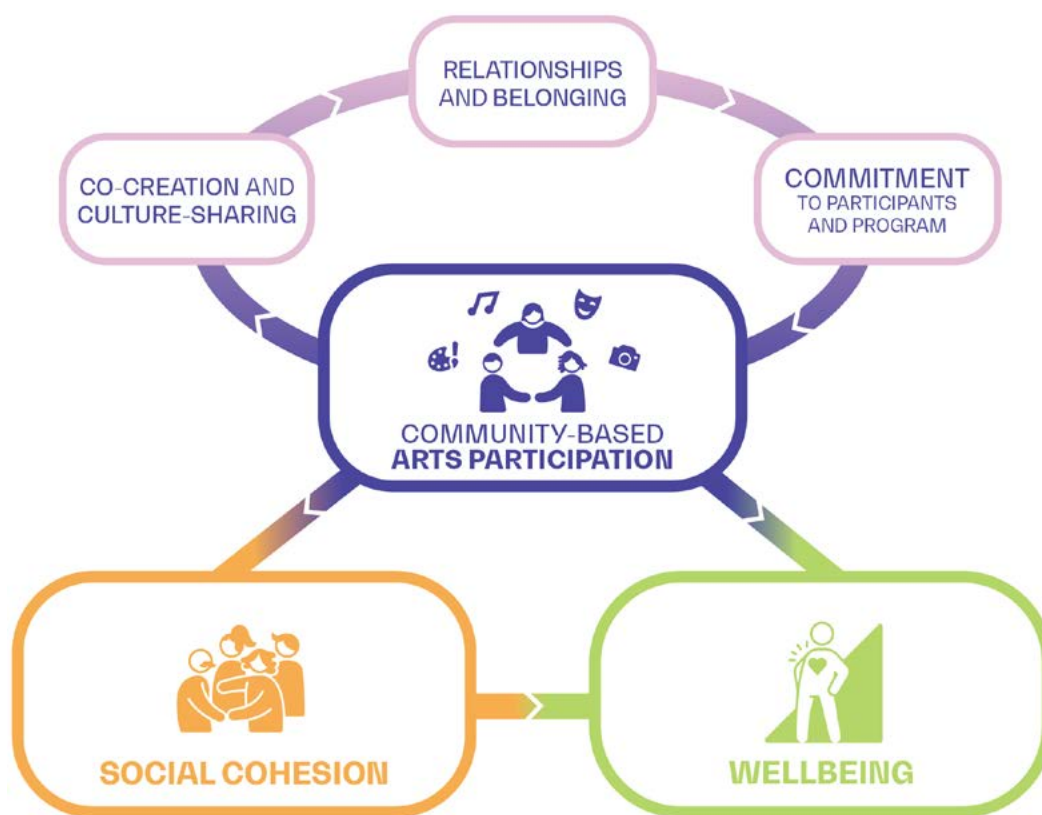
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The Conceptual Model

The conceptual model below represents this review's key findings related to the relationships between arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing found in the articles we reviewed. This model depicts these relationships, highlighting some specific components of arts participation that may contribute to social cohesion and wellbeing.



The model shows three things we learned from the articles about how community-based arts participation can help build social cohesion and wellbeing. When people co-create, or make things like performances or art works together, and when cultural sharing is involved, they can build relationships and a sense of belonging to a community. And when that happens, they can feel a greater commitment to the program and other participants, which may lead to more regular participation in the program. This cycle can build social cohesion and well-being.

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Why is this learning important?

This review's articulation of the cycle of community-based arts participation, co-creation and cultural sharing, relationships and belonging, commitment, and more regular arts participation highlights the usefulness of co-creation, in particular, as a key element in arts programs designed to enhance social cohesion and community wellbeing. The findings of this review support previous claims that arts participation can be a useful approach to enhancing social cohesion and wellbeing in communities. These claims have been found in the We-Making Theory of Change⁷, the Federal Theatre Project component of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of 1935⁸, and the Public Works program⁹. All these programs served as inspiration for the One Nation/One Project initiative. This review offers a view of research findings that may help guide design of future programs and studies of the value of arts participation to building social cohesion and wellbeing in communities.

Citing the research and conceptual model

This study has been submitted for peer review and publication and is currently available as a pre-print [here](#). Please note that the manuscript is subject to change per peer review, but may in the meantime be cited as: Sonke, J., Pesata, V., Morgan-Daniel, J., Rodriguez, A., Davidson Carroll, G., Burch, S., ... & Karim, H. (2024). Relationships between arts participation, social cohesion, and wellbeing: An integrative review and conceptual model. *medRxiv*, 2024-05.

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Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Dr. Jill Sonke and Dr. Shanaé Burch. It is based on the manuscript, authored by ONOP Research & Impact team members along with members of the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine Interdisciplinary Research Lab, Jill Sonke, Virginia Pesata, Aaron Colverson, Jane Morgan-Daniel, Alexandra K. Rodriguez, Gray Davidson Carroll, Shanaé Burch, Abel Abraham, Seher Akram, Stefany Marjani, Cassandra Belden, and Hiba Karim.

ONOP is supported by partnership with the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine and the National League of Cities.

One Nation/One Project Partners is fiscally sponsored by Tides Center, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.



ONOP is supported by Anne Clarke Wolff and Ted Wolff, Barbara and Amos Hostetter, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Create Foundation, Doris Duke Foundation, Frances Clayton & Jessi Hempel, Hull Family Foundation, Jason Cooper, Katie McGrath & J.J. Abrams Family Foundation, Kevin Ryan, The Kresge Foundation, Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation, Lyle Chatelain Family Foundation, Mellon Foundation, The Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Foundation, Sozosei Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, and The Tow Foundation.