



Culture and Recreation: Links to Well-Being

by

Sherri Torjman

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Introduction

This paper explores the importance of culture and recreation for the health and well-being of individuals and communities. It is the eighth in a series of papers written in support of the Vibrant Communities project.

Vibrant Communities is a four-year national effort to explore promising local solutions to reduce poverty. The Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation in Montreal are the primary sponsors of this initiative. The (former) Human Resources Development Canada provided funding for the policy component of this work.

Selected conveners from 14 communities across the country are involved in a Pan-Canadian Learning Partnership in which they come together on a monthly basis to share ideas, resources and strategies. They effectively scale up their individual efforts through this collaborative strategic approach.

In addition, several communities, known as ‘Trail Builders,’ receive substantial funds to support their poverty reduction work. In order to qualify for these funds, they must convene a multisectoral steering group that takes responsibility for the initiative and helps create a community-wide vision as well as a strategic plan with detailed actions. This steering group must include representatives from at least four sectors: business, government, anti-poverty groups and the voluntary sector.

Community-based approaches to solving pressing social and economic problems are not new. Voluntary action by citizens and organizations was alive and well long before government programs. What *is* new is the methodology that appears to be emerging at the local level – which is far more strategic than before. Funders, policy-makers and program designers have been exploring a range of approaches to revitalizing distressed neighbourhoods and to tackling other complex problems, such as unemployment and poverty. This new generation of efforts is known in the field as ‘comprehensive community initiatives.’

These initiatives are described in more detail in a related paper [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003a]. Briefly, they seek to engage diverse sectors in working together on a collaborative basis, over the long term, to tackle a range of interrelated issues. Comprehensive community initiatives have emerged both in response to recent practices that have proven ineffective and as a reformulation of approaches to community development that have been tried in the past. They also reflect views on the changing role of government and the place that communities can play in promoting economic and social well-being.

Why would a national initiative that focuses upon local solutions to poverty be interested in culture and recreation? And why is an organization concerned with social policy writing about this subject? The answers lie in the fact that research evidence from a variety of fields is pointing to wide-ranging benefits – in the areas of health and well-being, skills development, social capital and economic strength – from investment in these areas.

This work is also consistent with thinking on sustainable development, which focuses on the intrinsic links among economic, social and environmental well-being. While it is essential to think in three-dimensional terms, even this broad conceptualization may not be sufficient to capture the full scope of the social component of sustainable development. Culture is so embedded within personal identity that to leave it out or subsume it as part of the social dimension is to minimize its importance.

A Working Group that has been organized on Museums and Sustainable Communities notes that: “Culture is being recognized as central to the well-being of community, but few have made much progress in developing indicators that will help understand how individual and collective values function; how identity issues are engaged and evolved; how cultural practices really mix and mingle in our contemporary pluralist cities” [Working Group 2003]. While precise measures may not yet be in place, the significance of culture has been recognized increasingly in literature on sustainable development and healthy communities.

The evidence presented here should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive. Its purpose is to demonstrate the value of culture and recreation as social amenities – i.e., key elements of social infrastructure that make for healthy individuals and communities.

Health and Well-Being

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association has compiled an extensive volume of research evidence that identifies the health, social, economic and environmental benefits of recreation [CPRA 1997]. In this context, ‘recreation’ reflects a broad concept related to physical education, sports, fitness, social recreation, the arts, culture and therapeutic recreation.

The substantial benefits of recreation related to physical health, in particular, are well documented. Physical exercise promotes the optimal performance of all major systems of the human body – musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, immunologic, neurosensory and gastrointestinal. While recreation benefits the entire population, it is especially important for seniors and young people.

In the case of seniors, recreation and active living prolong independent functioning by compressing the impairment period and diseases typically associated with aging. Physically active

older adults tend to be one or two decades younger physiologically than their sedentary counterparts [CPRA 1997: 4].

Recreation and active living reduce significantly the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, the leading causes of death in Canada. They help combat osteoporosis, affecting 25 percent of menopausal women. Recreation and active living also have been found to reduce diabetes, the fourth major killer disease, and to prevent site-specific cancers, particularly in the colon, breast and lungs [CPRA 1997: xiii].

The health care system gains from reduced costs that otherwise would be spent on the medical treatment of these conditions [CPRA 1997: xv]. In addition to preventive benefits, recreation is a proven therapeutic tool used in hospitals, clinics and communities to restore physical, mental and social capacities.

At the other end of the age spectrum, physical activity has been found to have a substantial impact upon the growth and maturation of children and youth. There is also a positive correlation between physical activity and increased muscle strength, bone density and mass, motor fitness and aerobic capacity. Physical activity can help control childhood obesity, reduce elevated blood pressure and improve overall health and growth [Ewing, Seefeldt and Brown 1996].

Recreation and play are particularly important for healthy childhood development – promoting the acquisition of motor skills, social skills and creativity, and the development of cognitive functions. These activities foster psychological well-being by reducing feelings of depression and anxiety [Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families 2001]. Recreational programs can provide safe, developmental opportunities for latchkey children after school.

In addition to building healthy bodies, involvement in recreational and cultural activities can help prevent emotional and social problems. Participation in recreation and regular physical activity has been linked to improved self-concept and self-esteem, reduced depressive symptoms, decreased stress and anxiety, improved self-acceptance, changes in anti-social behaviour and enhanced psychological well-being [CPRA 1997: xiii]. Young people ages 15 to 17 who participated in organized sports, for example, were more likely to report being very satisfied with their level of self-esteem compared to youth who did not participate in organized sports (46.5 percent versus 37.0 percent) [Harman, Jackson and Roberts 2001: 26].

Young people who participate in recreational activities experience reduced boredom and associated deviant behaviours [McKay et al. 1996; Reid et al. 1994; Witt 1996]. Boredom is considered a problem for adolescents, in particular, because of its relationship to depression, hopelessness and loneliness. Boredom also has been linked to alcohol use among college and high school students, smoking among high school students, deviant behaviour at school and overeating.

This evidence is consistent with the findings of a US-based study: “Without the opportunities to participate in structured outlets, adolescents are more likely to spend significant amounts of their time alone in unstructured activities, primarily watching television” [Larson 2001].

Cultural and recreational programs help reduce crime among juvenile delinquents, thereby lowering the costs of social service intervention and juvenile justice [CPRA 1997: xiv-xv]. In fact, recreation is emerging as a crucial focal point for social investment, particularly for families and children deemed ‘at risk.’

A landmark study conducted by Dr. Gina Browne and colleagues at the System-linked Research Unit at McMaster University, for example, used a randomized trial methodology to assess the effectiveness of various interventions in helping families on social assistance in particular. The sample of 765 households (1,300 children) headed by single-parent mothers on social assistance were randomly assigned to groups ranging from those receiving no additional services to those receiving home visits by public health nurses, job retraining and recreation child care for children. The interventions included public health nurse case management, employment retraining/child care, recreation/skills development and self-directed care [Browne et al. 2001].

The study found that recreational services alone help psychologically disordered children on social assistance maintain their social, physical and academic competence at a level equal to that of non-disordered children. Recreation appeared to pay for itself through reduced use of health and social services, such as child psychology, social work and probation. Moreover, the study found that mothers had fewer mental health problems, less medication usage, lower reliance on subsidized child care, less counselling and reduced food bank usage.

The impact of providing recreational services alone resulted in a 10 percent greater exit from social assistance compared to the parents of children who did not receive this service [Browne et al. 2001]. Twenty percent of parents who received recreational services for their children exited from social assistance after one year. Only ten percent of parents without services exited from social assistance after one year [Haldane 2000]. Subsidized recreation for children living in poverty appears to have a significant positive impact upon a community’s social priorities and its associated investments.

Skills Development

Recreation plays a vital role in learning and skills development. Organized sports, in particular, provide children with an opportunity to learn from coaches, instructors and mentors. Children who participate on teams learn important leadership skills and improve their social abilities, such as sharing and cooperation.

Culturally based programs in the areas of art, drama, music and dance provide a different, but equally important, means of building skills in creative thinking, decision-making and problem-solving. They foster social skills including co-operative work, negotiation, conflict resolution and tolerance for difference as well as personal skills such as individual responsibility, perseverance, self-management and integrity.

Learners have been found to attain higher levels of achievement through their engagement with the arts. One study of the impact of the arts found that students with more exposure to arts instruction had scores averaging 20 points higher than their peers on measures of creative thinking, fluency, originality, elaboration and resistance to closure [Burton, Horowitz and Abeles 1999].

Other studies have found that learning in and through art can help ‘level the playing field’ for youth from disadvantaged circumstances. A study conducted with 25,000 students reported that students with high levels of art participation outperformed ‘arts poor’ students on virtually every measure [Catterall, Chapleau and Iwanaga 1999].

Sustained involvement in certain areas of arts, notably music and theatre, is highly correlated with success in mathematics and reading. The Chicago Arts Partnership in Education, for example, developed arts-integrated curricula in 14 schools in high-poverty neighbourhoods. The results found dramatic improvement in academic performance in these schools [Catterall and Waldorf 1999].

In Canada, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation has been at the forefront of promoting the active participation of young people in the arts. Launched in 1998, *ArtsSmarts* is a national initiative that supports arts-related activities in the classroom by encouraging the use of art as a vehicle for teaching all subjects. Music or dance may be employed, for example, to help students understand mathematical concepts. Sculpting may be used to teach geography. Painting enables children to visualize the events of local history [<http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca>].

By building self-esteem and social skills, recreation and cultural programs also can encourage participation in community life [CPRA 1997: xiv]. This involvement has been found to produce leaders who serve their communities, thereby helping to build social capital.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the relationships, networks and norms that support collective action. It is created when people come together out of a shared purpose or goal that goes beyond individual benefits and incorporates the idea of connectedness. Social capital is built through participation in associations or social structures of cooperation – e.g., religion organizations, political parties,

neighbourhood associations, sports or cultural clubs, and active participation in civic activities, such as volunteering or voting [Putnam 2000; Helliwell 2001].

The healthy development of children depends in large part on the social context in which they grow up. Neighbourhoods with high levels of social capital tend to be good places to raise children [Putnam 2000: 307]. Connections through trusting networks and common values enforce positive standards for youth and provide them access to mentors, role models, educational sponsors and job contacts.

Culture and recreation provide the means to build social capital. They can take the form of arts or recreational programs, and community events or celebrations such as festivals, parades and block parties. Community events, in particular, help keep neighbours in touch with each other and reinforce the relationships that make neighbourhoods strong.

Participation in cultural and recreational programs have been found to promote social connectedness in communities and shape civic behaviour later in life. In one study, for example, respondents who played in organized team sports as children were almost twice as likely as an adult to be a member of a board or committee – 11.3 percent compared to respondents who did not participate in organized sports (6.0 percent) [Harman, Jackson and Roberts 2001: 24].

The study also found that respondents were more likely to teach or coach for an organization as an unpaid volunteer in the past 12 months if they were a participant in organized sport as a child (11.1 percent) than if they were not (4.2 percent) [Harman, Jackson, Roberts 2001: 24]. Youth who had participated in organized sports were more likely than youth who did not participate to volunteer through a group or organization (44.0 percent versus 41.9 percent) and were more likely to volunteer to help build or repair a facility for an organization (23.6 percent versus 15.4 percent) [Harman, Jackson and Roberts 2001: 27].

The 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating substantiated this link between volunteering and certain early life experiences. In comparison to the volunteer rate for all Canadians (27 percent), the probability of volunteering was higher among youth who were active in student government (42 percent), had a parent involved in community work (39 percent) or had participated in an organized team sport (31 percent) [Hall, McKeown and Roberts 2001].

At the community level, the arts have been found to foster social cohesion and community identity by promoting multicultural understanding [Azmi 2002: 4]. They provide opportunities for sharing the various forms of diversity that comprise a community. “Through cultural festivals, presentations and exhibits of art, it is possible to display and recognize different historical and cultural backgrounds as well as other forms of social diversity” [Azmi 2002: 4].

The arts and culture also are being seen increasingly as way to foster local identity in a global culture dominated by mass media. Around the world, “people turn to culture as a means of self-definition and mobilization and assert their local cultural values. For the poorest among them, their own values are often the only thing that they can assert” [World Commission on Culture and Development 1996].

One of the problems that has emerged in recent years with respect to arts and culture is the growth of large entertainment complexes and multi-screen cinema houses in urban centres – the so-called big “boxification” of the entertainment industry. These boxes are creating “urbanoid” environments – sealed-off private spaces that purport to be public spaces but that lack energy, variety, visual stimulation and cultural opportunities [Hannigan 1999]. A related concern arises from the fact that these big box entertainment complexes appear to be crowding out the space for local and indigenous cultures [Hannigan 1999]. These issues point to the need for urban design that enables creative cultural expression.

Economic Impact

Culture and recreation make important economic contributions to communities. The economic benefits come both from direct jobs in the cultural and arts industries and through indirect spin-offs from tourism, local investment and export products.

The arts can have a positive impact on urban quality of life through health outcomes, social cohesion and urban revitalization. As part of the Western Cities Project, for instance, the Canada West Foundation published a paper entitled *Culture and Economic Competitiveness*. It points out that numerous researchers have identified strong arts and culture within communities as a key strategy in attracting people to a city and enhancing the quality of urban life [Azmer 2002].

More and more, international analysts are arguing that arts and culture may aid in attracting and retaining skilled workers, and ultimately in establishing a strong, viable and globally competitive economy. At the same time, there is a growing body of research indicating that arts and culture have a strong positive impact upon the quality of life within cities, creating a vibrant urban culture of creativity and innovation [Azmer 2002: 2].

The arts often are employed as a mechanism for community revitalization through inner-city redevelopment, building community pride and engaging ethnic minorities in civic endeavours. A study on the role of the arts in neighbourhoods of Philadelphia, for example, found that communities with an historical arts presence underwent the most vibrant economic renewal. By building bonds among neighbours, arts and culture were found to promote social reconstruction and contribute to economic

revitalization. A strong arts presence was correlated with reduced poverty and population growth, while areas with poor arts development had declining populations and lower incomes [Stern and Seifert 1998].

Another important dimension of economic benefits includes the contribution of the arts to the ‘quality of place.’ There is a growing body of evidence on the role that cultural amenities appear to play in attracting human capital – particularly for professional and technical workers. “In an era of an increasingly mobile workforce and industry, a city’s urban culture and ‘livability’ can impact not only its existing residents and economy, but also future residents and businesses” [Azmier 2002: 6]. Seeing arts and culture in a new perspective provides greater fuel for the argument that arts and culture are a public good, and moves cultural policy to the centre of urban policy and planning [Azmier 2002: 10].

The theory of the ‘new geography’ argues that in order to thrive in an era of ever-widening choice in the knowledge economy, communities must pay attention to the factors, including those relating to lifestyle and cultural choices, which appeal to a broad range of entrepreneurial companies [Kotkin 2000]. Recruitment concerns rather than taxes and regulations have become the key drivers of the knowledge-based economy.

In this emerging framework, parks, schools and amenities replace low taxes and loose regulation as the primary tools of industrial development [Kotkin 2000: 41]. Cities are focusing on cultural and arts-related activities – art museums, theatre, ballet and video production – to lure more residents to their central districts [Kotkin 2000: 159]. Libraries are particularly well positioned to create social capital by providing opportunities for community learning [Makhoul 2004].

Richard Florida explores these factors in a report entitled *Competing in the Age of Talent: Environment, Amenities and the New Economy*. He argues that the new economy, which requires highly skilled talent, has altered radically the way in which cities and regions establish and maintain their competitive advantage. Talent has become the single most critical factor of production and the ability to attract talent creates regional advantage [Florida 2000: 26]. Amenities and the environment, particularly natural, recreational and lifestyle amenities, are vital to attracting knowledge workers and supporting leading-edge technology firms and industries.

Knowledge workers essentially balance economic opportunity and lifestyle in selecting a place to live and work. Thus, lifestyle factors are as important as traditional economic factors such as jobs and career opportunity in attracting knowledge workers in high technology fields. Given that they have a wealth of job opportunities, knowledge workers have the ability to choose cities and regions that are attractive places to live as well as work [Florida 2000: 5].

This conclusion is consistent with a study of world class cities, which argues that healthy communities need both ‘magnets’ and ‘glue’ [Kanter 1995]. Magnets refer to the factors that attract a flow of external resources – such as new companies and new people – to renew and expand skills, and contribute to the economic health of the region. Magnet factors typically include a healthy and

well-educated workforce, a clean environment, a vibrant business climate, and a solid social and cultural infrastructure.

But communities also need glue to hold them together. In addition to the essential physical infrastructure such as roads, sewers, electricity and communications systems, communities require social infrastructure to help tackle complex problems and promote individual and community well-being. Interestingly, many factors that comprise the magnets of a community – especially the solid social and cultural infrastructure – also comprise its glue.

A publication of the National Governors Association summarizes succinctly the economic value of culture. “Arts programs have served as components of high-impact economic development programs by assisting state and local government in:

- Leveraging human capital and cultural resources to generate economic vitality in under-performing regions through tourism, crafts and cultural attractions.
- Restoring and revitalizing communities by serving as a centerpiece for downtown redevelopment and cultural renewal.
- Creating vibrant public spaces integrated with natural amenities, resulting in improved urban quality of life, expanded business and tax revenue base, and positive regional and community image.
- Contributing to a region’s ‘innovation’ habitat by simultaneously improving regional quality of life – making communities more attractive to highly desirable, knowledge-based employees – and permitting new forms of knowledge-intensive production to flourish” [NGA Center 2001: 1].

Financing Issues

Despite the contribution of culture and recreation to the well-being of individuals and communities, these social amenities are continually at risk. Recreation and the arts are among the first targets when it comes to government cuts. (These areas tend to be funded primarily by municipal governments, though some receive support from provincial and federal governments while others are sponsored by corporations or community foundations.)

Their vulnerability is serious in light of the evidence, which has found a wide range of positive results from participation in culture and recreation. The programs and events that do manage to elude the municipal knife often survive only because users are required to make a private contribution to

offset the cost of these social amenities. A recent survey of municipal recreation departments across Canada found that:

... the vast majority of municipal recreation departments charge a user fee for at least some of their programs. A majority of the departments surveyed charged user fees for all of their programs. Over 90 percent charged user fees for some of their aquatics, athletic and arts programs; 87 percent charged for after-school programs and 70 percent charged for youth drop-in programs. In most cases, user fees have risen over the last five years [Slack 2003: 23].

A major problem with user fees is that those who cannot afford the fees participate less in cultural and recreational programs or not at all. Participation in physical and artistic activities has been found to be particularly low and irregular for children from low-income families.

The differences are even greater for structured recreation and for programs that require elements of instruction or expensive equipment. Children's participation in organized sport increases with household income, particularly above \$40,000. An estimated 75 percent of children in low-income families rarely play organized sports compared to 25 percent of children in high-income families [Roberts and Ross 1999].

Children from high-income families and those living above Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs generally are much more likely to partake frequently in organized sports (i.e., sport with a coach) than children from lower-income families. A recent study found that nearly three-quarters of children from the highest-income households played sports with a coach one or more times a week compared to just over half (56.6 percent) of children from lower-income families [CCSD and CPRN 2001].

The user fee problem is not a simple one to resolve. Its roots lie deep. In fact, user fees are merely the tip of a fiscal iceberg. Municipalities in most provinces have only limited sources of revenue: property tax, payments from higher levels of government in lieu of taxes and fees from various sources such as development charges, permits and admissions (and parking tickets).

Another constraint is the fact that municipalities are not permitted to run deficits on their operating budgets. Local governments must pay for all their operating costs without borrowing from the bank. They either must raise property taxes or cut programs in order to hold the line on spending.

At the same time, most communities and larger urban centres, in particular, are plagued by increasingly complex economic and social problems, such as poverty and insecure housing. Municipalities in Ontario face an even greater crunch as a result of the disentanglement exercise in which the provincial government downloaded many of its responsibilities onto local governments in order to 'clarify' and 'rationalize' their respective areas of responsibility [Torjman 1997].

In short, local governments face growing pressure and increased expectations with respect to attracting talent, addressing social problems and improving the quality of life for all members of the

community. Yet they are constrained by cost and by limits on the ways in which they can generate revenue. The recent study of municipal financing for recreation, in particular, concluded that local governments must set out long-term strategic plans for the financing of recreation:

Probably the most that can be said from this review is that there is no single source of revenue that would be sufficient to meet the operating or capital needs for municipal recreation. Rather, municipalities need to use a combination of revenue sources to meet the long-term requirements for municipal recreation [Slack 2003: 34].

The lack of investment in these social amenities means a loss of the benefits to physical health, social development, community well-being and economic vibrancy. Health Canada has estimated that for each \$1 invested in physical activity alone, there is a long-term savings of \$11 in health care, including fewer nervous system problems, less medication usage, lower anxiety, reduced reliance on subsidized child care, less counselling and reduced usage of food banks [Haldane 2000].

The 2004 Speech from the Throne pointed to a new deal for municipalities in recognition of their serious financing problems. The Speech was followed shortly by the federal Budget, which announced a multi-pronged package for communities. It includes a full rebate of the GST paid by municipalities, acceleration of federal spending through a Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund, funds for the Urban Aboriginal Strategy and investment in the social economy. It is uncertain, however, that any new funds which eventually flow to cities and communities will be made available for social amenities like culture and recreation.

While lack of adequate funding is a critical factor, it is not the only barrier to participation in these activities. A survey on access to recreation found many additional barriers that prevent school-aged children and youth from accessing recreational programs in particular. These barriers include transportation problems, lack of parental and family support, social and cultural factors, lack of equipment or suitable facilities, low awareness of programs and a shortage of volunteers [Slack 2003: 27].

Mother's level of education is another major determinant of participation in recreation and the arts. The higher the mother's level of education, the more likely were children to participate once a week or more in dance/gymnastics, organized sports, art/drama/music lessons and community clubs [CCSD and CPRN 2001].

Yet another significant determinant of participation is parental behaviour. Parental support and encouragement are important positive factors. When parents participate in recreational activities, their children are more likely to participate as well [Kremarik 2000]. While adequate and secure funding for culture and recreation is essential to stabilize and improve these vital dimensions of social infrastructure, it is not sufficient to ensure participation. Parental influences are a crucial factor.

Conclusion

It is clear that the benefits of culture and recreation are extensive. The evidence is simply too strong and wide-ranging to ignore. Culture and recreation contribute immeasurably to the health of individuals and of communities by keeping them alive – and well.

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