



Promoting Social Connectedness Through Food

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Foreword

OECD governments are increasingly taking action to promote social connectedness and reduce social isolation and loneliness, and several OECD countries have launched national strategies to boost connectedness in recent years. At the international level, the OECD, the European Commission and the World Health Organization (through its Commission on Social Connection) have conducted research and knowledge exchange activities to support these efforts and advance the agenda of putting social connections firmly on the radar of policymakers. These governmental efforts are also being supported by increasing international co-ordination amongst non-governmental actors and researchers, such as through the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection (GILC).

This report builds on these efforts, and notably the 2025 report *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, taking the example of food and food-centred activities to contribute to practical knowledge on how government and non-government actors can work together to boost opportunities and spaces for connection within communities. The case studies considered in the report indicate how growing, preparing, and eating food with others can provide accessible and adaptable ways to improve connectedness and broader well-being outcomes, as well as highlighting issues for well-designed programme implementation with broad relevance for activities beyond food, such as volunteer support, models for cross-sector collaboration, and the need for robust evaluation evidence.

The report was prepared by the OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE), under the direction of Romina Boarini. It was co-authored (in alphabetical order) by Jessica Mahoney, Tom Schraepen and Kate Scrivens, with editorial inputs from Lara Fleischer and Carrie Exton, and research assistance from Danielle Provost. Martine Zaida, Anne-Lise Faron and Taylor Kelly provided support throughout on communication co-ordination and formatting. The report was undertaken with the support of the Ajinomoto Co., Inc.

This publication draws on valuable interviews and insights from representatives of the featured case studies in Chapter 2: Orion Kriegman, Founding Executive Director (Boston Food Forest Coalition); Megumi Hikichi, Founder (WATALIS); Jamie Sadler, Managing Director and Co-Founder (Men's Pie Club); Polle Janssens, Executive Director (Resto VanHarte); Holly Griffin, Founder and Manager (Share Kai); Community Dining Spaces Programme (The Secretariat of Social Welfare, City of Cali); Thomas Dryburgh, Planning and Partnership Co-ordinator (City of Melbourne's Community Meals Subsidy Programme); and the Federal Multi-Generational House Programme (Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, Germany). In addition to the featured case studies, the publication also benefited from interviews with representatives from the following organisations: Autonomous University of Querétaro, Mexico; DaneAge Association, Denmark; Cooking Kids, Slovenia; City of Ghent, Belgium; Vejle Municipality, Denmark; Hyper Voisins, France; People's Movement Against Loneliness, Denmark; Medina Community Centre, Switzerland; North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit Ontario, Canada; and Wolne Miejsce Foundation, Poland.

The publication also benefitted from the valuable comments of delegates from the OECD Working Party on Social Policy (WPSP). We are also grateful for comments received from Hans Rocha IJzerman (Annecy Behavioural Science Lab); Julianne Holt-Lunstad (Social Connection & Health Lab at Brigham Young University), and Céline Giner, Agricultural Policy Analyst in the Agro-food Trade and Markets Division of the OECD Trade and Agriculture Directorate.

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Executive summary

Social connectedness is an emerging policy priority in OECD countries

Social connectedness has moved steadily up the policy agenda across OECD countries, reflecting growing recognition of the individual and societal costs associated with loneliness and social isolation. Governments are increasingly treating these issues as matters of public health and social policy, supported by national strategies, international co-ordination efforts and expanding evidence on their consequences for physical and mental health, education and labour market outcomes, and broader well-being. Risks for disconnection are especially high among those already experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, older people and those living alone, while men and young people have emerged as newly vulnerable groups. These trends are unfolding alongside structural changes in how people interact, including declining rates of in-person socialising, rising solo living and the erosion or transformation of local “social infrastructure” – defined as the spaces that bring people together physically, facilitating meaningful interaction.

A case study approach reveals key insights on how food-based initiatives can boost connectedness

This report focusses on the example of food as a means to bring people together. Food is a universal basic need and a feature of daily life that provides a range of opportunities for people to interact and connect. Food-based activities appear in some national and sub-national efforts to combat loneliness and isolation in OECD countries, and a growing body of academic and practitioner research is exploring the well-being benefits of food-related programmes. This report features eight in-depth case studies of community-led and government-supported food initiatives – encompassing activities to grow, access, prepare, consume and redistribute food – that yield six cross-cutting insights to benefit public sector and non-governmental actors interested in implementing their own programmes to promote human connection, as follows:

Food can provide a widely accessible and socially acceptable entry point for social interaction

The case studies considered in the report cover a range of target population groups, showing that food-based activities can be adapted to enable accessible participation for people regardless of age, income, culture and ability – including people who tend to face higher structural barriers to social connection such as elderly or socio-economically disadvantaged people. Joining a meal, gardening session or cooking group is socially acceptable and purposeful, providing a reason to engage with others without the explicitly negative framing of being lonely. Initiatives such as the Men’s Pie Club cooking group network in the UK and the Dutch non-profit Resto VanHarte explicitly design their activities around food to reduce the stigma that can be associated with social isolation and loneliness. Food can have deep cultural meaning, creating opportunities for intercultural exchange and connection, as in the Share Kai case study from New Zealand. Food can also draw individuals into community settings where they may subsequently engage in other group activities or connect with social or support services, as in Cali’s community dining spaces in Colombia.

Food-based initiatives frequently operate through the activation and repurposing of underused physical spaces, contributing to the renewal of local social infrastructure

Across the case studies considered in the report, vacant urban lots, idle farmland and under-utilised community venues are often transformed into sites of regular activity such as gardens, cafés, dining spaces or cooking venues. In doing so, they can generate social value while also contributing to environmental and economic objectives, such as urban greening, local food production and the productive use of land. For example, the Boston Food Forest Coalition in the United States identifies abandoned plots within the city that have often become sites of dereliction, illegal dumping, soil contamination and environmental neglect and transforms them into “edible” woodland public parks that provide food, tree canopy coverage, and neighbourhood socialising space.

Food-based initiatives have the potential to affect multiple outcomes besides social connection

The case studies indicate that food-based activities have the potential to contribute to outcomes beyond social connectedness such as physical health (through improved nutrition and food security, the promotion of healthy eating habits, and physical activity involved in gardening and harvesting), mental well-being (through strengthened confidence and self-efficacy, and increased willingness to ask for help and access support resources), economic participation (where initiatives provide income generation and employment opportunities), and environmental sustainability (such as through collective gardening or farming initiatives that enhance biodiversity, promote urban greening, and support soil restoration and climate resilience).

Volunteer involvement and structured support are central to many initiatives

Financial constraints mean that many food-based initiatives rely on volunteer resources for their implementation. While this can bring risks (such as high staff turnover or burnout), the case studies indicate how volunteers can also gain self-confidence and purpose alongside new opportunities for skills development through structured support (e.g. in Cali, volunteer managers of community dining spaces receive training on food safety, small business ownership, and social and emotional skills). In many cases, volunteers are drawn from the same communities as participants (and are often former programme beneficiaries), including individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Government support and cross-sector collaboration play an enabling role in the development, scaling and sustainability of initiatives

Most of the case studies in the report have been initiated and led by civil society or community organisations but government bodies at the national and local level provide essential support through funding, access to space or land, policy alignment, and referral pathways. Government-led programmes such as Germany’s Multi-generational Houses and Melbourne’s Community Meals Subsidy Programme can provide more stable funding channels and introduce common standards and monitoring practices. Partnerships with diverse government and non-government actors – including health and social support services, private sector actors, philanthropic organisations, social enterprises, and research organisations – further enhance food-based initiatives’ ability to tackle organisational and resource challenges.

Going forward, stronger evidence is needed to assess the effectiveness of food-based approaches for social connectedness

Existing evidence on social connectedness and broader well-being impacts remains limited, often relying on qualitative feedback or participant surveys rather than rigorous evaluation. Generating more robust evidence, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, would support a clearer understanding of which intervention elements deliver results and under what conditions.

1. Promoting social connectedness through food: Policy relevance, conceptual underpinnings and existing evidence

OECD governments are increasingly recognising the need to reduce social isolation and loneliness. Food-related initiatives have the potential to help strengthen community social infrastructure (the spaces and organisations that encourage social interactions) and can be integrated into existing policy strategies to promote social connection. This chapter explores the policy relevance of promoting social connectedness and summarises existing evidence on how activities centred around food might be used to strengthen local social infrastructure in a way that helps boost social connectedness while contributing to broader well-being outcomes and policy goals.

Social connectedness is rising on the policy agenda in many OECD countries, driven in part by a growing awareness of the significant individual and societal costs of loneliness and social isolation. However, despite an increased focus on identifying impactful interventions in recent years, these are relatively new areas for policy attention and governments are still at an early stage of understanding how to boost connectedness in practice. This report contributes to the practical knowledge in this field by focussing on the role of food and food-based activities for bringing people together, making use of existing community social infrastructure, and creating new opportunities for interaction and connection. Growing, preparing, and eating food together provides opportunities to potentially boost social connectedness while also generating broader individual, community and societal well-being benefits, such as improving physical and mental health, encouraging active lifestyles and more nutritious food choices, enabling new skill development, addressing food insecurity and financial deprivation, and contributing to stewardship of environmental resources.

This report builds on previous OECD research on social connection and loneliness (OECD, 2025^[1]; Mahoney et al., 2024^[2]). It also builds on academic research on the broader well-being benefits of sharing meals and practitioner research exploring how local communities can build programmes that simultaneously improve both access to nutritious food as well as social connections outcomes, expanding on these efforts to bring in evidence from a broader range of OECD countries (De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Dunbar, 2017^[4]; Birla, Krombach and Pasricha, 2025^[5]; Health Food Policy Project, 2023^[6]). Its aim is to provide practical examples and insights for policymakers and other actors looking to improve social connections and broader well-being outcomes at the community level.

This chapter addresses the policy relevance of social connection and the value of fostering gathering spaces through social infrastructure in more depth, before outlining how food and food-related activities have been included in formal strategies that OECD governments have launched to combat loneliness and social isolation. It concludes with a consideration of the existing evidence on the benefits of food-related activities for social connectedness. Chapter 2 delves deeper into selected case studies to understand how programmes are being implemented by community organisations and local and national governments, highlighting what has worked well in practice, and how common challenges are being addressed.

Social connectedness as an emerging policy priority

OECD governments are increasingly recognising the need to promote social connectedness and reduce social isolation and loneliness. Japan, Korea, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom are among the countries to have launched national strategies to boost connectedness in recent years (OECD, 2025^[1]; 2026^[7]). At the international level, the OECD, the European Commission and the World Health Organization (through its Commission on Social Connection) have conducted research and knowledge exchange activities to support these efforts and further advance the agenda of putting social connections on the radar of policymakers (World Health Organization, 2025^[8]; Mahoney et al., 2024^[2]; European Commission, 2022^[9]; OECD, 2025^[1]). In 2025, delegates of the World Health Assembly approved a resolution identifying social connections as a global public health priority, encouraging public awareness campaigns, better measurement of loneliness and isolation and the establishment of national strategies (World Health Organization, 2025^[8]; Health Policy Watch, 2025^[10]). Existing initiatives are also being supported by growing international co-ordination amongst non-governmental actors and researchers, such as through the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection (GILC, 2025^[11]).

While some of these efforts predate the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread social distancing and confinement measures of 2020-2021 gave greater urgency to the need to understand how social ties can be strengthened. Additionally, trends such as population ageing (as older people tend to be more socially isolated than other age groups on average across OECD countries),¹ increasing rates of people living

alone, and changing modes of social interaction towards digital communication (see for example Figure 1.3, Panel A) have contributed to the rise in policy attention for this issue (OECD, 2025^[1]).

Social connectedness is an essential component of overall well-being,² which is multi-faceted and comprises structural aspects of people's relationships as well as their quality and the support they provide.³ In principle, a person can be socially isolated in a structural sense (e.g. living alone and rarely seeing other people) without experiencing subjective feeling of loneliness. Conversely, someone with frequent social contact with friends and family can feel lonely or lacking in social support (see Glossary for definitions of key terms). However, both social isolation and loneliness are associated with poor *physical and mental health outcomes* such as heightened risk and worsened symptom severity for dementia (Akhter-Khan et al., 2021^[12]; Penninkilampi et al., 2018^[13]; Holwerda et al., 2014^[14]), cardiovascular, coronary heart and other diseases (Valtorta et al., 2016^[15]; Freak-Poli et al., 2021^[16]; Liang et al., 2024^[17]), as well as increased risk of premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015^[18]; Alm, Låftman and Bohman, 2019^[19]), depression, anxiety, and other negative mental health outcomes (Wang et al., 2018^[20]; Cruwys et al., 2013^[21]; Cacioppo et al., 2011^[22]; Hansen et al., 2017^[23]); worse *labour market outcomes* (loneliness is also associated with poorer performance and productivity at work, a higher risk of absenteeism, unemployment or dropping out of an educational programme (Morrish, Mujica-Mota and Medina-Lara, 2022^[24]; Matthews et al., 2016^[25]; Maher et al., 2013^[26]; Bowers et al., 2022^[27])); and shape patterns in *civic engagement and voting behaviours* (Neu et al., 2023^[28]). Conversely, strong social ties within communities – including close relationships with one's neighbours, community leaders or local service providers – are associated with *crime reduction* (Stuart and Taylor, 2021^[29]) and a greater ability of the local area to *respond to natural disasters* (The U.S. Surgeon General, 2023^[30]; Aldrich and Meyer, 2014^[31]).⁴ Furthermore, societies with higher levels of trust – an important aspect of social capital – have been shown to be more *productive* (Smith, 2020^[32]; Bjørnskov and Méon, 2015^[33]; Yamamura and Shin, 2012^[34]; Ganau and Rodríguez-Pose, 2023^[35]), have higher *income* per capita (Algan and Cahuc, 2010^[36]), and higher rates of *economic growth* (Smith, 2020^[32]; Horváth, 2013^[37]; Beugelsdijk, de Groot and van Schaik, 2004^[38]; Zak and Knack, 2001^[39]; Knack and Keefer, 1997^[40]).

The public health impact of loneliness is considered to be substantial, and the World Health Organization estimates that loneliness may be responsible for 871 000 deaths annually, across the globe (World Health Organization, 2025^[8]). Methodology to estimate the economic costs of loneliness and isolation differ across studies but a systematic review of national appraisals found estimates ranging from USD 2 billion to USD 25.2 billion per year (Engel et al., 2025^[41]): individual country estimates range from USD 400 billion annually for the US economy (Cigna, 2020^[42]; CDC, 2023^[43]), 1.2% of annual GDP in Spain (Rodríguez, Castiñeira and Rodríguez-Míguez, 2023^[44]), DKK 7 million annually in Denmark (AGE Platform Europe, 2023^[45]; Hamilton, 2023^[46]), GBP 2 billion per year for employers in the United Kingdom (New Economics Foundation, 2017^[47]), and KRW 7 trillion total – or KRW 21 million per capita – for young Korean adults (Korea Youth Foundation, 2023^[48]).

Recent analysis at the OECD has also shed light on patterns in connection and disconnection in OECD Member states (OECD, 2025^[1]) finding that:

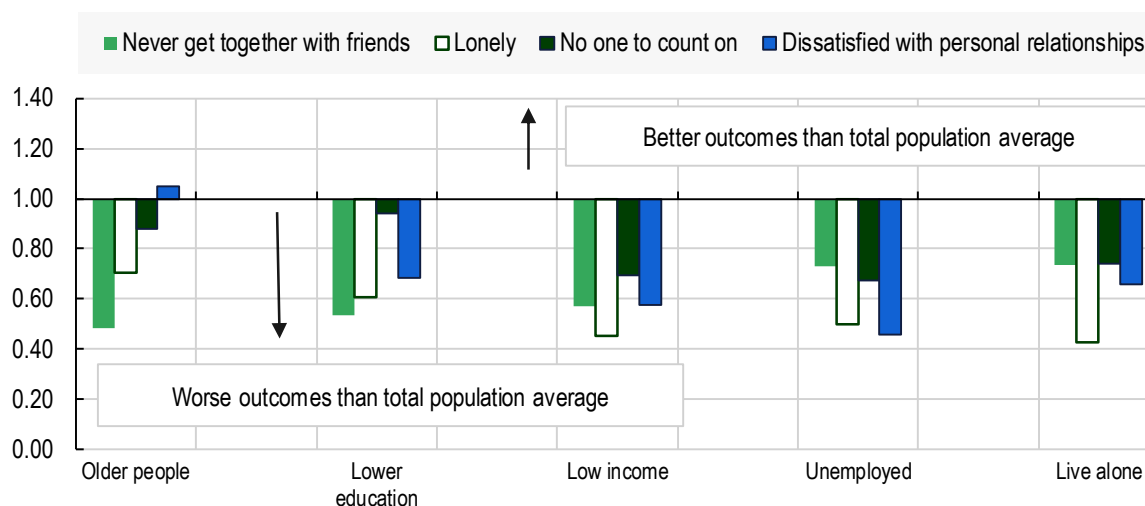
- While in general social connection outcomes are strong, there remains a substantial minority of people who feel disconnected: In 2022 10% of people say they have no one to count on in times of need, 8% report having no close friends, and 6% felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks.
- Socio-economic deprivations – including unemployment, low earnings and lower levels of education – put one at heightened risk for disconnection, as does older age and living alone (Figure 1.1). For example, compared to the overall population, people who are unemployed or have lower incomes are around twice as likely to report feeling lonely; people who live alone (a growing share of the population) are 1.5 times more dissatisfied with their relationships; and the elderly are

more socially isolated: 11% say they *never* meet friends in person in a typical year, more than double the rate of the general population.

- In recent years, men and young people – groups traditionally not considered as vulnerable to disconnection – have seen some deterioration in social connection outcomes on average across OECD countries.

Figure 1.1. Socio-economic precarity, old age and living alone are associated with poorer social connections outcomes

Ratio of social connections outcomes for different population groups compared to population outcomes, OECD average, 2022 or latest available year



Note: The figure depicts the ratio of the population group outcome compared to the total population average outcome, for each of four selected social connections outcomes. Latest available year refers to 2022 aside from “no one to count on” which refers to a pooled average of 2022-2023 for education, income and live alone outcomes; and a pooled average of 2017-2023 for age and education outcomes. Pooled averages are used to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes. Outcomes better than the population average are greater than 1, and outcomes that are worse than the population average are below 1. A value of 1 indicates equal outcomes for the population group and the population average.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]), *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/hqokf4>

The need for social infrastructure to support community-level connectedness

Social connectedness is a relatively recent policy field with less established evidence on good practice than other parts of public health and social policy. The existing knowledge base on the effectiveness of programmes and policies to combat loneliness and social isolation is mostly limited to interventions at the individual level such as training in social skills and relationship-building, and psychological or therapeutic interventions, which have been found to have small-to-moderate effects on social connectedness outcomes (World Health Organization, 2025^[8]). However, there is a widespread consensus that, beyond such individual-level efforts, community- and societal-level interventions are needed to tackle the environmental and structural drivers of disconnection (OECD, 2025^[1]; WHO, 2025^[49]; Holt-Lunstad, 2024^[50]; Schnepf, d’Hombres and Mauri, 2024^[51]).

A key factor in the formation, maintenance and strengthening of social connectedness at the community level is the presence of widely accessible, high-quality local social infrastructure (Figure 1.2). Social infrastructure in this context (also known as “third places”, see Glossary) refers to spaces and organisations that encourage social interactions and thereby strengthen social capital and feelings of belonging. This can include public institutions and places (libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, public libraries, pedestrian walking areas), community organisations (places of worship, civic associations) and commercial establishments (cafes, barbershops, bookstores) (OECD, 2025^[1]; Klinenberg, 2019^[52]).

Figure 1.2. Access to social infrastructure facilitates interactions across disparate social groups



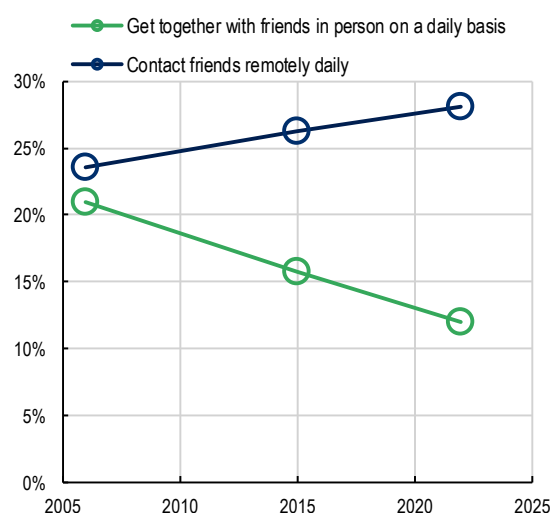
Source: OECD (2025^[1]), *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>.

Given the diversity of spaces that can be considered social infrastructure, measuring trends in social infrastructure availability and quality in a comprehensive and internationally comparative way can be challenging (OECD, 2025^[1]). However, the disappearance of third spaces has become the subject of academic or media attention in a number of OECD countries (Joseph, 2025^[53]; Khassen, 2025^[54]; Finlay et al., 2019^[55]), and there is some evidence that public and commercial spaces and their use is changing, in ways that potentially limit social interaction. For example, in the United Kingdom, more than 180 libraries operated by local government either closed or were handed over to volunteer groups between 2016 and 2024, with more socio-economically deprived communities being four times more likely to have lost a publicly-funded library during the period (Lynch, Thomas and Hattenstone, 2024^[56]). In France, the closure of more than 18 000 “bars-tabacs” (small bars also selling cigarettes, lottery tickets and other provisions such as postal stamps) between 2002 and 2022 has been associated with rising political polarisation at the local level due to the disappearance of spaces that previously facilitated discussion and debate (Subtil, 2026^[57]). Even when public spaces remain, the ways that people interact with one another in these places are changing. Evidence from a study analysing video recordings and CCTV footage of pedestrian behaviour in three metropolitan areas in the United States over a 30-year period showed that walking speeds increased by 15% and time spent lingering on public sidewalks declined, leading to an overall decrease in frequency of group encounters and interactions in public spaces, and indicating that urban residents view streets primarily as thoroughfares rather than social spaces (Salazar-Miranda et al., 2024^[58]).

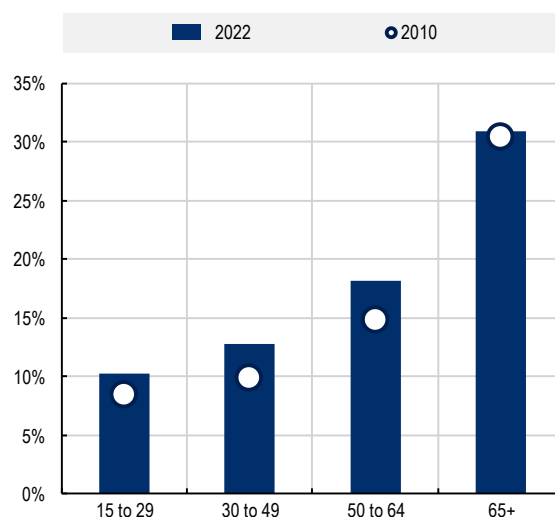
Changing patterns of social interaction may also be impacting the use of social infrastructure spaces. For example, on average across OECD countries, the share of people getting together with friends on a daily basis has dropped considerably over the last two decades (from 21% in 2006 to 12% in 2022). During the same period, daily remote contact with friends (by telephone, text, and social media) increased (Figure 1.3, Panel A). Both trends are occurring in the context of a large and growing share of the population in OECD countries living alone (Figure 1.3, Panel B). While these data do not directly pertain to social infrastructure usage, they may reflect broader societal trends where face-to-face socialising is being replaced with remote interaction via digital platforms in some instances.

Figure 1.3. People meet in person less, and connect more digitally, as solo living grows

Panel A. Share of respondents who socialise daily in-person vs. remotely, OECD EU-EFTA 21



Panel B. Share of population living in single person households, by age group, OECD 30



Note: Panel A: OECD EU-EFTA 21 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain. Panel B: OECD 30 refers to Austria, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]), *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>.

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Food as a social connector

Among several options for community-based social connection efforts, food can provide a valuable entry point because it has relatively broad-based appeal (being a universal human need which is often also an inherently pleasurable experience). Food-based activities can also be adapted to available social infrastructure and help strengthen the social purpose of shared public and private spaces – ranging from existing or repurposed green space (for community gardens, communal-supported agriculture, and community composting initiatives), built space (such as community halls, restaurants, and cafés for meal-sharing and cooking groups), and shared public outdoor areas (such as parks or neighbourhood streets for large-scale community dining events).

Food-based activities are not the only group activity that can help strengthen both relational and broader well-being outcomes; this is for instance also true for sports (Bengtsson et al., 2025^[59]; Eather et al., 2023^[60]; World Economic Forum, 2021^[61]), board games and role playing games (Novaes and Kanyat, 2025^[62]; Abbott, Stauss and Burnett, 2021^[63]), and singing (Rowan et al., 2025^[64]; Williams, Dingle and

Clift, 2018^[65]) among other group activities. Nevertheless, food-based activities can be easily accessible to a wide range of people (e.g. no particular skill or fitness level is required for attending a communal meal, and it can be relatively low-cost), making it a promising vehicle for connecting people within and across communities.⁵

The inclusion of food-based activities in national and sub-national government strategies to promote social connection

The social opportunities afforded by food-based activities have often been harnessed by actors at the local level such as municipal governments, civic or community organisations and local businesses. As strategies to promote social connections and combat loneliness become more widespread, some national and sub-national governments are beginning to consider the connecting power of food more systematically in these efforts as well.⁶

For example, the Japanese national government has taken a series of institutional steps to address loneliness and social isolation in recent years. In 2021 the government appointed the Minister for Loneliness and Isolation (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2021^[66]). Furthermore, the Act on the Advancement of Measures to Address Loneliness and Isolation came into force in 2024, and in the same year, the Cabinet Office adopted the Priority Plan to Facilitate the Promotion of the Policies Regarding Measures to Loneliness and Isolation (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2024^[67]). The Priority Plan recognises loneliness and social isolation as national issues, and the associated policy recommendations include a number of food-related measures involving several different ministries across government.⁷ These include activities such as food and nutrition education; increasing participation in farming activities by people with disabilities, older adults and those experiencing poverty; redistributing public food stocks to children's cafeterias, home-meal delivery services and food banks; and expanding community cafés, particularly dementia cafés, providing older adults and their families with an inviting atmosphere to socialise and connect (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2025^[68]).

At the municipal level in Korea, the *Seoul without Loneliness* strategy includes the introduction of "Seoul Mind Convenience Stores", spaces where city residents prepare and share free meals with one another, while also accessing mental health support (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024^[14]; Joon-hyun, 2025^[15]). The strategy also includes the Healthy Dining initiative, which supports social dining experiences for middle-aged people living in single-person households: this population group is targeted given their higher risk for neglecting to maintain a healthy diet, which can negatively affect their physical and mental health (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024^[69]).

Mobilising public participation: Activity banks, awareness campaigns

Food-based activities associated with anti-loneliness initiatives are not always directly implemented by governments. In several OECD countries (including the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and Germany, among others) the government uses national coalitions to bring together actors from multiple sectors to better enable cross-sectoral collaboration.⁸ These coalitions help inform national action plans, facilitate knowledge exchange and networking, support research, conduct outreach and advocacy, highlight good practices, and organise events to raise awareness around loneliness. Many have established online platforms to allow the public to find social connectedness activities in their area,⁹ which often include food-based activities (e.g. community gardens, shared meal events, and platforms that help residents set up local cooking clubs).

Food activities have also been integrated into awareness campaigns or themed action weeks designed to reduce stigma and encourage people to take part in social activities. For example, in Germany, the Together Out of Loneliness week used "drinking coffee together" as a theme in 2024, encouraging local

actors to organise informal encounters around coffee tables (Kompetenznetz Einsamkeit, 2026^[70]). During the Netherlands' annual Week Against Loneliness, municipalities and neighbourhood organisations host a wide range of activities that invite people to connect, including communal meals, neighbourhood potlucks, and community cafés (Eén tegen eenzaamheid, 2026^[71]). The role of food is most explicit in Denmark's biannual campaign "Denmark Eats Together",¹⁰ a nationwide campaign encouraging people across Denmark to host or join shared meals (Folkebevægelsen mod ensomhed, 2026^[72]). The events are not intended as one-off encounters, but as gateways into longer-term community involvement.

Mobilising private sector contributions: Funding and in-kind support

Government leadership in establishing social isolation and loneliness as policy priorities can also help mobilise support from private sector actors, in terms of providing additional funding, in-kind support (such as food surplus, or employee time for volunteering), and access to venues (such as restaurants, bars, or cafés) for community activities. Leadership from (sub-) national strategies against loneliness and isolation can – either explicitly or implicitly – encourage private sector actors to develop their own community social connectedness initiatives.

Examples of private sector engagement with (sub-) national social connections initiatives in OECD countries include:

- **Strengthening the social infrastructure functioning of Dutch supermarkets.** As a part of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport's National Coalition Against Loneliness, the supermarket chain Jumbo has introduced a "chat checkout" for customers who are not in a hurry and appreciate a short conversation with cashiers (Grimmer, 2023^[73]). Following positive feedback from both employees and shoppers who enjoyed having more social interactions, the initiative has expanded to more than 200 stores nationwide (Jumbo, 2021^[74]). In some locations, this is complemented by an "All Together Coffee Corner", where neighbours can share a coffee and, in some cases, receive assistance with shopping from volunteers. Beyond these initiatives, other local supermarkets in the Netherlands have also contributed to the country's efforts to combat loneliness by identifying and referring potentially lonely individuals to community initiatives. This approach recognises that people experiencing loneliness or social isolation still visit supermarkets for essential errands, making these familiar settings important points of contact for early outreach and support (Eén tegen eenzaamheid, 2024^[75]).
- **Utilising food delivery services to identify individuals at risk of loneliness in Seoul, Korea.** As a part of its *Seoul without Loneliness* strategy, the city of Seoul has partnered with delivery app services to identify users who may be more disconnected: For example, people in single-person households who frequently order takeaway food through delivery apps. These users receive a pop-up window to assess their risk of isolation, are offered discount vouchers for community activities that encourage them to go outside and are notified about the availability of support services (including the Seoul Mind Convenience Stores, described above) (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024^[69]).
- **Boosting children's nutrition and social connectedness through cafeterias and breakfast clubs.** The national governments in Japan and the United Kingdom were both early to recognise the policy importance of loneliness, establishing central strategies and government positions to promote social connections. In both countries, as well, private companies are engaged in efforts to combat loneliness and isolation – even if not explicitly under the remit of a national initiative. For example, the Ajinomoto Group, a multinational food company based in Japan, has launched the "AjiPanda Shokudo" (cafeteria) scheme, which channels proceeds from the sale of its food waste reduction products to support local children's cafeterias. In addition to contributing to environmental sustainability, this initiative strengthens community connections by enabling people to share meals in local community settings. By 2024, the programme had supported more than 280 community

meal events, reaching over 16 000 students (Ajinomoto, 2025^[76]). A similar approach has also been taken in the United Kingdom, with children's Breakfast Clubs at local schools funded in part by the sales of food surplus by the bakery chain Greggs and its foundation (Greggs Foundation, 2026^[77]).

The examples highlighted in this section provide a brief overview at how governments have already thought about the link between food and social connectedness promotion. Chapter 2 of this report is devoted to a detailed exploration of eight programmes, led by stakeholders within and outside of government, at the local, municipal and national levels, all of which use food-based activities to foster a sense of belonging and community cohesion. The case study approach informs our understanding of the cross-cutting challenges facing these types of initiatives, how programme leaders and policymakers have addressed these issues, and identifies emerging lessons for good practice in building community through food-based programmes.

Understanding the relationship between food and social connectedness

Before moving to specific case studies, it is useful to first take stock of what is known from existing research about the relationship between food and social connections. Indeed, there is a growing evidence base highlighting the association between food practices and broader well-being outcomes, including social connectedness. This section unpacks what is known about the social benefits of food more generally (with a focus on food security, cooking, and eating meals with others) before providing a summary overview of different types of food-based interventions and associated evidence.

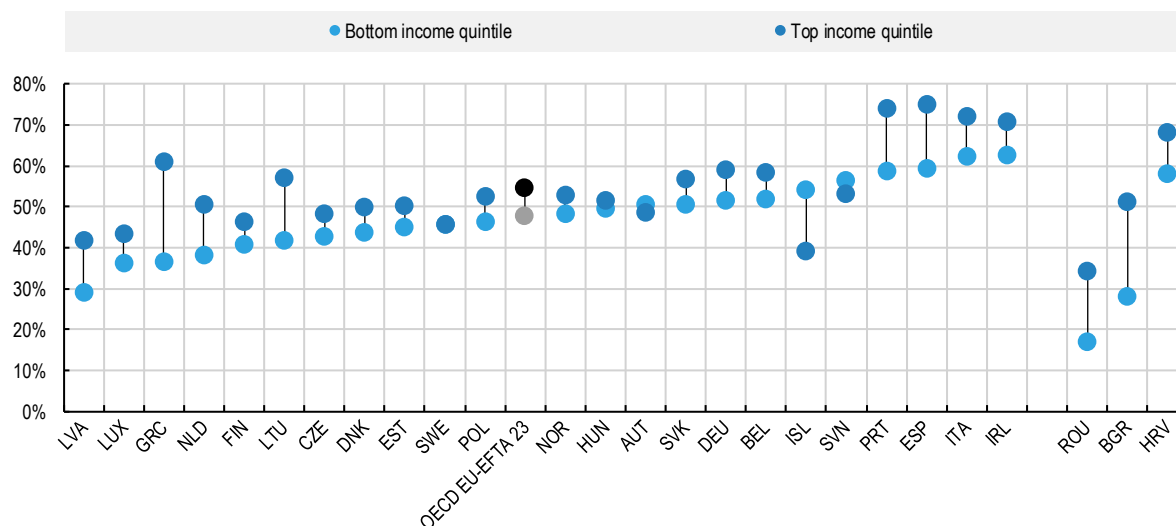
Food security and access to nutritious food

There is a robust literature highlighting the economic, developmental, physical and mental health costs of lacking access to nutritious food (Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]; Placzek, 2021^[79]), with now also increasing evidence as to the social costs of food insecurity. Research has demonstrated that individuals experiencing food insecurity are at increased risk of loneliness and a lack of social support. Socio-economic inequalities in the regular consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables (Figure 1.4) overlap with deprivations in social connections outcomes (Figure 1.1). In a similar vein, the inability to get together with friends and family to share a meal, or to afford to eat meat, chicken, fish (or the vegetarian equivalent) at least every other day, are more likely to affect those already experiencing other socio-economic deprivations (Figure 1.5) – such as unemployment, lower education and lower earnings (Figure 1.1). Food insecurity among the young exists in all OECD countries with comparable data, with 8% of 15-year-old students reporting they skip a meal at least weekly because they cannot afford to buy food (Figure 1.6).

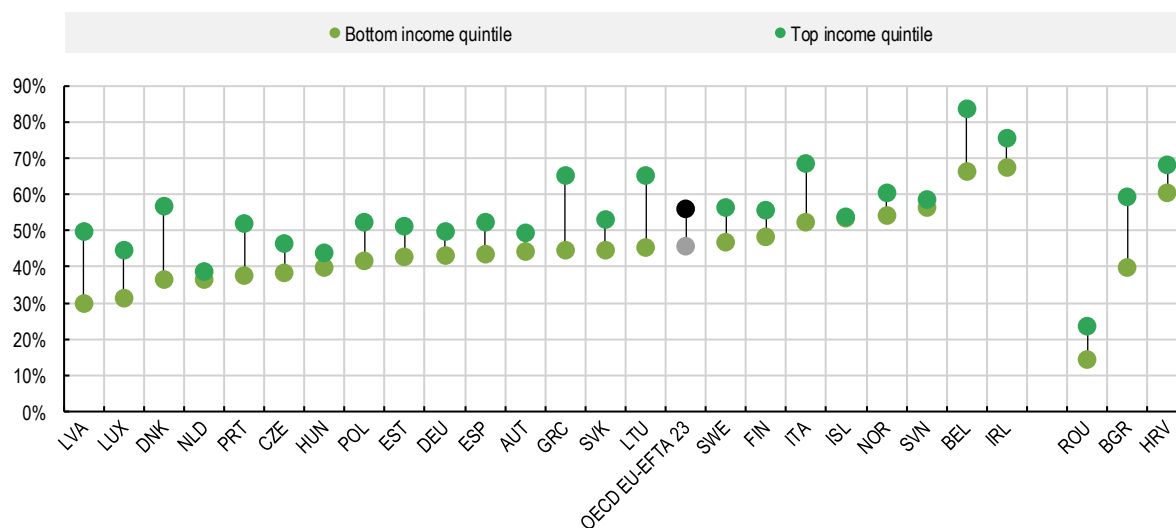
Beyond nutritional deprivation, there is also a link to the ability to connect with others: for example, those experiencing food insecurity may feel isolated or ashamed, with stigma acting as a barrier to seeking help and socialising with others, leading to a downward spiral of further withdrawal (Garthwaite, 2016^[80]; Runnels, Kristjansson and Calhoun, 2011^[81]; Bernal, Frongillo and Jaffe, 2016^[82]). Food insecurity can also be associated with social exclusion, as individuals may feel unable to afford food-related social activities, such as meeting up with friends at a local café or restaurant, or participating in culturally-relevant events (e.g. birthday celebrations), resulting in less time spent with friends and more time spent alone (Knight, O'Connell and Brannen, 2018^[83]; Meijs et al., 2020^[84]; Pfeiffer, Ritter and Hirsland, 2011^[85]).

Figure 1.4. Daily consumption of fruit and vegetables rises with income quintile

Panel A. Share of respondents who report consuming fruit -- excluding juice -- at least once per day, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2019 or closest year



Panel B. Share of respondents who report consuming vegetables or salad -- excluding juice or potatoes -- at least once per day, OECD EU-EFTA 23, 2019 or closest year



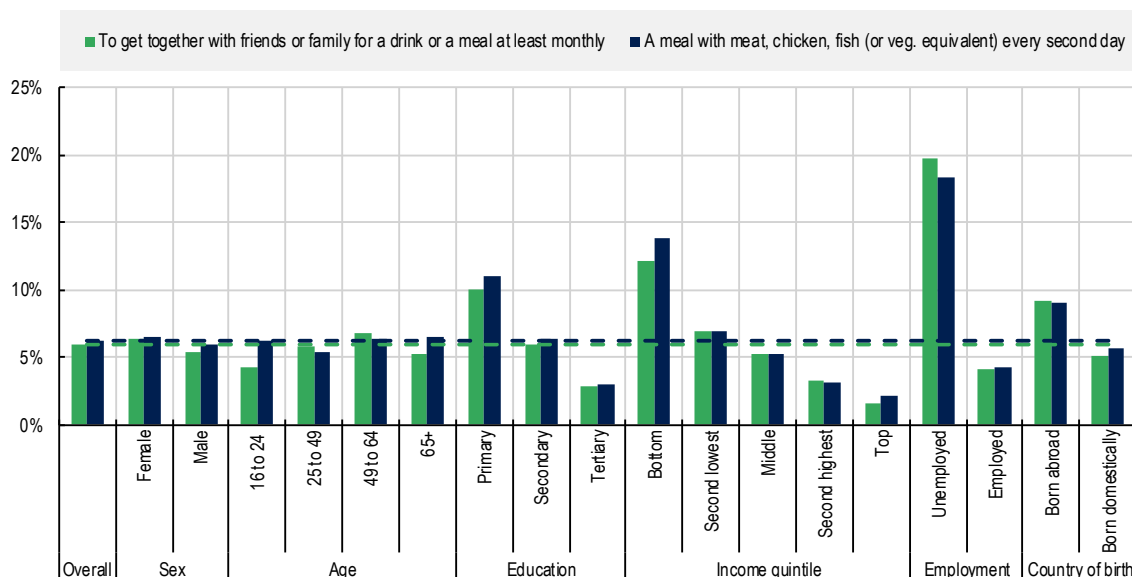
Note: Data refer to 2019 aside from Belgium (2018), Austria (2018-2019) and Germany (2019).

Source: OECD calculations based on *European Health Interview Survey (EHIS)* wave 3 data, Eurostat (n.d.^[86]) (database), [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:European_health_interview_survey_\(EHIS\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:European_health_interview_survey_(EHIS)).

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Figure 1.5. Food insecurity is most acute for the unemployed, those with lower levels of education, and those with lower incomes

Share of respondents who *cannot* afford each activity, OECD EU-EFTA 24, 2024



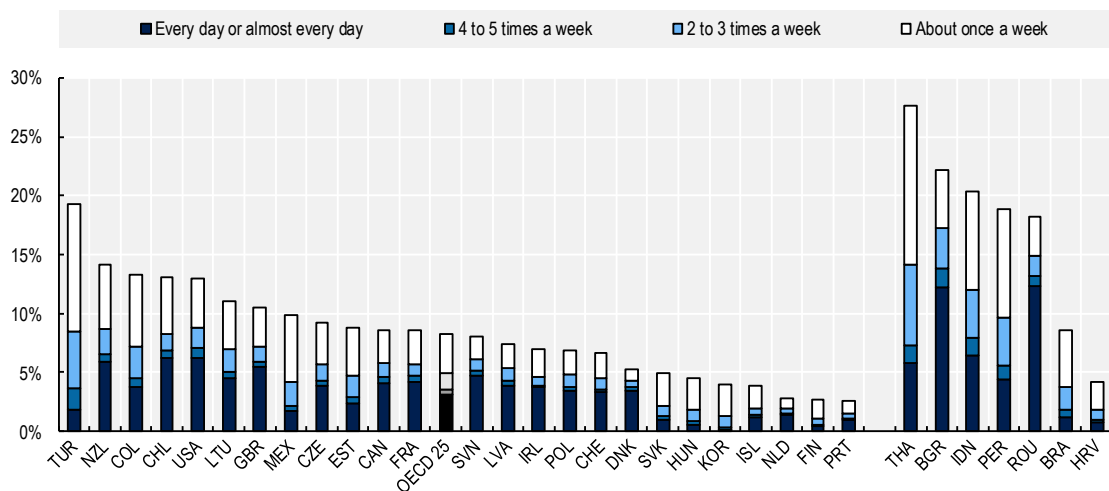
Note: OECD EU-EFTA 24 refers to Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Item non-response rates exceed 20% for Poland for inability to afford meeting friends/family for a monthly meal (22%). The dotted lines represent the overall population average for each indicator.

Source: OECD calculations based on Eurostat (n.d.^[87]), *European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) – Scientific Use File (SUF)* (database). <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions>.

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Figure 1.6. In 8 OECD countries, at least 1 in 10 students report skipping a meal weekly for financial reasons

Share of students reporting not eating once a week or more because there was not enough money to buy food in the past 30 days, OECD 25, 2022



Source: OECD (2024^[88]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume V): Learning Strategies and Attitudes for Life*, PISA, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c2e44201-en>.

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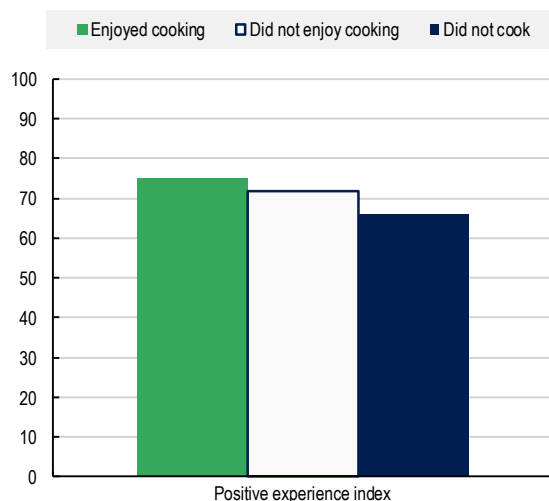
Cooking and food preparation

Analysis of cross-sectional data show that people who prepare and consume home-cooked meals tend to also have better nutritional literacy and healthier diets (Gallup & the Ajinomoto Group, 2023^[89]; Mills et al., 2017^[90]; Nature Research Intelligence, 2024^[91]). While this is particularly true for older people (Beck et al., 2020^[92]; Studiyaniti et al., 2025^[93]), children who are involved in preparing meals with their parents can also benefit and are more likely to develop life-long cooking skills, better nutrition, reduced risk of obesity and disordered eating, and higher academic achievement (Hagmann, Siegrist and Hartmann, 2020^[94]; Glanz et al., 2021^[95]; Nature Research Intelligence, 2024^[91]).

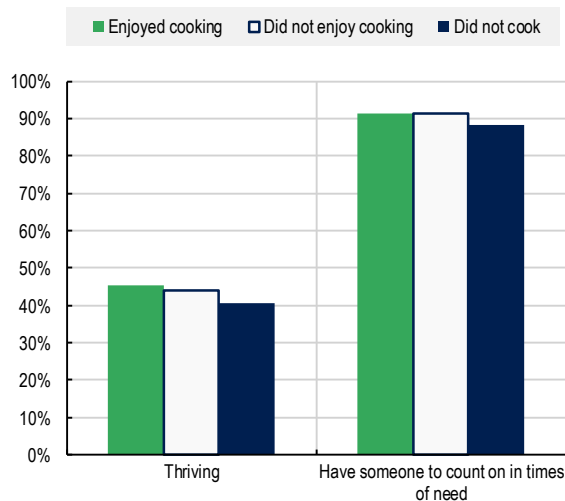
Recent associational evidence from the Gallup World Poll shows people who cook often, especially with or for others, report higher life satisfaction, improved well-being and a stronger sense of belonging (Figure 1.7); cooking in general is associated with slightly higher social support than not cooking (Figure 1.7, Panel B). In OECD countries in 2022, 67% of respondents reported they enjoyed cooking over the past week, 14% reported they did *not* enjoy cooking, and 19% did not cook. Those who enjoyed cooking had the best outcomes across two indices of subjective well-being – measuring experience of positive emotions (Figure 1.7, Panel A) and life evaluation (Figure 1.7, Panel B). Women are more likely to take on the responsibility for domestic food preparation than men – across OECD countries in 2022, 28% of men said they had not cooked at all in the previous 7 days compared with only 10% of women – highlighting the case for bringing men (and particularly older men) together to strengthen their ability to cook for themselves while building social connections (Men’s Pie Club, 2026^[96]; Men’s Kitchen, 2025^[97]) (see also Chapter 2 for the case study on Men’s Pie Clubs).

Figure 1.7. Cooking with others is linked to better subjective well-being and social connections outcomes

Panel A. Positive experience index, by respondents who enjoyed cooking, did not enjoy cooking, or did not cook over the past 7 days, OECD, 2022



Panel B. Share of respondents who are thriving, or have someone to count on, by respondents who enjoyed cooking, did not enjoy cooking, or did not cook over the past 7 days, OECD, 2022



Note: Both data panels refer to an OECD 38 average. Panel A: The positive experience index runs from 0 (lowest possible score) to 100 (highest/best possible score), based on how many positive emotions the respondent experienced the previous day. Panel B: “Thriving” refers to respondents who rate their current life satisfaction a 7 or higher (on a 0-10 scale) and their future expected life satisfaction an 8 or higher.

Source: Adapted, to limit analysis to OECD countries only, from Gallup and the Ajinomoto Group (2023^[89]), *Well-being Through Cooking: Global Insights Into Cooking Enjoyment and Eating Together*, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/544376/cooking-enjoyment-communal-wellbeing.aspx>.

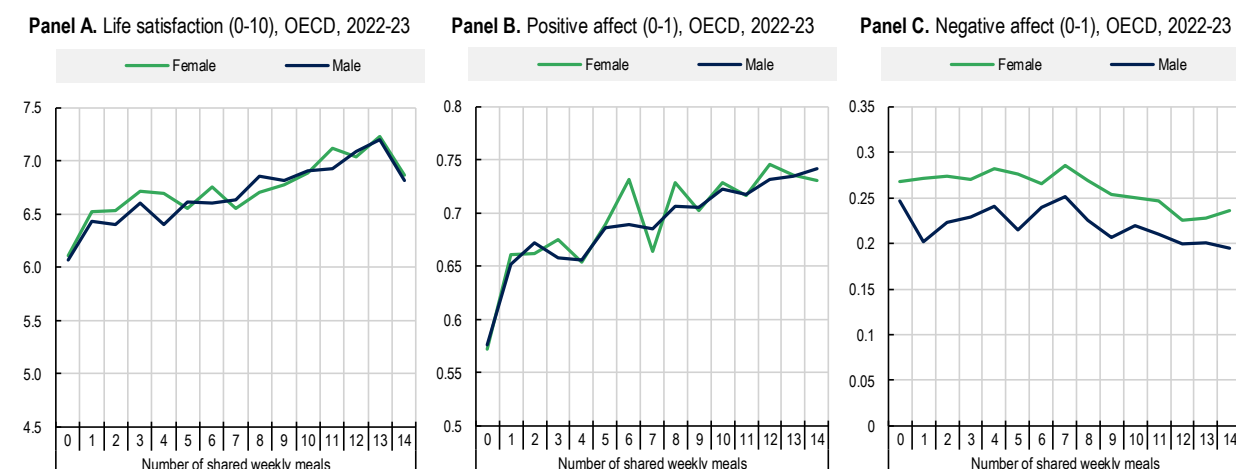
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Aside from cooking *with* others, qualitative studies have shown that people derive meaning from cooking *for* others: the acts of feeding loved ones and gifting food can provide a sense of purpose and joy (Farmer and Cotter, 2021^[98]). The social benefits of cooking may be particularly strong for older people, with cooking associated with having more opportunities to socially engage with others, in addition to a sense of autonomy, purpose and independence (Studiyaniti et al., 2025^[93]; Mayer, 2024^[99]). A population-based study in Japan found that older women with better cooking skills were more than twice as likely to have strong neighbourhood ties and 65% more likely to eat with friends compared to those with lower cooking skill levels (Tani, Fujiwara and Kondo, 2023^[100]).

Eating meals with others

Beyond cooking together, a number of studies have explored the beneficial outcomes associated with sharing meals (Gallup & the Ajinomoto Group, 2023^[89]; Gallup, 2023^[101]; De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2025^[102]; Birla, Krombach and Pasricha, 2025^[5]). Data from the Gallup World Poll show a positive association between shared meals and subjective well-being outcomes: life satisfaction and positive affect increase with the number of shared meals in an average week, and negative affect decreases (Figure 1.8).

Figure 1.8. Eating meals together is linked to better subjective well-being outcomes



Note: Panel A: Life satisfaction is measured on a 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) scale; Panels B and C: Positive and negative affect refer to the number of positive or negative emotions the respondent experienced the day prior, higher values indicate a higher frequency of positive (/negative) emotions. Number of shared weekly meals refers to the number of meals that were consumed with others over the past 14 days.

Source: Adapted, to limit analysis to OECD countries only, from De Neve et al., (2025^[3]), "Sharing meals with others: How sharing meals supports happiness and social connections", in Helliwell, J. et al. (eds.), *World Happiness Report 2025*, <https://doi.org/10.18724/whr-q119-bv60>.

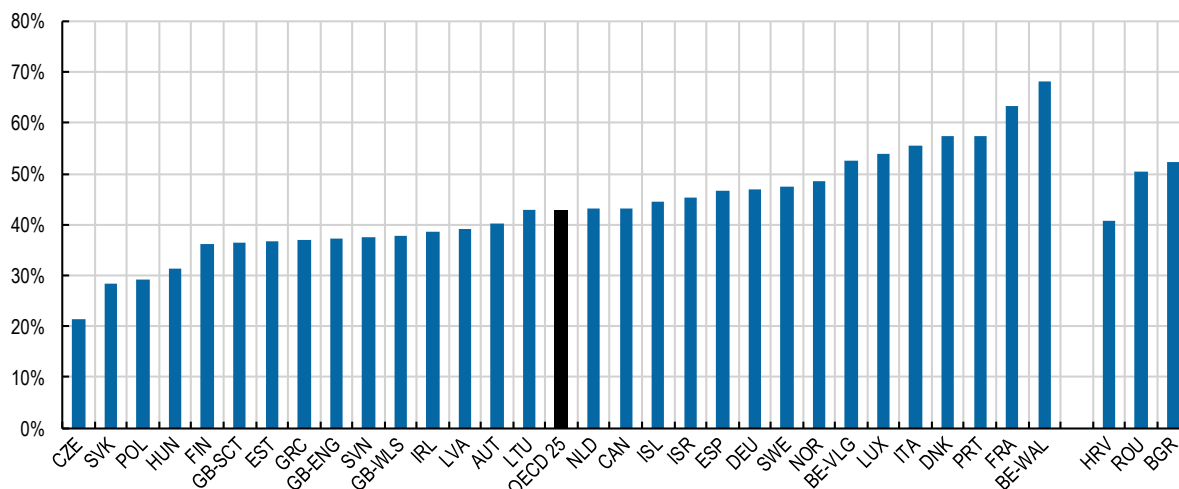
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Indeed, evidence shows that individuals who regularly share meals with others report higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, trust, connection to others in the household, community engagement, and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Dunbar, 2017^[4]; Berge et al., 2024^[103]; De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Victoria-Montesinos et al., 2023^[104]; Prati and Senik, 2026^[105]). In addition to experiencing more frequent positive emotions, people who share meals with others are also more likely to report enjoying their food (De Neve et al., 2025^[3]). Social meals serve as moments of togetherness, deepening bonds and increasing the number of dependable friendships (Dunbar, 2017^[4]; Birla, Krombach and Pasricha, 2025^[5]).

Shared family meals also play an important role in the lives of children and adolescents. Data from 25 OECD countries reveal that fewer than half (43%) of young people (students aged 11, 13 or 15 who attend mainstream schools) report that they have a shared meal as a family every day, though rates vary widely across countries, from as low as 21% to as high as 68% (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9. Under half of young people in 25 OECD countries have a daily shared family meal

Share of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds who report having a shared family meal “every day”, OECD 25, 2021-2022



Note: The OECD average excludes Belgium (Flemish- (BE-VLG) and French- (BE-WAL) speaking regions) and the United Kingdom (England (GB-ENG), Scotland (GB-SCT) and Wales (GB-WLS)).

Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) World Health Organization Collaborative Cross-National Survey 2017-2018 and 2021-2022. OECD (n.d.^[106]), *Child well-being drivers* (database), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/child-well-being-drivers.html>.

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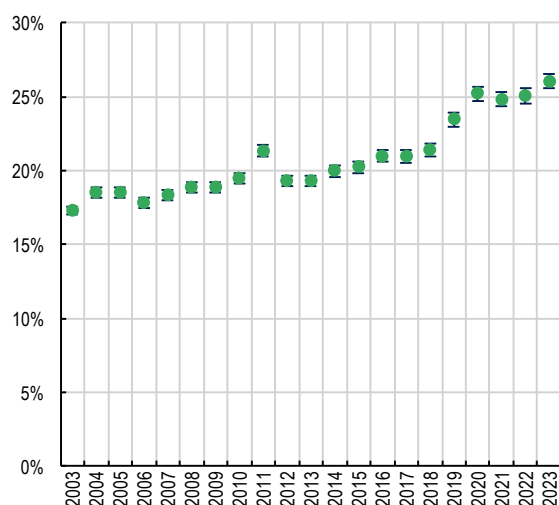
Regular family meals are associated with improved mental health, stronger social ties and positive development outcomes for young people. For example, in a large-scale Canadian study, adolescents who frequently ate dinner with their families reported fewer emotional and behavioural problems, greater life satisfaction and higher levels of prosocial behaviours (Elgar, Craig and Trites, 2013^[107]). The study found that meals created opportunities for emotional exchange, helping children and adolescents develop coping strategies and enhancing family communication. Similarly, in the United States, data from nearly 100 000 students demonstrated that the frequency of family dinners was positively linked to developmental assets like social competence and parental involvement, while being inversely associated with high-risk behaviours including substance use and depression (Fulkerson et al., 2006^[108]). A New Zealand report also describes how adolescents who regularly ate family meals had better family relationships, improved communication, lower levels of depressive symptoms and healthier dietary patterns. These associations were seen for both male and female adolescents, and were persistent across income and family structure, reinforcing the idea that sharing meals is a protective practice linked to multiple aspects of adolescent well-being (Utter et al., 2011^[109]).

Older adults are also likely to report benefits from sharing meals with others. Shared meals are associated not only with improved dietary habits and better nutritional outcomes (Eto, Sakamoto and Ainuki, 2022^[110]; Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]), but also with better quality of life and a greater ability to maintain or rebuild social ties later in life (Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]; Hansen, 2022^[112]). Programmes to facilitate shared meals may be particularly important for low-income seniors who live alone (Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]).

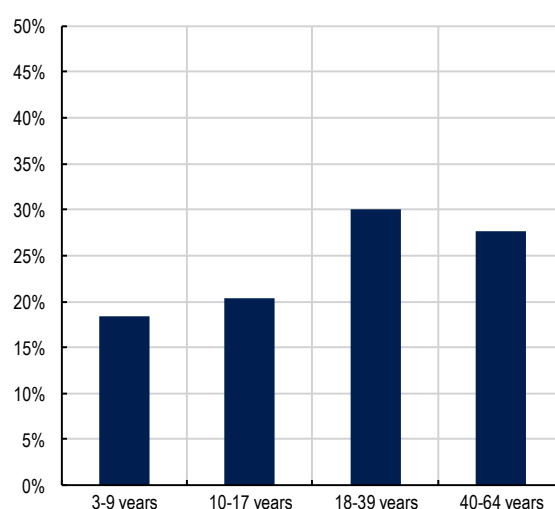
In contrast, individuals who eat alone frequently are also more likely to report feeling more isolated, have worse self-reported health ratings and express less optimism about life (Gallup & the Ajinomoto Group, 2023^[89]). Solo dining is on the rise: time use data from the United States show that by 2023 more than 1 in 4 respondents reported having eaten every meal alone the previous day, compared to 17% two decades prior (Figure 1.10, Panel A). Data from France find similar rates of solo dining: a June 2025 survey found 24% of respondents had eaten dinner alone four or more days the week prior, and 31% had eaten lunch alone (CEPREMAP, 2025^[113]).

Figure 1.10. Time use survey data from the United States show that solo dining is on the rise; data from Belgium show the wide-spread practice of watching television while eating

Panel A. Share of respondents who ate all of their meals alone the day prior, United States, 2003-23



Panel B. Share of people who "often" or "always" watch television during dinner, Belgium, 2022



Note: Panel A: Data are taken from the American Time Use Survey, 95% confidence intervals are shown. Refer to original source for additional details. Panel B: Data refer to the share of respondents who "often" or "always" watch television during dinner (other response options include "never", "rarely" and "sometimes". Parents provide information on television viewing habits for children aged 3-9. Data for respondents 65+ are not available.

Source: Panel A: De Neve et al., (2025^[3]), "Sharing meals with others: How sharing meals supports happiness and social connections", in Helliwell, J. et al. (eds.), *World Happiness Report 2025*, <https://doi.org/10.18724/whr-g119-bv60>. Panel B: Vasquez et al. (2025^[114]), EatMoveStats: Estimates from the Belgian Food Consumption Survey (v2025-11-20) [dataset], <https://eatmovestats.sciensano.be>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/fc4xbd>

Another behaviour that reduces the social quality of mealtimes is watching television or using a smartphone while eating. Simultaneously consuming media *and* a meal is shown to not only be negatively associated with dietary choices and weight (especially among children) (Coon et al., 2001^[115]; Avery, Anderson and McCullough, 2017^[116]; Martines et al., 2019^[117]; Alblas et al., 2023^[118]), but also with lower quality mealtime experiences – for example, a worse emotional atmosphere, less communication and lower group enjoyment during family meals (Berge et al., 2024^[103]; Fulkerson et al., 2014^[119]; Trofholz et al., 2017^[120]).¹¹ Data from Belgium show that in 2022 almost one-third of adults aged 18-39 reported "often" or "always" watching television during dinner. Rates for children are also high, at 18% and 20% for 3- to 9-year-olds and 10- to 17-year-olds, respectively (Figure 1.10, Panel B).

Collective approaches to growing, accessing, preparing, eating, and disposing of food all present potential opportunities to boost social connectedness

As the preceding sections have summarised, people's ability to access nutritious food, their participation in cooking and food preparation, and their engagement in eating meals with others can be linked with their social connectedness outcomes. These activities – accessing, preparing, and consuming food – can also be classified as stages within a broader cycle of food production and use which begins with growing food and ends with food disposal (Figure 1.11):

Figure 1.11. Five stages of food production and use



Source: Adapted from Healthy Food Policy Project (2023^[6]), *Local Policy to Promote Healthy Food Access: A Food Systems Framework*, <https://healthyfoodpolicyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Food-Systems-Framework.pdf>, with additional inputs from FAO (2018^[121]), *Sustainable food systems: Concept and framework*, <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/ca2079en> and OECD (2025^[122]), "Food systems", <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/food-systems.html>.

The food system model presented in Figure 1.11 is usually applied to analyse social and environmental issues across the agri-food supply chain, including food security and nutrition. In this report, we have adapted the approach to categorise different food-based activities that can provide opportunities to boost social connectedness, as follows:

- **Growing** food together can be a way to connect people, as well as to foster a deeper awareness of and appreciation for the seasonal, environmental, agricultural and cultural processes involved in bringing food to the table.
- Food **access** shapes who can reach healthy and nutritious food, when, where and at what cost. Activities to improve access to nutritious food can also bring social benefits.
- **Prepare** refers to all of the ways food is made for personal or communal consumption. While food preparation often takes place in the home, collective food preparation outside the home can also provide opportunities for connection.
- The **consume** stage of the food system relates to eating food and sharing meals with others. While these can take place in a variety of settings – including at home; in bars, cafes or restaurants; or

in schools and the workplace – the case studies in this report focus on community meal-sharing initiatives outside domestic, commercial or institutional settings. Also referred to as “commensality”, sociological and anthropological literature recognises meal-sharing as a fundamental aspect of human connection and communal relationship building (Fiske, 1991^[123]; Fischler, 2011^[124]).

- **Dispose** refers to recycling, composting and donating or redistributing food waste or surplus.

Table 1.1 describes example activities for each of these categories and accompanying evidence for their impacts. These examples include community gardens and communal-supported agriculture programmes (growing food); food banks and meal delivery programmes (accessing food); community kitchens and cooking groups (preparing food); community dining events, social cafés, and pop-up neighbourhood restaurants (consuming food); and community composting initiatives and food redistribution programmes (food disposal).

Despite the breadth of existing intervention examples and their potential, the majority of evidence on their impact are based on correlations rather than established causality (see Box 1.1). Indeed, much of the evidence on programme impacts on social connections rely on non-experimental, small sample size research. Yet already, the recent inclusion of food practice questions in both large-scale international surveys as well as large-scale population surveys has enabled more robust statistical analysis of the relationship between food and various aspects of well-being (Gallup & the Ajinomoto Group, 2023^[89]; Gallup, 2023^[101]; De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Prati and Senik, 2026^[105]). Generating better evidence on the underlying mechanisms and causal pathways linking food-related activities to social connections and broader well-being outcomes – to then be able to assess their cost-effectiveness and value for money – is a central priority moving forward, as also highlighted in Chapter 2.

Box 1.1. The quality of existing evidence on the drivers of social connectedness

Previous OECD work has found that most research on the drivers and impacts of social connectedness outcomes tends to be based on correlational or associative analysis, rather than designs allowing for the establishment of causal pathways. Further, some relationships appear to be bidirectional, with causal mechanisms acting in both directions simultaneously, such as the relationship between loneliness and unemployment: becoming unemployed leads to less time socialising and a loss of community, both of which can contribute to loneliness, while conversely, loneliness is associated with worse mental health outcomes, which is then demonstrated to affect future employment opportunities.

Strengthening causal evidence on the drivers of social connectedness requires improved evidence such as more longitudinal data collection of social connectedness outcomes at the population level, as well as rigorous impact evaluation of community-level interventions, including randomised control trials. Beyond causality, there is also a need for more nuanced impact evaluations to provide information on the magnitude and duration of programme outcomes, as well as differences in outcomes for different population groups and across implementation designs. Improving the rigour and breadth of impact evidence is especially important in the context of establishing cost-effectiveness and value for money to inform whether and when to invest in such programmes. Nevertheless, the existing evidence presented in this report suggests strong theoretical and associational links between actively participating in food-based initiatives and better social connections outcomes.

Source: OECD (2025^[11]), *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6df2d6a0-en>.

Table 1.1. Overview of food-based activity examples, with evidence of associated social connections and broader well-being benefits

Food system component	Programme examples	Associated social connections outcomes	Additional well-being benefits	Type of evidence
Growing food together	Community gardens are jointly cultivated by engaged neighbourhood residents, with the resulting harvest shared (Vicenzi, Calzolari and Hasterok, 2022^[125]; OECD, 2013^[126]).	- encourage <i>social interactions</i> between individuals from diverse age, socio-economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and <i>facilitate cultural exchanges</i> between members based on their preferred produce and gardening styles (Wakefield et al., 2007^[127]; McDaniel, Soto Mas and Sussman, 2021^[128]; Firth, Maye and Pearson, 2011^[129]). - growing culturally relevant food is important for immigrant communities, helping them to strengthen a <i>sense of identity</i> in their new home (Wen Li, Hodgetts and Ho, 2010^[130]; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004^[131]; Graham and Connell, 2006^[132]).	- provide residents – especially those in urban areas – with <i>green spaces</i> and a <i>direct connection to nature</i> that may otherwise be lacking (Vicenzi, Calzolari and Hasterok, 2022^[125]; OECD, 2013^[126]) - bolster <i>civic engagement</i> by providing a space for community members to establish partnerships with local institutions and authorities (Firth, Maye and Pearson, 2011^[129]). - bolster <i>mental health</i> and sustain one's <i>sense of purpose</i> (Soga et al., 2017^[133]; Shimp, 2024^[134]; Brigance et al., 2018^[135]). - improved <i>nutritional outcomes</i> through access to fresh ingredients, including fruits and vegetables (Alaimo et al., 2008^[136]; Zoellner et al., 2012^[137]; Litt et al., 2011^[138]), and have better <i>physical health</i> with healthier BMIs (Al-Delaimy and Webb, 2017^[139]; Zick et al., 2013^[140]).	- evidence for <i>social interactions</i>, <i>sense of identity</i>, <i>connection to nature</i> and <i>civic engagement</i> primarily come from non-experimental research, often with qualitative methods: Focus groups, in-depth or semi-structured interviews, participant observation or surveys (Wakefield et al., 2007^[127]; Firth, Maye and Pearson, 2011^[129]; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004^[131]; Wen Li, Hodgetts and Ho, 2010^[130]; Vicenzi, Calzolari and Hasterok, 2022^[125]; Soga et al., 2017^[133]; Shimp, 2024^[134]). - evidence for <i>nutritional outcomes</i> (consumption of fresh produce) come from random sample / population representative surveys and regression analysis to control for confounders (Alaimo et al., 2008^[136]; Litt et al., 2011^[138]); also for <i>physical health</i> (<i>reduced BMI</i>), via a study that uses comparison groups and controls for confounders (Al-Delaimy and Webb, 2017^[139]; Zick et al., 2013^[140]).
	Communal-supported agriculture (CSA) programmes directly link members of a community to the source of production of their food, primarily small-scale local farmers. Enable producers and consumers to share the financial risks associated with farming, while providing environmental, social and health benefits to the broader community (DeMuth, 1993^[141]; Furness et al., 2022^[142]).	broaden the <i>social networks</i> of both producers and consumers via engaging in farming volunteer programmes (e.g. planting, weeding, harvesting), creating opportunities for <i>social interaction</i>, building <i>trust</i> and <i>belonging</i> among groups that may otherwise have fewer chances to interact with one another (Birtalan et al., 2020^[143]; Furness et al., 2022^[142]).	- enables producers and consumers to <i>share the financial risks</i> associated with farming (DeMuth, 1993^[141]; Furness et al., 2022^[142]). - better <i>nutritional outcomes</i> and greater likelihood to consume fruit and vegetables (Hanson et al., 2017^[144]; Seguin-Fowler et al., 2021^[145]) and improved <i>physical health</i> outcomes such as healthy range BMI (Minaker et al., 2014^[146]; Seguin-Fowler et al., 2021^[145]).	- evidence for <i>social networks</i> and <i>interactions</i> come primarily from qualitative research designs, such as (semi-)structured participant interviews (Birtalan et al., 2020^[143]; Furness et al., 2022^[142]). - evidence for improved <i>nutrition</i> (consumption of fruits and vegetables) and <i>physical health</i> (BMI) outcomes come via population-based surveys and multilevel linear regression analysis (Minaker et al., 2014^[146]); a randomised control trial found CSA participation to improve nutrition

				outcomes for caregivers in low-income households but not for children (Seguin-Fowler et al., 2021 ^[145]).
Accessing food together	Meal provision programmes (sometimes referred to as “feeding programmes”) prepare and provide meals to community members in need. Examples include: • food banks, not-for-profit organisations that collect and distribute food to those struggling with food insecurity in a central location • school meal programmes, which deliver meals to school-aged children (Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]; OECD, 2023^[147]) • meal delivery programmes, such as “Meals on Wheels”, a social care service operating in several OECD countries, provide cooked meals to housebound individuals who are unable to prepare food themselves, particularly elderly people (Papadaki et al., 2023^[148]).	• attendees of charitable food organisations reported <i>making friends</i> at the centres and feeling a stronger <i>sense of community belonging</i> due to their visits (Rotenberg, Surman and McGrath, 2021^[149]). • volunteers at food banks report increased <i>empathy</i>, a greater sense of <i>social responsibility</i> (Wright et al., 2021^[150]; Lee, Coulson and Hackett, 2023^[151]). • school meal programmes can improve the <i>mental well-being</i> and <i>social functioning</i> of participating students (OECD, 2024^[88]; Peirce et al., 2022^[152]), facilitate <i>cross-cultural exchanges</i> – as students are exposed to a greater diversity of culinary traditions through diverse school-provided offerings – and teach important <i>social skills</i> (OECD, 2023^[147]). • daily <i>friendly interactions</i> between meal recipient and meal deliverer are an important factor in mitigating <i>social isolation</i> for Meals on Wheels service users (Papadaki et al., 2023^[148]). • benefits accrue even in non-formal programmatic settings: Supermarkets and convenience stores often serve as community hubs (Neighbourly Lab, 2025^[153]) for <i>social interaction</i> and physical activity, helping to alleviate <i>loneliness</i>, especially in older male participants (Hansen, 2022^[112]).	• school meal programmes improve <i>nutritional, cognitive and learning outcomes</i> (Placzek, 2021^[79]; Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]; OECD, 2024^[88]; OECD, 2023^[147]).	• evidence on <i>social outcomes</i> (<i>making friends, sense of belonging, social responsibility, social isolation, loneliness</i>) primarily come from qualitative studies based on participant interviews (Rotenberg, Surman and McGrath, 2021^[149]; Wright et al., 2021^[150]; Lee, Coulson and Hackett, 2023^[151]; Papadaki et al., 2023^[148]; Hansen, 2022^[112]). • the many benefits of school meal programmes – including <i>mental and social well-being</i>, as well as <i>nutritional, cognitive and learning outcomes</i> – have been covered extensively in other OECD work (Placzek, 2021^[79]; Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]; OECD, 2024^[88]; OECD, 2023^[147]); a mixed-method impact evaluation of a New Zealand school meal programme, using (in part) a regression discontinuity design based on programme eligibility thresholds, finds support for improved <i>mental well-being</i> and <i>social functioning</i> (Peirce et al., 2022^[152]).
	Farmers markets provide access to fresh, locally grown foods and are typically staffed by vendors from local farms who sell their produce directly to consumers. To enhance inclusivity and ensure broader access, some farmers markets associations partner with	• provides participants with a space to <i>interact</i> with other community members, build <i>new relationships</i>, and increase feelings of <i>community belonging</i> and interpersonal <i>trust</i> (Russomanno and Tree, 2021^[154]; Maró et al., 2023^[155]; Vittersø	• provides access to <i>healthier</i> and more <i>nutritious</i> foods, and participants have better <i>physical health</i> outcomes (<i>healthy weight</i>) (Russomanno and Tree, 2021^[154]; Maró et al., 2023^[155]).	• <i>social interactions</i> evidence (including <i>relationship building</i>) come from systematic reviews of both qualitative and quantitative research designs (Russomanno and Tree, 2021^[154]; Maró et al., 2023^[155]), and evidence on <i>trust, belonging</i> and

	public service providers to subsidise transport costs, or ensure farmers market products are included in food-assistance social welfare programmes.	et al., 2019 ^[156]).		<i>psychosocial well-being</i> from mixed method study designs (combining in-depth interviews, literature reviews, and surveys) (Vittersø et al., 2019^[156]). cross-sectional studies show an association between <i>physical health</i> outcomes (e.g. lower BMI) and farmers' market attendance (Bimbo et al., 2015^[157]; Minaker et al., 2014^[146]; Pitts et al., 2015^[158]), but causal studies (one using an instrumental variable approach, and the other a randomised control trial) find no significant impact of farmers' market attendance on health outcomes (Hu, Clarke and Zendehelel, 2021^[159]; Aktary, 2025^[160]).
Preparing food together	Community kitchens are spaces in which community members gather to cook a meal together. As a venue, community kitchens offer a more structured, or institutionalised form of cooking together, and often target communities or individuals experiencing food insecurity. Cooking groups meet on a one-off or regular basis to allow participants to learn or exchange food preparation knowledge in a social setting.	- participation in communal cooking activities is associated with reduced <i>social isolation</i> and enhanced <i>social capital</i> (Iacovou et al., 2013^[161]), an enhanced sense of belonging and shared purpose (Marovelli, 2019^[162]; Farmer, Touchton-Leonard and Ross, 2018^[163]; Herbert et al., 2014^[164]), and can encourage men and young people to socialise (Kheraj, 2025^[165]). - intergenerational and multicultural cooking groups bring people together to <i>share cultural knowledge</i> and <i>create connections</i> between different age or ethnic groups (Migrateful, 2026^[166]; RIA Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging, 2025^[167]; Çakır, 2014^[168]).	- builds new <i>skills</i> in food preparation and household budgeting (Iacovou et al., 2013^[161]; Herbert et al., 2014^[164]; Marovelli, 2019^[162]). - may reduce <i>food insecurity</i> and <i>improve nutrition</i> (Iacovou et al., 2013^[161]). - in therapeutic patient-based settings, can improve <i>mental health</i> (reduce anxiety and enhance coping skills) (Hill, O'Brien and Yurt, 2007^[169]).	- evidence on <i>social connections</i> (<i>social isolation, social capital, cultural exchange</i>), <i>skills building</i> and <i>food insecurity</i> come from systematic reviews of primarily qualitative studies (Iacovou et al., 2013^[161]), with one systematic review noting the lack of peer-reviewed evidence in the field (Farmer, Touchton-Leonard and Ross, 2018^[163]); other evidence comes from qualitative (Marovelli, 2019^[162]) and mixed-method, quasi-experimental (Herbert et al., 2014^[164]) studies. <i>mental health</i> evidence comes from a non-experimental study of burn survivors (patient questionnaires) (Hill, O'Brien and Yurt, 2007^[169]).

Consuming food together	Sharing meals often occurs in informal, private settings, rather than as a part of policy interventions. The evidence included for this section refers to sharing meals in non-programmatic settings. Some policy examples do exist, however, and include: • “block party”- style neighbourhood or community dining events (such as The Longest Table network in the United States, or the “Table d’Aude” organised by Hypers Voisins in Paris (The Longest Table, 2025^[170]; Abran, 2025^[171])). • community café or social restaurant programmes that provide more regular and consistent meal-sharing opportunities that are open to all, or targeted towards specific groups (see the Resto vanHarte case study in Chapter 2).	• higher levels of <i>trust</i>, <i>connection to others</i> in the household, <i>community engagement</i> (Dunbar, 2017^[4]; Berge et al., 2024^[103]; De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Victoria-Montesinos et al., 2023^[104]; Prati and Senik, 2026^[105]) • shared family meals enhance <i>pro-social behaviours</i>, improve <i>social competence</i>, <i>communication</i> and <i>family relationships</i> (Elgar, Craig and Trites, 2013^[107]; Fulkerson et al., 2006^[108]; Utter et al., 2011^[109]). • for older adults, shared meals are associated with better quality of life and a greater ability to maintain or rebuild <i>social ties</i> later in life (Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]; Hansen, 2022^[112]).	• improved <i>mental health</i> via higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Dunbar, 2017^[4]; Berge et al., 2024^[103]; De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Victoria-Montesinos et al., 2023^[104]; Prati and Senik, 2026^[105]; Fulkerson et al., 2006^[108]). • improved <i>dietary habits</i> and better <i>nutritional</i> outcomes (Eto, Sakamoto and Ainuki, 2022^[110]; Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]; Utter et al., 2011^[109]; Glanz et al., 2021^[95]).	• <i>social connections</i> and <i>mental health</i> outcomes come from statistical analysis of cross-sectional survey data (Dunbar, 2017^[4]; Berge et al., 2024^[103]; Victoria-Montesinos et al., 2023^[104]; Fulkerson et al., 2006^[108]; Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]), including from large-scale international or population surveys (De Neve et al., 2025^[3]; Prati and Senik, 2026^[105]; Elgar, Craig and Trites, 2013^[107]). • evidence on <i>dietary habits</i> and <i>nutritional</i> outcomes come from a mix of cross-sectional survey data and systematic reviews (Eto, Sakamoto and Ainuki, 2022^[110]; Ishikawa et al., 2017^[111]; Utter et al., 2011^[109]; Glanz et al., 2021^[95]).
Disposing food together	Community-based composting initiatives encourage the composting of organic materials close to the source of their generation (i.e. within the same community) to ensure that the benefits go towards the local area, and waste transport is reduced (Clark, 2015^[172]). Food redistribution programmes ensure that surplus food – generated by various stakeholders throughout the food system (i.e. factories, suppliers, restaurants, etc.) – is given to those in need, for example soup kitchens, homeless shelters, school meal programmes, etc. (OECD, 2025^[176]). Examples include: • Refettorio in Paris: An anti-waste restaurant, staffed by Michelin-star chefs using surplus food and ingredients from their restaurants to prepare free meals for locals experiencing financial and social	• collective composting can bring social benefits such as <i>strengthened community ties</i> (Christie and Waller, 2019^[173]; US EPA, 2025^[174]), <i>social cohesion</i>, <i>knowledge exchange</i> and <i>shared responsibility</i> for sustainable food practices (Morrow and Davies, 2021^[175]). • reduces feelings of <i>social exclusion</i>; can <i>build social networks</i> and increase interactions between individuals and public authorities, civic associations and/or private companies (Vittuari et al., 2017^[180]).	• <i>environmental</i> benefits, such as providing essential nutrients for soil, ensuring that food waste is re-integrated back into the local eco-system (Morrow and Davies, 2021^[175]; US EPA, 2025^[174]). • linked to increased <i>environmental awareness</i> and <i>stewardship</i> (Christie and Waller, 2019^[173]). • reduces <i>food insecurity</i> among participants (Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]), however concerns remain around <i>stigma</i> and <i>shame</i> of consuming donated food, and at times <i>questionable nutritional value</i> of available food items (Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]; Vittuari et al., 2017^[180]). • contributes to <i>environmental sustainability</i> goals (OECD, 2025^[176]; Damiani et al., 2021^[181]; Nenert et al., 2025^[182]).	• findings come from qualitative research: Participant observation and interviews (Christie and Waller, 2019^[173]; Morrow and Davies, 2021^[175]). • little evidence explicitly focussing on social connections outcomes exist – the referenced study showing <i>social cohesion</i> outcomes is based on expert interviews and results from participant questionnaires (Vittuari et al., 2017^[180]). • existing OECD work discusses the relationship between <i>food insecurity</i>, and <i>environmental sustainability</i>, and food waste reduction plans (Giner and Placzek, 2022^[78]; OECD, 2025^[176]; Nenert et al., 2025^[182]).

precarity. The meals are consumed communally, in a restaurant setting (Refettorio, 2018^[177]; Bosio, 2025^[178]). • The United Kingdom baked goods chain Greggs has established a network of “Greggs Outlet” shops in socio-economically deprived areas, selling day-old products at a reduced price compared with its regular shops (Greggs Foundation, 2025^[179]). A portion of profits are used to fund community initiatives to boost nutrition and social connectedness for low-income students (Greggs Foundation, 2026^[77]).			
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Notes

¹ Although OECD analysis indicates that according to some data sources, younger people have seen a slight rise in loneliness and other indicators of social disconnection in recent years on average across OECD European countries (OECD, 2025^[1]).

² The OECD Well-being Framework includes Social Connections as one of the 11 dimensions of current well-being and Social Capital (societal norms, shared values and institutional arrangements that encourage co-operation between groups) as one of the four capital stocks driving the long-term sustainability of well-being (OECD, 2024^[184]).

³ Recent OECD work has drawn from a widely-adopted conceptual framework developed by Holt-Lundstad, Robles, and Sbarra (2017^[183]) to recognise that social connectedness consists of *structural* aspects (referring to the existence of social relationships, roles and interactions); *functional* outcomes (which capture the actual or perceived support provided through these relationships); *qualitative* features (recognising that social relationships are complex, and are not always inherently positive); and *communal and societal connectedness*, capturing an individual's sense of belonging and relationship to broader social groups (OECD, 2025^[1]).

⁴ It should be noted that social ties are complex and can also be associated with negative individual and community outcomes such as deteriorated health outcomes (Lee et al., 2026^[188]) or participation in gang violence (IDRC, 2017^[193]). Strong ties within different communities or social groups can also contribute to in-group out-group dynamics which can foster exclusion or polarisation (Bliuc et al., 2024^[189]). For this reason, it is important to consider the quality of social connection alongside structural and functional aspects (OECD, 2025^[1]).

⁵ It should also be noted that while the consumption of food is a universal basic need, food-based activities may not always be perfectly inclusive as different individuals or groups of people may experience limitations or aversion to participation due to cultural, religious, physical, or psychological restrictions around food, which need to be taken into account to maximise inclusivity of programmes.

⁶ Recent OECD work on social connections and loneliness in OECD countries (OECD, 2025^[1]) guided the identification of relevant plans from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

⁷ Relevant ministries include the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; the Ministry of the Environment; and the Consumer Affairs Agency.

⁸ See, for example: The National Coalition against Loneliness in the Netherlands (Eén tegen eenzaamheid, 2026^[195]); the People's Movement Against Loneliness and the former National Partnership against Loneliness in Denmark (Folkebevægelsen mod Ensomhed, 2026^[186]); the Public-Private Partnership Platform to Combat Loneliness and Isolation in Japan (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2026^[190]); and, the Competence Network on Loneliness in Germany (Kompetenznetz Einsamkeit, 2026^[192]).

⁹ Examples include Austria's Platform Against Loneliness (Plattform Gegen Einsamkeit, 2026^[187]); One Against Loneliness in the Netherlands (Eén tegen eenzaamheid, 2026^[194]); and Germany's Competence Network on Loneliness (Kompetenznetz Einsamkeit, 2026^[191]).

¹⁰ The initiative began in 2016 under the national umbrella coalition, “United Against Loneliness”, which brings together around 100 civil society organisations, municipalities, foundations and private actors to address loneliness. Local actors organise the meals and the coalition plays a central facilitating role through: An online platform where people can find and create meal-sharing events; practical toolkits and guidance on organising communal dining, including communication materials, conversation starters and inclusion guidelines; and co-ordinated media outreach that raises awareness and encourages participation. The coalition chose to centre its campaign around food as a low-barrier, everyday activity: Everyone eats, and hosting or joining a communal meal requires limited specialised skills, equipment or long-term commitment.

¹¹ As with much of the evidence in this field, many of the studies assessing the relationship between television viewing during mealtimes are associational, rather than causal, so care should be taken in interpreting results (see Box 1.1). Moreover, research into watching television during mealtimes tends to focus on its effects on *family* (i.e. group) meals – as opposed to the effects of eating alone while watching television. Researchers note that the social benefits of shared family meals may not disappear entirely when television is present, and that, for example, adolescents who watch television while having a family meal may still experience some of the communal dining benefits as compared to those who rarely share meals at all (Feldman et al., 2007_[185]).

2. Food-based initiatives to promote social connections: Insights from case studies

This chapter explores the practical implementation of food-based activities for promoting social connectedness through eight case studies. These wide-ranging practice examples – including community-level interventions and government support models – highlight some cross-cutting insights for public sector and non-governmental actors engaged in community interventions for reducing social isolation and loneliness: (1) Food is a broadly accessible entry point for promoting social connection; (2) food-based programmes can help revitalise under-used community social infrastructure, while (3) promoting other well-being co-benefits for participants; (4) volunteers involved in the implementation of such activities can gain self-confidence and purpose alongside new opportunities for skills development; (5) government support plays a crucial enabling role for community-level interventions and could be expanded further; and (6) better evidence on impacts and pathways for social connection outcomes specifically is needed to strengthen policy knowledge on “what works” for boosting social connectedness through food.

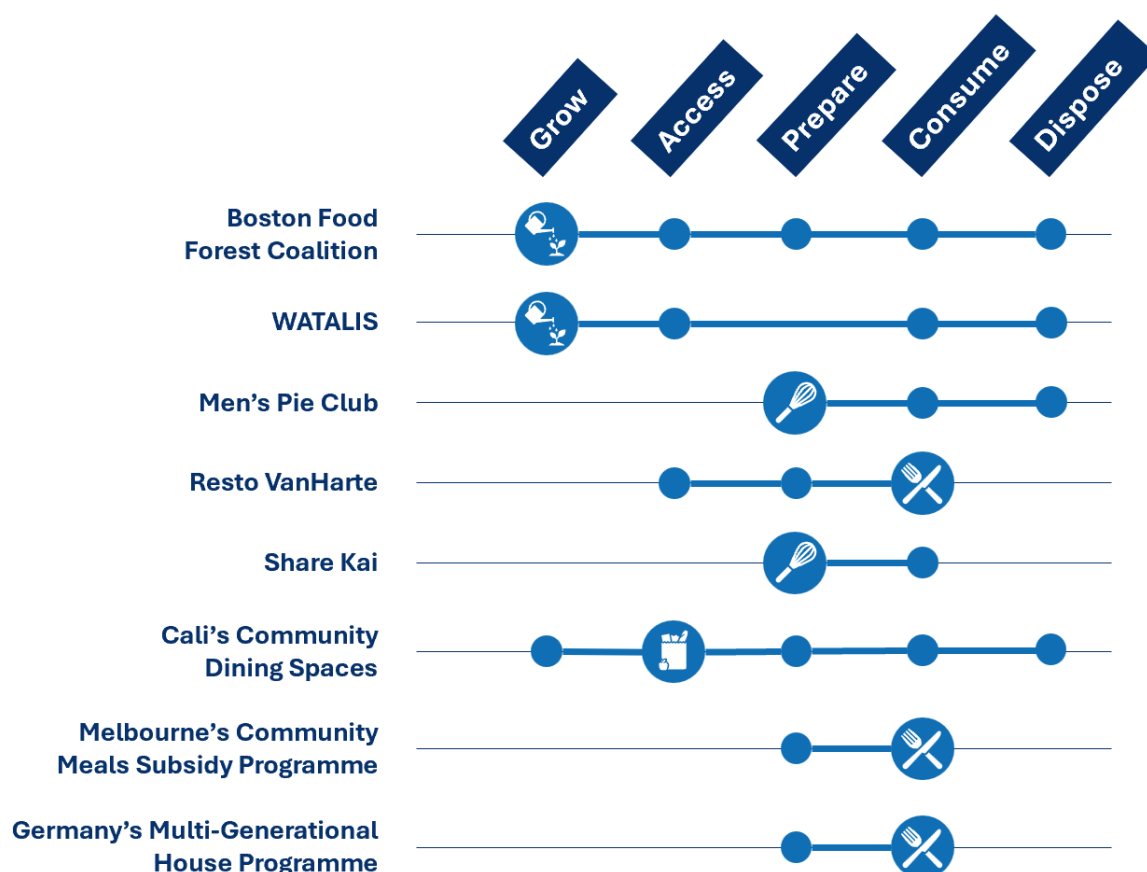
This chapter explores the practical implementation of food-based activities for promoting social connectedness. It presents eight case studies¹ – five community-led interventions (e.g. programmes that have been initiated by local non-governmental organisations) and three government-led programmes (one at the national and two at the municipal level). It then highlights resulting cross-cutting insights for public sector and non-governmental actors engaged in community interventions for reducing social isolation and loneliness. The aim of this chapter is to give a broad introductory overview of the different ways that food-based activities can help foster social connectedness and broader well-being outcomes. While they do not present an exhaustive mapping, the illustrative examples included here (Table 2.1) have been selected to present a range of intervention approaches, target groups, geographic areas, community types, organisational structures (including different types of government involvement), and objectives (including some where boosting connectedness was not the primary project goal). The methodology used to select these case studies is described in Annex A.

Table 2.1. Summary of case studies presented in this chapter

Initiative	Intervention description	Key objectives	Country
Community-led programmes			
Boston Food Forest Coalition	A city-wide community network transforming vacant urban lots into community-run gardens and public “food forests”	Environmental sustainability and community connectedness	United States
WATALIS	A town-based social enterprise (in Watari, Japan) incorporating food-related activities to provide revenue and local employment opportunities, as well as preserving community connectedness and cultural heritage	Post-earthquake community rebuilding	Japan
Men's Pie Club	A regional network of weekly meet-up groups for men of all ages to learn cooking skills (savoury pies) and spend time together	Reduce male loneliness and improve mental well-being	United Kingdom
Resto VanHarte	A nationwide non-profit foundation that organises a range of regular communal dining activities, including community restaurants as well as meal-sharing programmes targeted to specific vulnerable groups	Prevent and reduce loneliness and isolation	The Netherlands
Share Kai	A city-based non-profit initiative that places the culinary traditions of women from refugee and ethnic minority backgrounds at its core to facilitate social contact and meal-sharing between people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds	Fostering social cohesion and multi-cultural awareness	New Zealand
Government-led programmes			
Comedores Comunitarios (Community Dining Spaces)	A municipal network of communal dining spaces providing daily meals and welfare services for residents in vulnerable situations in Santiago de Cali	Food security, nutrition and community connectedness	Colombia
The City of Melbourne's Community Meals Subsidy Programme	A municipal programme that provides financial support to non-profit community organisations that deliver low-cost or free shared meal activities	Strengthen social connectedness, especially for elderly people	Australia
The German Federal Government's Multi-Generational House Programme	A long-standing nationwide initiative supporting local community centres where people of different ages and backgrounds can meet (food is not the primary focus of the programme but many houses organise shared meals and cooking activities)	Strengthen social connectedness and promote intergenerational exchange	Germany

The selected examples cover all stages of the food system to a certain extent (growing, accessing, preparing, consuming, and disposing), with meal-sharing (consumption) being the most common aspect and community composting or food redistribution (disposal) being the least common aspect addressed (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Overview of the links between selected case study activities and food system stages



Note: A large circle with an icon indicates the primary food system stage focus area for the selected example's activities, while smaller circles without icons indicate secondary food system stage focus areas encompassed by the example's activities. For example, while the primary focus of the Boston Food Forest Coalition is the collective cultivation of food (growing), it also contributes to food access (by making the food available to local communities), preparing and consumption (by organising meal-sharing activities for volunteers and community members) and disposal (through community composting efforts at the food forests).

The final section of the chapter identifies cross-cutting challenges and lessons for food-based social connectedness interventions, drawing from the case studies, as well as to a certain extent, the examples linked to national and sub-national strategies to tackle loneliness and social isolation described in Chapter 1. In particular, it focusses on six key insights related to the use of food and food-based activities to strengthen social connectedness, as summarised in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2. Key insights for designing food-centred policies to promote social connections



Community-led programme case studies

This section presents five case studies of community-led interventions to strengthen social connectedness through food: The Boston Food Forest Coalition (United States), WATALIS (Japan), Men's Pie Club (United Kingdom), Resto VanHarte (the Netherlands) and Share Kai (New Zealand).

Boston Food Forest Coalition (United States)

The Boston Food Forest Coalition (BFFC) is a non-profit organisation that transforms vacant urban lots (usually in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods) into community-owned “edible” parks called food forests.² Food forests differ from traditional community gardens (which tend to utilise raised growing beds to cultivate annual plants and vegetables on a changing seasonal basis) in that they are more permanent ecosystems favouring the cultivation of trees and bushes that bear fruit year after year, thus mimicking natural woodland (Krugman, 2025^[1]). The first food forest was created in 2015, and the network expanded to include 13 food forests by 2025 (conserving over 12km² of urban land). The BFFC aims to establish 30 food forests by 2030 to create a permanent “green space corridor” across the city (BFFC, 2025^[2]). In addition to cultivating food-producing trees and plants, the food forests also function as public parks, accessible to more than 150 000 people living within a 10-minute walk. Food forests serve multiple community purposes including revitalising parts of neighbourhoods experiencing decline through underinvestment (e.g. abandoned urban lots), addressing limited neighbourhood access to fresh, healthy and affordable food (with many local shops offering only shelf-stable items and lacking produce, fruits, or nuts), and improving equitable access to forested areas in the city,³ with a goal of fostering environmental sustainability and community connectedness (BFFC, 2025^[3]). A defining feature of the BFFC’s model is its emphasis on local stewardship (BFFC, 2025^[4]), with each food forest designed, cared for and collectively owned by a team of resident volunteers (known as stewards) who live near the site.

Structure and activities

The activities of the Boston Food Forest Coalition (BFFC) are managed by three key groups of members: a network of neighbourhood volunteer groups who build, protect and maintain food forests across the city of Boston (known as “stewardship teams”), a core team of paid staff (responsible for organisational management, strategy, and support functions), and a board of directors made up of local community leaders (some of whom are also food forest stewards themselves), who oversee co-ordination and co-operation across the different food forest stewardship teams.

Potential sites for food forests – vacant lots that are undesirable for commercial development and that have often become sites of dereliction, illegal dumping, soil contamination and environmental neglect – are identified by local city residents and BFFC members (Krugman, 2025^[1]). Before transforming a vacant lot into a food forest, the BFFC works with local residents to establish a core group of 5-15 local volunteer stewards, to discuss the design and intended purpose of the future food forest (BFFC, 2025^[4]). BFFC also facilitates co-design workshops involving other neighbourhood residents, local businesses, churches, youth organisations and schools, as well as gathering further inputs through door-knocking to speak to local residents in their homes, as well as neighbourhood surveys and other meeting formats. Together, these different forms of neighbourhood stakeholder outreach shape the site’s purpose, design and planned activities. The stewardship team then drafts a proposal to the City, supported by BFFC staff and where possible,⁴ the BFFC purchases the land from the City of Boston for a nominal fee of USD 100 per parcel (the legal minimum selling price at the time of writing) (Krugman, 2025^[1]). The purchased land is established as a community land trust,⁵ which legally protects the community-serving purpose of the site and ensures local community ownership in perpetuity.

Once a lot has been purchased for conversion to a food forest, the stewards and BFFC staff remove debris, manage contaminated soil, install infrastructure (paths, pavilions, fences) and plant diverse perennial species that are suited to urban microclimates, including trees, shrubs, nuts, fruits and herbs. The BFFC offers a variety of free hands-on trainings to the food forests’ stewards, covering both social skills (team dynamics, governance and goal setting) and ecological skills development (horticultural and permaculture, soil science and eco-landscaping workshops), see BFFC (2025^[4]).

In addition to the core cultivation activities, stewardship teams organise various food-related activities to foster community connectedness: community meals and cooking demonstrations, harvest festivals, cultural and artistic events (e.g. open-mic nights) and composting workshops. At many food forests, weekly or monthly workdays are organised (e.g. tree care, weeding, pruning fruit trees and harvesting), often accompanied by picnics, potlucks or other ways of sharing food (BFFC, 2025^[5]; 2025^[6]). In addition, seasonal celebrations complement regular activities: for example, the Edgewater Food Forest organises a yearly Halloween parade during which participants harvest and process black walnuts, learn about their health benefits and share recipes (BFFC, 2025^[7]). These food-related social activities are all accessible to the public for free, with workshops requiring registration and the option for a voluntary donation. Given the low financial barrier to entry, food forests serve as a third place where people can come together for conversation and connection, grow healthy foods and build resilient communities (BFFC, 2024^[8]).

Target groups

While all food forests are open to anyone free of charge, the BFFC prioritises transforming vacant lots in neighbourhoods that have historically experienced structural disadvantage. Residents of these neighbourhoods (often racial and/or ethnic minority communities) have less access to green space, are more exposed to extreme heat, and have fewer fresh and healthy foods available (City of Boston, 2022^[9]). Furthermore, the BFFC aims to ensure diversity in its steward teams to foster inclusive decision making and long-term care of its forests. Currently, 73% of stewards overall are women and 47% are people from racial and/or ethnic minority communities (BFFC, 2025^[3]).

Funding and partnerships

The BFFC has established financial and strategic partnerships with public and civil society organisations to deliver its programme. At the municipal level, the City of Boston's Urban Agriculture Office (GrowBoston), the Mayor's Office of Housing, the Mayor's Office of Food Justice and the Community Preservation Committee provide some share of its funding and make land parcels available at the lowest legal sale price (BFFC, 2025^[10]; Krugman, 2025^[1]). The BFFC receives additional funding from philanthropic foundations, individual donors and local businesses. Beyond financial support, the City of Boston has embedded food forests in its policy strategies, including its Urban Forest Plan and 2030 Climate Action Plan (City of Boston, 2025^[11]; City of Boston, 2022^[12]). The BFFC's work was also recognised as good practice for urban environmental and community-rooted resilience work by the federal government in 2024 (BFFC, 2024^[8]).

Non-financial partnerships with other non-profit organisations facilitate knowledge spillovers and broader community benefits. For example, members of organisations with similar objectives, such as the Massachusetts Audubon Society or The Trustees of Reservations, often take part in social and ecological trainings offered by the BFFC (2025^[13]). Food surpluses from the forests are shared with faith-based organisations to distribute to congregations and homeless people (through meal programmes). Schools, youth organisations and other community-based groups are welcomed in the food forests for cultural and food-related events, volunteer days or environmental education – reinforcing the forests' role as a multifunctional community space.

Outcomes

As of November 2025, 13 food forests were part of the Boston Food Forest Coalition, conserving over 12km² of urban land and reaching more than 150 000 people that live within a 10-minute walk. In 2024, 61 stewards organised more than 30 public workshops, 112 community workdays, and 10 neighbourhood-wide community events. They welcomed over 500 unique participants and planted over 525 individual fruiting trees and shrubs (BFFC, 2024^[8]).

While quantitative impact evaluation is not currently conducted for BFFC activities, annual reporting highlights qualitative assessments of community-building and connectedness outcomes (BFFC, 2025^[2]). For example, people participating as stewards report increased feelings of community belonging, as well as stronger optimism, and better collective preparedness in the face of environmental risks.⁶ Impact reporting also emphasises key social connectedness learnings from the management of food forests, including the importance of face-to-face meetings and events for creating real connection within neighbourhoods and across food forests. The role of food for providing opportunities to build community through shared meals, food-related workshops, and community events – is emphasised in impact reporting. Events hosted during peak harvest season when trees and shrubs bear fruit draw the largest crowds, enhancing the social purpose of the food forests (BFFC, 2025^[2]).

Beyond social connectedness outcomes, surplus food from the food forests is donated to local shelters and neighbours in need, while the forests themselves provide free access to fresh and culturally relevant produce, thus contributing to community food access and security. According to BFFC leadership, stewards and other volunteers also report other well-being outcomes including improved mental and physical well-being as a result of regular outdoor activities (e.g. gardening), contact with nature, and meaningful collective work.

WATALIS (Japan)

WATALIS is a social enterprise and non-profit community association founded in Watari, a coastal town in Miyagi Prefecture in 2012. The name WATALIS combines two distinct words: Watari, where the organisation is based, and “talisman”, denoting its purpose of healing, rebuilding and protecting the local

community. It was created in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, which caused massive loss of life, infrastructure damage, resident displacement and disruption of everyday community life in the region (INTILAQ, 2023^[14]). The disaster further compounded existing structural challenges common to rural areas in the country, such as declining birth rates, reduced local employment opportunities, reduced transmission of local cultural practices and the exodus of younger residents (who increasingly moved to urban areas to work or study), with older residents staying behind and feeling socially isolated (Finders, 2021^[15]).

While government disaster recovery efforts focussed on supporting damaged businesses and rebuilding public infrastructure, the founder of WATALIS recognised unmet community needs for strengthened social infrastructure and cultural preservation, alongside economic revitalisation. The social enterprise model of WATALIS encompasses a range of activities that revitalise abandoned or underutilised spaces to support local employment and income generation, strengthen neighbourhood ties and foster a shared sense of belonging. This includes several food-based activities such as community farming, beekeeping and the establishment of a community café. Through these activities, the organisation aims for residents of different ages and backgrounds to interact with one another, develop and exchange skills, and thereby increase community sense of belonging, combat social isolation, and ultimately help people reconnect with local traditions in a town navigating the long-term impacts of a natural disaster and demographic change (Miyagi Prefecture, 2022^[16]; Japan's Cabinet Office, 2025^[17]).

Structure and activities

WATALIS' social enterprise model initially focussed on the upcycling of traditional material from unused kimonos belonging to local women into new saleable products, such as drawstring pouches and other handcrafted items. In this way, WATALIS aimed to create small-scale employment and income generation opportunities – particularly for older local women and mothers with young children, drawing on their knowledge of sewing and textile traditions – and preserve local cultural identity (INTILAQ, 2023^[14]; WATALIS, 2026^[18]). Over time, the social enterprise operation expanded to include food-based activities, as well as the establishment of a community café (which hosts events and activities in addition to serving meals) to strengthen local social infrastructure for community connectedness. Many of these activities have transformed vacant businesses and idle farmland into new community spaces (WATALIS, 2026^[19]; WATALIS, 2026^[18]). These include:

- **Beekeeping:** Local residents cultivate flowers that attract bees on underutilised farmland, help care for hives and harvest honey. They also conduct fieldwork to identify local plants that can provide nectar for the bees, clear invasive plants and process honey into ready-to-use products (e.g. sweets) in collaboration with local social welfare organisations (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2025^[17]; WATALIS, 2026^[20]).
- **Vegetable cultivation:** Participants transform idle plots into productive farmland by growing seasonal produce, while learning about farming practices and local food traditions. The harvest is processed in workshops (e.g. making miso or tofu) and in local social welfare organisations, which are then used in community meals and sold in WATALIS' café (WATALIS, 2026^[20]).
- **Community café:** Originally a closed gas station office, the café now serves as a central gathering space where residents can meet and eat together. Many of the ingredients used in the café's dishes are sourced from the beekeeping and vegetable cultivation activities (WATALIS, 2026^[21]).
- **Food processing and cooking workshops and other seasonal events:** WATALIS organises seasonal workshops and traditional community events throughout the year to create further opportunities for residents to connect.

Target groups

WATALIS primarily engages women and older residents, groups who were particularly affected by the disaster and subsequent demographic changes due to loss of employment and increased social isolation. However, activities and events related to beekeeping are purposefully open to anyone to build connections across ages, abilities and social backgrounds. In addition, WATALIS collaborates with local social welfare organisations so that people with disabilities can participate in activities such as making and packaging and making food products, and light agricultural work.

Funding and partnerships

WATALIS's dual mode of functioning comprises a non-profit association that leads the community and food-related activities, and a profit-generating social enterprise that manages the kimono upcycling production and sales. The social enterprise supports the community activities by redistributing a portion of its profits and purchasing some of the products from the association's food-related activities (e.g. honey or agricultural products). The association complements this earned income with grant funding from Japan's Cabinet Office and Miyagi Prefecture's community fund (WATALIS, 2026^[22]), among other contributors, which serves as its main revenue source.

WATALIS works closely with a variety of local actors. Local farmers contribute land that is not being used for cultivation purposes as well as equipment and agricultural knowledge. WATALIS also collaborates with other local non-profit organisations through the exchange of knowledge and materials, and, in some cases, to jointly deliver workshops, as well as (as mentioned above) to support the involvement of people with disabilities in volunteer activities. Resources are also shared with local producers (e.g. lending beehives to pollinate blueberry farms).

Outcomes

As of 2023, WATALIS had revitalised approximately 4 000m² of idle farmland and upcycled 12 tons of kimono fabric, engaging more than 50 000 people in its activities, including workshop participants, customers, and kimono donors. WATALIS's work has received recognition from public institutions such as the Ministry of the Environment and Japan's Cabinet Office for contributions to post-disaster recovery, regional economic revitalisation, environmental sustainability and efforts to reduce social isolation (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2024^[23]; WATALIS, 2026^[24]).

While no formal impact assessments or external evaluations measure the social connectedness outcomes of WATALIS' food-related activities, internal assessments have been made based on participant feedback and testimonials.⁷ This qualitative evidence indicates that the agricultural activities and the community café workshops are particularly important for people who have fewer opportunities, or experience greater barriers, for social interaction in their daily lives such as elderly people and people with disabilities. For example, the parent of a child with disability participating in the food-based activities of WATALIS stated that "My child now talks about enjoying farm work at WATALIS. They never mentioned such things before". The inclusive and collaborative approach of WATALIS to adapt to different disabilities (for example making efforts to encourage volunteers to learn and use sign language to be able to communicate with participants with hearing difficulties) and to encourage mutual support has been seen to improve mental health outcomes and sense of belonging among participants, as reflected in participant statements such as "Hearing people with disabilities say 'We can do it together, not alone' gives me the power to overcome difficulties and keep pushing forward". Feedback from elderly participants in farm work and workshops include statements such as "Today was the first time I talked to someone" indicating the importance of the activities as a social lifeline for people living alone and experiencing isolation, particularly older people.

Men's Pie Club (United Kingdom)

The Men's Pie Club is a regional network of 37 community-based groups in Northeast England. Each local club meets weekly in accessible neighbourhood venues to prepare savoury pies together in order to foster social connectedness and a sense of community belonging amongst its male participants. The first Men's Pie Club was piloted in 2017, in response to a call from men's health charity Movember for innovative ideas to combat male loneliness in the United Kingdom (Lee, 2023^[25]) (see Box 2.1 for more context on the emerging issue of male loneliness in OECD countries). Responding to the fact that men may face low mental health literacy and experience stigma around seeking support, the aim of Men's Pie Club is to create accessible, welcoming and male-friendly environments that provide opportunities for men to meet and talk without making mental health the primary focus (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[26]). Pies were chosen as the core of the Club's activities after discussion with local actors and potential participants as they are not only relatively easy to prepare, relatively low-cost and versatile (with a different filling recipe at every meeting) but also have widespread popularity, particularly in the North of England.

Box 2.1. Male loneliness in OECD countries: An emerging issue

Recent evidence from across OECD countries has signaled that men may be an emerging risk group for social isolation and loneliness (OECD, 2025^[27]). While women are more likely than men to report feeling lonely, men are more likely to report having no-one to count on for help in a time of need, such as illness or emotional difficulties. In addition, certain indicators of social disconnection – such as feelings of loneliness or satisfaction with personal relationships – are worsening for men at a slightly greater rate than for the general population on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2025^[27]).¹

The problem of male loneliness has also drawn significant research, media and policy attention in individual countries in recent years. In Japan, social isolation has been a growing concern over the past 20 years, especially among young and retired men (OECD, 2025^[28]). Korea has also taken measures to address the high and rising rates of “lonely deaths” (Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2023^[29]), which disproportionately involve middle-aged and older men (Jeong-yoon, 2025^[30]). In the United States and the United Kingdom, there has been increased public discourse about a “male friendship crisis”, or “male friendship recession” (Hirsch, 2022^[31]; Pearson, 2022^[32]; Wollaston, 2023^[33]). Survey results from the United States indicate that men report having fewer close friends than in the past (Cox, 2021^[34]) and a 2018 survey by the United Kingdom men's health charity Movember indicated that male friendships become less strong as men get older, with 22% of men aged 55 and over saying they never see their friends (Movember, 2018^[35]).

1. Overall, across OECD countries, the magnitude of the differences in social connectedness outcomes between men and women are generally not large but are statistically significant (OECD, 2025^[27]).

Structure and activities

As of 2025, the Men's Pie Club consisted of a network of 37 volunteer- and member-led community groups located across North-East England.⁸ Every week, each club brings together around 12 members in local venues, such as community centres, brewery tap rooms or libraries. Each session follows a similar format: Participants enjoy a cup of tea, discuss what they will cook, prepare the pastry and filling, bake the pies and then share food and conversation. Throughout the session, the atmosphere is deliberately low-pressure and non-therapeutic to encourage natural social interaction without any expectation to discuss personal difficulties. The Men's Pie Club also offers a range of one-off activities, such as cookery classes,

pickling workshops, foraging trips, or fishing days, accessible to anyone whether they are a club member or not (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[36]).

Most participants join the Men's Pie Club after hearing about the initiative through local host venues (e.g. community cafés or libraries), word of mouth or the organisation's communications. Around one-third of participants are referred to the Club through social prescribing⁹ channels, including general practitioners in the National Health Service (NHS). This indicates that health professionals view the Men's Pie Club as a non-clinical activity that can support individuals experiencing loneliness, social isolation, or low-level mental health challenges.

The central management and co-ordination of the Men's Pie Club network is undertaken by a small core team of around four people. The operational functioning of the individual Men's Pie Club community groups is managed by volunteer group leaders. Three-quarters of these volunteer leaders themselves began as participants and gradually took on more responsibilities (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[37]). Volunteer leaders are supported by the Club's core staff, including through training and skills development, but also have some flexibility to choose how to manage their weekly meetups. This means that each community group in the Men's Pie Club network is different, but are expected to uphold certain core values, including collaboration, kindness, solidarity and ensuring a space for being "different together" (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[38]). To ensure that these values, as well as practical standards such as food safety, are maintained as the network expands, the Club is in the process of developing an online "Kitchen Portal" providing training material, guidelines and other material for volunteer leaders.

Target groups

The Men's Pie Club was initially designed to target older men facing disconnection after retirement (Movember, 2018^[35]). Over time, while the majority of Club members continue to be middle-aged or older (the average participant age is 54), younger participants represent an increasing proportion of membership. In addition, the Men's Pie Club is piloting a local club at Newcastle University, reflecting students' desire to connect over activities that do not involve sports or consuming alcoholic beverages. More than two-thirds of participants are part of the UK's most deprived communities and participants often live alone, are out of work and live with long-term health issues. Clubs make efforts to respond to the cultural diversity of participants, and at least one of the clubs has committed to preparing only halal recipes to ensure inclusion for Muslim members.

Funding and partnerships

Initial funding for the creation of the first Men's Pie Club was provided by the charity Movember (Lee, 2023^[25]). Since then, the organisation has established a partnership model with local community actors and other funders which ensures that Club members do not have to pay for their participation. The use of community venues is provided free of charge by the venue owners (representing a mix of public sector, private sector and civil society), who are considered as community partners in the Men's Pie Club initiative. Additional funding, and in-kind support such as food donation or promotion activities, are also provided by community partners as well as other national and local funders (e.g. the National Lottery Funding and the Pioneering Care Partnership) (PCP, 2024^[39]; Men's Pie Club, 2025^[40]). Merchandise sales, such as branded t-shirts, aprons and bags further contribute to the initiative's revenue streams (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[41]). Overall, the organisation has managed to keep operational costs relatively low despite rising food prices. While staff costs represent the main expense component, overall operating costs remain modest because of the multiple types of support provided by community partners, volunteers and other stakeholders.

Outcomes

What began as a local initiative has expanded into a network of 37 active Men's Pie Clubs, delivering 2 562 sessions and reaching 855 men across communities. With the support of more than 100 referral partners, participants have made nearly 16 000 pies and volunteers contributed over 6 500 hours since 2016 (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[42]).¹⁰

From its inception, the Men's Pie Club has embedded evaluation as a core element of its model to strengthen men's social connectedness and support learning, replication and scaling up. As part of Movember's Social Innovators Challenge, the organisation developed evaluation priorities, tools and learning objectives in collaboration with other initiatives and independent partners (Stein, 2018^[43]; Movember, 2025^[44]). Since then, the Men's Pie Club has continued to assess its impact using a mixed-methods approach in partnership with an independent evaluation partner, First Person Consulting. Results¹¹ show strong improvements in social connectedness outcomes: over a 20-week evaluation period, more than 80% of participants reported having built stronger social networks, 81% improved their confidence and life skills and almost 90% were highly satisfied with their experience.

Qualitative interviews, focus groups, and members' stories contextualise these results (Men's Pie Club, 2025^[42]). In particular, qualitative evidence from members, referral partners (e.g. NHS) and volunteer leaders highlights reduced loneliness, increased confidence and self-esteem, greater health literacy (e.g. learning about mental healthcare options and coping strategies), and stronger feelings of purpose and belonging.¹² Participants often build friendships that extend beyond the club, engage in informal peer support, or volunteer in their local community after having joined a Club. In addition, local Men's Pie Club community groups often organise group activities, such as fundraising and neighbourhood support, that provide further opportunities for connection and collaboration outside of the weekly meetings.

Resto VanHarte (the Netherlands)

Resto VanHarte is a nationwide non-profit foundation operating as a social dining initiative. It organises weekly shared meals in spaces transformed into pop-up neighbourhood "restaurants"¹³ to prevent and reduce loneliness and strengthen social connectedness at the community level. The first location was opened in 2005, motivated by the founder's experience of volunteering with a grocery delivery service where he repeatedly encountered older people for whom this was their first in-person interaction of the day and sometimes, their first social interaction in several days, revealing the extent of the experience of loneliness among this age group. In order to avoid stigma associated with the concept of loneliness, Resto VanHarte uses a positive framing of "social health" to describe its mission, described as the ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships and to participate in community life, thus supporting overall well-being (Resto VanHarte, 2026).

Structure and activities

In 2024, Resto VanHarte operated at 46 locations across the Netherlands, encompassing a range of activities including:

- Weekly pop-up neighbourhood "restaurants": Resto VanHarte organises weekly three-course dinners at publicly accessible locations such as community centres, schools or district offices. These locations are temporarily transformed into restaurant-like settings and restored afterwards. The regular schedule creates predictability and routine for participants. These community meals are the central pillar of Resto VanHarte's activities and are characterised by:
 - Volunteer-led meal preparation and hosting: Meals are prepared, served and facilitated by trained volunteers, who also play an active social role by sitting with guests and encouraging interaction. Volunteers are seen as a key target group themselves, not merely as labour.

- Open registration with low financial barriers: Guests register for meals in advance via an online system or telephone reservation line. A modest participation fee (e.g. EUR 8 for a three-course meal in 2025) is charged to maintain the dignity of participants, help cover operating costs, and signal the perceived value of the activity (i.e. reinforcing the idea of a “real restaurant” experience), with discounts available via municipal low-income schemes.
- VanHarte Children’s “KinderResto” programmes: A separate pillar targets children aged 10-14 through cooking workshops focussed on healthy eating, social skills, bullying and intergenerational connection, culminating in children cooking for their parents.
- World Resto days: Themed cultural exchange evenings where participants share meals from different culinary traditions while engaging with music and storytelling. Organised with local partners, these events bring together residents from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Moroccan, Turkish, Syrian, Surinamese, Indonesian, Moluccan, Chinese, Polish and Ukrainian communities) to foster mutual understanding and connection.

Target groups

Resto VanHarte’s activities are open to adults of all ages. While older adults were the initial target group, the scope has since broadened to include all ages from 10 years up. In 2024, 75% of its guests were older than 65, two-thirds were women, and 75% lived alone (Resto VanHarte, 2024^[45]). The majority of participants hear about Resto VanHarte through word-of-mouth and 14% join via referrals from local partners (such as social welfare organisations or non-profit associations). In addition, people who experience a heightened risk of loneliness and barriers to participation such as limited mobility, caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints, or stigma related to identity or health conditions (e.g. carers, LGBTI, older adults, students, people living with dementia) can participate in dedicated dinners that are often co-ordinated with specialised organisational partners. These occur less frequently but allow for deeper conversations between people with similar experiences.

Funding and partnerships

Organisation of Resto VanHarte activities combines central co-ordination and decentralised delivery: The national office develops strategy, fundraising, monitoring and partnerships, while local teams and volunteers ensure the neighbourhood-level implementation of activities. Various public sector actors play important roles as funders and facilitators. For example, local government municipalities often provide annual subsidies (typically covering 35-40% of total costs), low-income discount schemes for participants, access to venues (such as community centres) and alignment with local social cohesion policies. Municipal government workers contribute local knowledge to align activities with community needs and other social initiatives, for example by identifying neighbourhoods where loneliness or isolation is particularly acute. At the national level, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) has supported Resto VanHarte through project-based funding for specific initiatives related to pilots and scaling in earlier years. Resto VanHarte is also part of the civil society coalition supporting the “One against loneliness” programme, managed by VWS, and thus benefits from the awareness-raising efforts and other forms of organisational support provided by the ministry in this context (Eén tegen eenzaamheid, 2026^[46]).

In addition to public stakeholders, Resto VanHarte partners with non-governmental actors. It regularly collaborates with relevant civil society organisations to co-organise cultural or educational activities, or to plan targeted dinners for specific groups: for example, co-ordinating with the Alzheimer’s Association of the Netherlands (Alzheimer Nederland). Volunteer organisations support staffing at the local level, and philanthropic funds and lotteries such as the Postcode Lottery (Postcode Loterij) and Oranje Fonds (the Netherlands’ largest philanthropic social fund) provide funding support (Resto VanHarte, 2025^[47]). Finally, private companies – such as the supermarket chain Albert Heijn – also provide funding, sponsorship, in-

kind support (including corporate volunteer arrangements) and contribute communication reach and visibility.

Outcomes

In 2024, Resto VanHarte operated 46 neighbourhood restaurant locations in 21 municipalities, with the support of 400 volunteers. The organisation reached 94 413 participants through 1 974 activities, including 249 activities specifically designed for targeted groups (the elderly, carers, LGBTI older adults, students and people living with dementia) and 303 dedicated kids' lunch days. Previous year's activities have achieved a similar scope, but with an overall growing trend over time.

Resto VanHarte regularly produces impact reports summarising qualitative findings, trends and outcomes for selected indicators (Resto VanHarte, 2024^[45]; 2025^[47]). Participant experiences and outcomes (such as feelings of connection and loneliness, frequency of participation, whether participants engage in other social activities, and perceived changes in social networks) are monitored through both annual surveys and ongoing feedback opportunities. While not causal evidence, the most recent impact assessment (Resto VanHarte, 2024^[45]) (based on 442 surveys conducted across 11 restaurant locations) indicates the following positive self-reported outcomes among programme participants:

- **Reduced feelings of loneliness:** Participants value the sense of belonging that comes from engaging in the meals as a regular social activity, and personal testimonies often describe the dinners as a lifeline, especially during periods of bereavement, illness or transition. On a loneliness scale from 1 (never feeling lonely) to 5 (feeling lonely very often), survey respondents who recently participated for the first time report a score of 2.5 on average, whereas those who have been attending dinners for three years indicate an average score of 1.3. Almost all (94%) of surveyed participants would recommend the initiative to people who feel lonely. Around three-quarters of guests attend a dinner at least once a week and report stronger social connectedness outcomes (both in terms of quality and quantity) relative to those attending less frequently.
- **Strengthened personal relationships:** More than half of survey respondents indicate that they made new friendships at Resto VanHarte and 75% come to meet friends and people they know. These friendships can extend beyond the dinners themselves: Around 40% of survey respondents meet people that they have met through Resto VanHarte for other activities (e.g. visiting each other, joining other community initiatives, attending cultural events). More than one fifth connect with other community initiatives within three years.
- **Improved eating habits,** particularly among people who would otherwise skip meals or eat less healthily when alone.

In addition to participant outcomes, volunteers and partners also report positive outcomes from engaging with Resto VanHarte's activities. Volunteers report personal fulfilment, purpose and reduced loneliness, reinforcing the dual role of volunteers as both contributors and beneficiaries. They also report having learned more about loneliness, hospitality and food safety (respectively, 37%, 45% and 42% of survey respondents in 2024 indicate knowledge improvements in these areas) (Resto VanHarte, 2024^[45]). As noted in the impact report, municipal partners recognise the initiative as a valuable complement to formal social and health services, particularly in terms of social isolation and mental ill-health prevention.

Share Kai (New Zealand)

Established in late 2022, Share Kai (kai is the te reo Māori word for food) is a community-based initiative in Christchurch that brings together people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds through shared meals (Share Kai, 2026^[48]). Share Kai was developed in response to a perceived need for community spaces that foster informal interaction between people from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and particularly women from refugee and migrant backgrounds, who often have limited

opportunities to engage meaningfully with the broader community beyond their immediate family or ethnic networks (Share Kai, 2026^[49]). This need became particularly salient in the aftermath of the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks, and a national government inquiry report highlighted a strong desire in local city communities for greater social cohesion and closer local connections so that all people could feel safe and welcome (The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019, 2020^[50]). Share Kai emerged as one of the community-led responses, using food as an entry point to create welcoming social spaces for different cultural and religious communities to interact with one another.

Structure and activities

Share Kai's flagship format, *Share Kai and Kōrero* (*kōrero* is the te reo Māori word for conversation), is a neighbourhood pop-up dining series hosted at local community venues. Rather than remaining in a single location, the initiative rotates between neighbourhoods. Each neighbourhood series typically runs over four consecutive Fridays or Saturdays, encouraging repeat attendance and allowing relationships to develop over time rather than through one-off encounters. Events are structured around shared tables, with simple facilitation tools such as printed connection cards that invite people to share personal stories. *Welcoming Dinners* are organised periodically to welcome newly arrived refugees with a meal and traditional music performances, and to connect them with longer-term residents.

At the centre of these events is the Share Kai Cooks' Collective who prepare the food. This group is made up of women from refugee and migrant backgrounds who are responsible for menu planning and co-hosting events, for instance by introducing their dishes and culture to further support interaction among participants. Meals typically feature traditional dishes from the cultures represented in the Cooks' Collective and tickets are offered at affordable prices, with proceeds going directly to the cooks. The financial remuneration is relatively modest but provides a decent compensation to the cooks for their time and skill, and means the activity is not done on a volunteer (i.e. unpaid) basis. The involvement of the Cooks' Collective extends beyond cooking: members participate in regular meetings, receive training (e.g. food safety, financial literacy and business skills), and progressively take on more responsibility in event co-ordination and business management.

Share Kai and the Cooks Collective also operate *Community Cafés* in recurring partnerships with local venues. The cafés also feature meals prepared by the Cooks' Collective, but unlike the flagship pop-up dining events, these cafés run on a regular schedule and provide a more stable hospitality environment. This extends the initiative's neighbourhood presence by creating predictable, ongoing points of contact between cooks and local residents. Other formats play a complementary role. *Share Kai Lunches* brings the model into the workplace by combining shared meals with short presentations and facilitated discussions on cross-cultural connection. Finally, *Share Kai in Solidarity* events raise funds in response to humanitarian crises.

Target groups

Share Kai is designed to benefit two main groups simultaneously: women from refugee and migrant backgrounds who participate in the Cooks' Collective, and the local residents of neighbourhoods in which the events take place. Members of the Cooks' Collective have roots in a range of ethnic communities, including Afghan, Eritrean, Nepali Lhotshampa and Moroccan backgrounds (Share Kai, 2026^[49]). While strengthening social connections and fostering social cohesion are core objectives for both target groups, Share Kai also aims to provide members of the Cooks' Collective with professional experience, small business learnings, and income-generating opportunities.

Funding and partnerships

Share Kai is co-ordinated by InCommon, a non-profit organisation that aims to foster links between people from different cultural, ethnic and faith backgrounds, by organising events, leading projects and spearheading campaigns (InCommon, 2026^[51]). In addition, Share Kai receives in-kind support from the Social Equity and Well-being Network, an initiative that provides support for local community initiatives including networking opportunities, connection to potential funding sources, and capacity-building trainings (SEWN, 2026^[52]). Share Kai supplements earnings from its activities with philanthropic funding, including a multi-year grant from the Weave Fund (JR McKenzie Trust, 2026^[53]) which has enabled long-term planning. In parallel, revenue is generated through ticket sales for the Share Kai and Kōrero events, community café operations, catering and workplace lunches. The income generated from these activities directly contribute to the wages of the members of the Cooks' Collective. Currently, the initiative aims to transition the Cooks' Collective into an independent co-operative business.

Local partner organisations host activities in their venues and support neighbourhood outreach. These mostly consist of local non-profit organisations, such as adult education providers, community centres and faith-based organisations. Acting as neighbourhood anchors that provide trusted spaces, they increase Share Kai's reach and engagement. In addition, local authorities and publicly funded community facilities provide in-kind support such as access to venues, support aligning with food safety and regulatory frameworks, as well as with wider social cohesion objectives.

Share Kai relies on a small co-ordinating team working alongside the Cooks' Collective and a large volunteer base for its operations. Considerable effort is devoted to partnership brokering, volunteer co-ordination, training and logistics, reflecting the labour-intensive nature of relationship-based community work.

Outcomes

In 2025, Share Kai organised more than a hundred events and community café days, across 16 neighbourhoods in Christchurch. In collaboration with 29 delivery partners, more than 6 000 meals were served with the support of around 20 members of the Cooks' Collective (from eight different ethnic communities) and alongside 94 volunteers. In 2024, 1 814 participants, including 881 first-time diners (around 5% of the population of the neighbourhoods covered), attended events.

Share Kai combines activity monitoring with ongoing participant feedback to understand its impact.¹⁴ Post-event surveys are routinely collected from participants and inform programme adaptation. At the end of 2025, more than 1 000 survey responses were gathered from participants, and reported qualitative insights include (Share Kai, 2026^[54]):

- **Cross-cultural social connections:** Events create structured yet informal environments where people from different backgrounds, who otherwise might not meet in real life, interact as equals. Seventy-three percent have noticed a change in how they think or behave around people from different backgrounds since participating in an event and 75% of participants say they have made an effort to get to know someone from another cultural, ethnic, faith or language background since going to an event. Of those who made an effort: 73% started a conversation beyond a simple greeting, 39% invited someone to join them for coffee, a meal, or a social activity, 31% joined a community event or group where the majority of people were from a different background than theirs, 31% helped someone solve a problem that required several steps and interactions (e.g. enrolling in a class or engaging with a service), 12% spent time together outside usual contexts (e.g. outside of work, study or regular exercise class), 8% initiated a playdate or activity with a parent and children.
- **Sense of belonging and community:** Participants describe Share Kai events as spaces where they feel welcome and accepted. Survey results show that 62% of participants say it is contributing a

“great deal” to making Waitaha Canterbury a place where everyone feels they belong (38% “somewhat” and 0% “little” or “not at all”), due to the ability to share experiences with people from different backgrounds.

- Well-being, skills development and economic participation for women from refugee and migration backgrounds: Members of the Cooks’ Collective report increased confidence, pride and recognition for their skills, alongside opportunities to earn (a modest) income and gaining work-relevant experience.

Government programme case studies

The preceding case studies illustrate how community-level interventions that use food to promote connection are commonly initiated and led by local non-governmental organisations, though they often depend on public sector support to ensure funding and access to infrastructure. This section presents three case studies that show how governments at the city and national level have implemented more formally structured institutional support and leadership models for food-focussed community social connectedness interventions.

Cali’s Comedores Comunitarios (Community Dining Spaces), (Colombia)

Comedores Comunitarios (Community Dining Spaces) is a city-wide programme in the Colombian city of Santiago de Cali (or, Cali) that provides city residents in vulnerable situations with daily meals. Its primary purpose is to combat food insecurity – an issue that impacts around 7.5% of the population across OECD countries on average¹⁵ – but also aims to strengthen social connectedness, contribute to greater social cohesion across the city, and improve people’s overall well-being (City of Cali, 2025^[55]).

The Comedores Comunitarios are rooted in a long tradition of grassroots community-led responses to hunger and socio-economic disadvantage that predate formal municipal involvement. In the late 1990s, local church leaders in the Archdiocese of Cali worked with residents to establish collective cooking initiatives known as “ollas comunitarias” to provide meals to people in acute need. Beginning in 2015, the municipal government, and specifically the Cali Social Welfare Department, joined into a partnership with the church and community organisers to formalise and expand the original grassroots model, embedding it within Cali’s Public Policy on Food Security and Sovereignty (Concejo de Santiago de Cali, 2019^[56]). The involvement of the local government also deepened the social purpose of the dining spaces, expanding their functioning beyond emergency food provision into local meeting points to strengthen social ties, promote mutual support, and foster community belonging (City of Cali, 2022^[57]). The programme now employs a hybrid governance model: the municipal government provides funding and support staff to ensure basic standards in Comedores across the city, while day-to-day functioning of each Comedor is led by local community volunteers. Municipal oversight ensures continuity of funding (e.g. food supply), technical standards (e.g. food safety) and links to broader social services, while community volunteers adapt activities to local needs and maintain trust-based relationships with participants.

Structure and activities

The Comedores Comunitarios offer consistent access to daily cooked meals for residents facing socio-economic vulnerability, prepared and served by local volunteers. These (predominantly female) volunteers prepare and serve meals, maintain relationships with participants, and often co-ordinate complementary activities (City of Cali, 2025^[58]; 2022^[57]). Their local knowledge enables the dining halls to remain responsive to neighbourhood needs and to sustain trust-based relationships with participants. Ingredients such as vegetables, grains, fruits, rice and meat are provided by the Municipality of Cali and are chosen to ensure that residents have access to healthy and balanced meals (City of Cali, 2025^[58]).

Regular attendance not only ensures food security, but also brings neighbours together, enables informal conversations and peer support, and strengthens local ties (City of Cali, 2025^[59]). Many Comedores Comunitarios also offer a variety of additional food-related activities, such as community gardens, cooking courses and waste management trainings (Trujillo, 2024^[60]; City of Cali, 2025^[59]; City of Cali, 2025^[58]).

Beyond food-based activities, many Comedores Comunitarios also host educational programmes (e.g. literacy and basic computer skills), cultural and sporting events, and access to health services (City of Cali, 2026^[61]; 2025^[55]; 2025^[59]). Workshops and neighbourhood events on mental health awareness and support are also regularly organised by Comedores Comunitarios, including educational sessions on self-care, conflict management, and emotional regulation for volunteers and residents, as well as opportunities to talk with local church leaders about their problems in dedicated “listening spaces”. Participants facing more severe emotional distress and family difficulties are referred to relevant health and/or social services (City of Cali, 2025^[55]; 2025^[58]; 2025^[59]). Some Comedores support beneficiaries in developing small businesses to establish new sources of income, for example through entrepreneurship training and skills-building initiatives, often in food-related areas such as baking, pastry-making, and gastronomy (Diario Occidente, 2025^[62]; City of Cali, 2025^[58]). Recently, the programme has also placed greater emphasis on active citizen participation. During 74 Community Contribution Days (“Jornadas de Retribución Social”) in 2025, more than 5 000 beneficiaries volunteered their time to work alongside municipal government staff on defined projects for improving local neighbourhoods (City of Cali, 2026^[61]).

Finally, the initiative supports the personal development of the local community volunteers who operate the Comedores, 85% of whom are women (City of Cali, 2022^[57]). The volunteers receive structured support that may include literacy and basic education opportunities, training in food handling and hygiene, entrepreneurship and small business skill development, as well as social and emotional skills development linked to leadership and conflict resolution (City of Cali, 2025^[55]).

Target groups

The Comedores Comunitarios programme primarily serves residents in situations of socio-economic vulnerability. Older adults, women in precarious economic situations, and children facing barriers to adequate nutrition are among the main groups that attend the dining halls (Concejo de Santiago de Cali, 2025^[63]; City of Cali, 2025^[58]). As each Comedor responds to the needs of its neighbourhood, they tend to serve different population groups depending on local vulnerabilities and demographics. For example, some Comedores provide tailored support for people with disabilities, women facing gender-based violence, older adults experiencing isolation, people experiencing homelessness, and ethnic and Afro-Colombian communities (City of Cali, 2025^[59]; 2025^[59]).

Funding and partnerships

As noted above, the Social Welfare Department of Cali plans and oversees the programme, providing food supplies, technical guidance, and other forms of support for volunteers (such as mental health awareness training or social and emotional skills development). Municipal teams work with the Comedores to support food safety standards, basic organisational processes, and provide referral pathways to other social services for residents in need (City of Cali, 2025^[55]). This co-ordination ensures that Comedores are connected to wider municipal strategies on food security and well-being while maintaining consistent minimum standards across the network. The Social Welfare Department also collaborates with other municipal entities including the Departments of Culture, Peace, Education and Health as well as local government entities for sport (Indervalle) and employment and skill-building (SENA) on joint activities and events such as workshops, the development of community gardens, cultural and sporting events, health fairs, and training programmes (City of Cali, 2025^[59]). These partnerships reinforce the role of the Comedores as neighbourhood entry points to a broader ecosystem of social, educational and community development services (City of Cali, 2025^[55]; 2025^[59]).

In 2025, the budget of the programme amounted to COP 79 billion (Colombian pesos, more than EUR 18 million), which covers the municipality's responsibilities outlined above (Concejo de Santiago de Cali, 2025^[63]). In addition, many Comedores mobilise complementary financial and in-kind resources, such as donations and support from local institutions in the form of workshops, services and materials. In some cases, Comedores also generate small amounts of income through solidarity contributions from participants who are able to pay. For example, at the Comedor Pan de Dios, a small voluntary contribution from some diners helps cover utility costs, while meals remain free for those in greatest need (City of Cali, 2025^[58]).

Outcomes

From an initial network of 47 dining halls serving around 4 400 people, by 2025 the Comedores Comunitarios programme had expanded to over 760 community dining halls serving approximately 94 000 people with at least one balanced meal daily (City of Cali, 2025^[59]; Diario Occidente, 2025^[62]; City of Cali, 2022^[57]). During the first half of 2025, the programme delivered over 11 million meals, with 56% of services located in the most socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods of the city (Diario Occidente, 2025^[62]; Concejo de Santiago de Cali, 2025^[63]). While causal evidence is lacking, existing municipality reports highlight the potential pathways to improved well-being outcomes stemming from Comedor activities:

- Improved food security and nutrition: 94 000 beneficiaries received balanced meals daily in 2025, improving food security and nutritional outcomes among participants (Diario Occidente, 2025^[62]).
- Stronger social ties and neighbourhood cohesion: Regular shared meals and complementary activities create repeated opportunities for interaction. Reduced isolation and stronger neighbourly relations contribute to rebuilding the social fabric in areas affected by vulnerability and fragmentation (City of Cali, 2025^[55]; 2025^[59]).
- Improved psychosocial well-being and emotional support: To date, more than 31 000 managers and beneficiaries have received guidance and participated in workshops led by psychologists and social work teams, focussing on issues such as strengthening social-emotional skills, self-care, and emotion management (City of Cali, 2025^[55]).
- Strengthened capacities and pathways to autonomy: The programme supports literacy and vocational training (e.g. food preparation, small-scale entrepreneurship, digital skills and basic business skills) helping participants, particularly women, build income streams that can contribute to greater economic participation over time (City of Cali, 2025^[55]).
- Reinforced community leadership and local agency: Community managers have emerged as recognised local leaders, organisers and connectors. Through training, accompaniment and public recognition, many have strengthened their roles as mediators and activity organisers (City of Cali, 2025^[55]; 2025^[59]).

The municipality has developed a framework (the Territorial Social Impact Level framework) to evaluate how well each Comedor is organised and the role it plays in the local community. As of 2025, one-third of Comedores were categorised at the highest level of impact, with strong organisational maturity, autonomous management functioning, and acting as strategic neighbourhood community hubs (City of Cali, 2025^[55]). Pilot diagnostic processes have also been carried out in selected dining halls to better understand infrastructure gaps, leadership capacity, and the extent of cross-government co-ordination on joint activities involving multiple departments (health services, trainings, etc.) (City of Cali, 2025^[59]). Recent discussions at the city level have called for more systematic studies to better understand beneficiaries' socio-economic characteristics and needs and to assess programme impacts so as to better inform future resource allocation and targeting (Concejo de Santiago de Cali, 2025^[63]).

Melbourne Community Meals Subsidy Programme (Australia)

The City of Melbourne's Community Meals Subsidy Programme provides financial support to eligible local organisations for the organisation of meal-sharing activities and events, with a particular focus on the participation of older people. The programme is founded in the recognition of meal-sharing activities as a particularly impactful way of building individual and community connectedness, as food encourages attendance and participation in programmes, while removing barriers to social interaction, helping build trust, and providing an introduction to other cultures (City of Melbourne, 2026^[64]). The programme has multiple aims, including (City of Melbourne, 2026^[64]):

- Strengthening the community's capacity to address loneliness and social isolation, as well as supporting access to affordable meals, recreation, activities and other community services for older people;
- Encouraging older people to participate in activities that improve their health, well-being, social connections and celebrate cultural diversity;
- Creating opportunities for community volunteers to develop skills, self-confidence, and sense of community;
- Partnering with community organisations and groups offering a range of services and activities for older people;
- Encouraging community organisations to welcome new participants by encouraging inclusive practices and policies that foster a safe and welcoming environment; and
- Contributing to food security for everyone, especially the most vulnerable, and enabling older people to enjoy a community meal in the company of friends.

Structure and activities

The subsidy programme operates on an annual basis and eligible organisations submit their applications for funding for a given calendar year in the August of the previous year. To be eligible, organisations must be not-for-profit community groups or incorporated associations, organise meal-sharing activities or events within the City of Melbourne municipality (or demonstrate that at least 80% of participants reside within the municipality) and primarily target older adults (City of Melbourne, 2025^[65]).¹⁶ The municipality issues guidelines for applicants specifying accessibility standards (e.g. accessible toilets, ramps and adequate lighting) and encourages organisations to adopt environmentally sustainable practices, including minimising food waste, disposing of waste responsibly and reducing the use of disposable cutlery (City of Melbourne, 2025^[65]). Organisations are also required to comply with food safety standards as outlined in the free online learning programme, DoFoodSafely (Department of Health, State Government of Victoria, Australia, 2025^[66]), and to submit financial reports.

Applications are reviewed by an internal panel of Council officers and assessed in terms of their ability to contribute to the subsidy programme's aims listed above. Successful applications receive a subsidy of AUD 6 (USD 4.3) per meal for the proposed activity or event, with the funding level based on the average number of participants at a usual group meeting, up to a maximum of 140 participants per session (City of Melbourne, 2026^[67]). Recipient organisations are then responsible for all aspects of the implementation of the meal-sharing events and activities, including shopping, cooking, cleaning, ordering supplies, managing bookings and providing a welcoming environment.

Target groups

The programme is primarily designed to target older adults who are at risk for social isolation and/or loneliness. Indeed, to be eligible for funding, applicants must demonstrate that a majority of participants in their meal programme are aged 55 and over (City of Melbourne, 2025^[65]).

Funding and partnerships

The Community Meals Subsidy Programme was part of the Community Grants and Partnerships Framework (2022-2025) of the City of Melbourne, which informed how the municipality works with community organisations to deliver social, cultural and well-being outcomes.¹⁷ Through this framework, the City invested approximately AUD 2.35 million (USD 1.7 million) per year in community-led initiatives and events (City of Melbourne, 2026^[68]; 2022^[69]) – of which the meals programme is just one. The framework used grants and partnerships as a mechanism to collaborate with community organisations, volunteer groups and not-for-profits to achieve shared social outcomes. It emphasised community participation, connection and capacity-building, and aligns funding with local needs and Council priorities, including through its neighbourhood-based approach.

Outcomes

In 2024, the Community Meals Subsidy Programme allocated AUD 167 300 (~USD 120 000) to support 42 community groups. In total, 408 volunteers and 42 paid staff planned 32 438 meals for approximately 2 540 participants. 67.3% of participants were women and around 80% of funded organisations worked with multicultural communities. Participants reported an average overall satisfaction of 4.73 out of 5 for the programme (City of Melbourne, 2025^[70]). Although the subsidy programme's monitoring and reporting processes do not incorporate social connectedness measurements, qualitative evidence gathered through acquittal reports from funded organisations¹⁸ and participant feedback highlights a range of potential pathways to improved social and well-being outcomes (City of Melbourne, 2025^[70]):

- Stronger social connection and inclusion: Shared meals create welcoming spaces where older people can build friendships, reduce isolation, and develop a sense of belonging. Participants, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, report feeling more socially connected.
- Improved health and well-being: The programme increases access to nutritious meals, which are particularly important for older participants who may face food insecurity or difficulties with food preparation. For some, these meals represent the only balanced meal of the week.
- Increased community participation: Beneficiaries become more involved in other community programmes as a result of attending shared meals. The sessions help strengthen support networks and can act as entry points to other services, including healthcare, housing assistance, and recreational activities.
- Cultural engagement and exchange: Meals often incorporate traditional foods, music and celebrations of culturally significant events, helping participants maintain cultural identity and community ties. Linguistically diverse groups benefit from opportunities to engage in their preferred languages, while information sessions delivered in their native language improve awareness of available services.

Multi-generational Houses (Germany)

The Multi-Generational Houses (Mehrgenerationenhäuser, MGH) programme is a long-standing federal initiative of the German Government that supports local community centres where people of different ages and backgrounds can meet, participate in various activities and volunteer. Despite its name, these “houses” do not serve as a primary residence for participants, but rather act as a community gathering space. While differences exist locally, they are typically located in repurposed public or non-profit buildings (such as family centres, daycare centres or church communities) and used on a permanent basis as open meeting places (BMBFSFJ, 2011^[71]). Co-ordinated by Germany's Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ), the programme aims to strengthen social connectedness, promote intergenerational exchange and provide accessible social infrastructure (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[72]).

While food is not the primary focus of the programme, many houses organise shared meals and cooking activities.

The programme was established in response to long-term demographic and social transformations: population ageing, the rise in single-person households and changing family structures have reduced opportunities for informal support within families and neighbourhoods. At the same time, many regions, particularly rural areas and those facing multiple, structural socio-economic disadvantages (such as those associated with population out-migration, population ageing, and/or economic transformations of traditional economic sectors), have seen a decline in social infrastructure. In this context, policymakers recognised the need for spaces that can help facilitate everyday social interactions (Interval, 2024^[73]; 2021^[74]). The original vision behind the programme was to translate the idea of the traditional extended family into modern society: to create shared public spaces where different generations could meet, exchange experiences, and benefit from each other's skills and perspectives. First launched in 2006, the initiative has since developed into a nationwide federal programme supporting approximately 530 houses (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[75]). While the core mission has remained consistent, the houses have been able to adapt to emerging societal challenges, such as supporting refugee integration following migration movements in 2015 and the war in Ukraine, as well as maintaining social contact and community support during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Structure and activities

Multi-generational houses provide a range of activities including volunteering opportunities, learning and skills development (e.g. digital literacy for older people), repair and sustainability initiatives (e.g. bicycle maintenance workshops), guidance sessions (e.g. on family life, employment and caregiving), and platforms for civic participation where residents can contribute ideas for their neighbourhood (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[76]; 2026^[75]). While the federal programme does not prescribe food-related activities, a recent overview by the Ministry¹⁹ identified more than 60 houses (nearly 1 in 8) offering regular cooking or meal-sharing initiatives with different objectives, such as strengthening intergenerational connections; promoting inclusive participation for people with disabilities; supporting the integration and social inclusion of migrants and refugees; encouraging healthy, sustainable and affordable nutrition; and providing literacy-sensitive learning environments (see Box 2.2 for examples).

Box 2.2. Examples of food-related initiatives implemented in multi-generational houses

Strengthening intergenerational connections

The Erkner house organises intergenerational cooking workshops under the motto “Cooking together, learning from each other”, in which children and older adults prepare healthy snacks together.

Promoting inclusive participation

At the Kaufbeuren e.V. house, people with and without disabilities cook and eat together on a regular basis. The programme is organised in co-operation with a local disability support organisation. Participants with disabilities are supported by younger volunteers and older helpers, ensuring that everyone can contribute according to their abilities.

Supporting the integration and social inclusion of migrants and refugees

The “Cooking beyond the horizon” initiative in Düren uses international cuisine as a platform for intercultural exchange. Participants explore recipes from different countries while discussing cultural traditions and everyday life.

Encouraging healthy, sustainable and affordable nutrition

The Giebel Esens house runs a weekly seasonal cooking initiative in co-operation with a women's association and a food bank. Participants developed a seasonal cookbook and exchange recipes that promote healthy, affordable and sustainable cooking. The initiative is open to everyone but is primarily aimed at improving young people's budgeting skills and environmental awareness.

Coeliac disease awareness and support

The Centre for Generations in Papenburg sponsors a Coeliac disease information exchange via messenger service. Members exchange information about health services, restaurants offering gluten-free meals, and tips for cooking and baking Coeliac-friendly recipes.

Supporting basic literacy and numeracy skills

A cooking club at the Waltershausen house strengthens participants' basic literacy and numeracy skills through everyday cooking tasks. Activities such as shopping, budgeting, following recipes and compiling a shared cookbook create a supportive and practical learning environment.

Source: Information provided to the OECD by Germany's Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

Target groups

The MGH programme is open to everyone in the local community so that people from all generations can meet, participate, and support one another in daily life. Individual houses are expected to align their activities with local needs and demographic conditions. In practice, this means that activities of multi-generational houses tend to benefit certain specific population groups including older people (especially those at risk of social isolation), families with young children (e.g. benefitting from childcare-related offers), young people, and people with a migration or refugee background.

Funding and partnerships

Core funding for multi-generational houses is provided by the government through a co-financing model combining support at the federal and municipal level. Each multi-generational house receives an annual grant of up to EUR 40 000 from the federal government, complemented by mandatory municipal co-financing of at least EUR 10 000 per year, which may also be provided in kind, to cover personnel and material costs of an equivalent value (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[77]). Many houses further supplement the core grant with additional funding from other government sources (e.g. municipal or state-level) or non-governmental funders. In most cases, the physical space itself is provided or supported by municipalities or local partner organisations (e.g. welfare associations or churches), often as an in-kind contribution, rather than financed through the federal programme.

Multi-generational houses are primarily run by civil society organisations with reference to federal programme guidelines setting out overarching goals, funding conditions and quality standards (BMBFSFJ, 2020^[78]). Each house has the autonomy to choose and design its specific activities, as long as they are aligned with the principles and service delivery priority areas set out by the federal government (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[79]; 2023^[80]).²⁰ Houses are required to submit annual reports detailing activities, expenditures and progress towards objectives (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[81]). In addition, each house carries out a structured review of its work at least every two years in collaboration with the municipality and at least one additional local partner, to reflect on achievements and identify areas for improvement.

Implementation is supported by a dedicated programme liaison contact within the federal government, who provides technical and content-related support to the houses. As part of programme support, houses are

grouped according to similar socio-demographic contexts to facilitate peer learning and tailored guidance. Each multi-generational house co-ordinates with local municipal governments to ensure alignment with local policies and priorities and inform funding applications and strategic planning. Other common local partners include associations and clubs, schools and childcare facilities, churches and faith groups, senior organisations and adult education centres. Co-operation typically takes the form of joint project implementation, exchange of expertise and shared use of space and resources (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[82]; 2025^[83]).

Outcomes

In 2024, around 3 000 paid staff members and 30 000 volunteers across approximately 530 multi-generational houses delivered 33 611 activities under the federal programme, nearly 20 000 of which focussed on intergenerational exchange. On average, the houses welcomed more than 55 000 participants per day, with strong representation across all age groups. Women account for around two-thirds of participants, 25% of participants have a migration background, and 18% have a refugee background. Four in five houses are run by non-profit organisations, working in partnership with over 10 000 local co-operation partners, including municipal administrations. Notably, 67% of houses are located in structurally weaker regions (e.g. geographic areas experiencing multiple socio-economic, infrastructural, and demographic disadvantages) (BMBFSFJ, 2025^[83]).

While the functioning of the programme is supported by a structured monitoring and evaluation system, no evaluations specifically measure the social connectedness outcomes of the multi-generational houses' food-related activities. However, qualitative evidence provided by the Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ), highlights several positive outcomes associated with cooking and shared meals, including: reduced social isolation, more frequent intergenerational and intercultural exchanges, more accessible learning environments for people with low literacy skills, and increased awareness of health, nutrition, food waste reduction and environmental sustainability (BMBFSFJ, 2025^[84]).

Key insights on the use of food to promote social connectedness in practice

The case studies and examples included in this chapter demonstrate a variety of intervention types, organisational structures, project objectives and community contexts in terms of both local needs and cultural practices. Yet despite the diversity of approaches, the case studies reveal shared challenges faced by programme implementers and, encouragingly, multiple options to address and overcome some of these difficulties (Table 2.2).

All programmes covered in the case studies face operational constraints. Food and energy costs are rising, which affects any organisation implementing food-based activities; additionally, many community programmes struggle with financial security and sustainable funding models, often relying on volunteers for staffing (who may need to have specialised food and hospitality industry knowledge), which can bring its own difficulties in terms of turnover and burnout. Finally, food-based social activities require spaces of sufficient size to host large groups of people, with regularity and adequate facilities and equipment (e.g. kitchens or farming tools).

In the context of limited funding, implementing organisations have been able to support the longevity and impact of their food-based social programmes through the establishment of collaborative partnerships involving civic organisations, the private sector, and multiple levels of government. In terms of financial considerations, diversified funding portfolios and accepting in-kind support (in the form of both staffing and venues) from public and private sources has alleviated acute cost burdens. Partnerships also facilitate skill sharing and development for staff and serve as a hub for linking social services. Many of the programmes train volunteer staff on food safety and handling, aided by central guidance, toolkits and minimum

standards provided by government. Programmes often work alongside local government, so that volunteer staff can refer participants to needed public services such as social welfare benefits or mental health support. Lastly, in-kind contributions from local businesses and/or the municipal government often comes in the form of providing low-cost spaces for programme activities, which has the added benefit of revitalising vacant or underused infrastructure.

Table 2.2. Common challenges faced by food-based initiatives and potential responses

Challenge	Responses, including through partnership and cross-sector collaborations
Community initiatives often experience financial insecurity and food-based activities are particularly exposed to rising food and energy costs	• Diversified funding portfolios combining public subsidies, philanthropic contributions, earned income, and in-kind support (e.g. food donations from private actors and community partners) in order to provide free or low-cost activities – this is particularly important for enabling participation in socio-economically deprived areas, although nominal charges may encourage participants' commitment to attend • Volunteer involvement • Multi-annual and flexible funding streams (such as through dedicated government programmes) allow for long-term planning and continuity
Limited permanent staffing means initiatives must balance the time-intensive work of building social connections with the organisational demands of co-ordination, fundraising, and regulatory compliance	• Hybrid operational structures combining centralised management of strategic functions (co-ordination, training, fundraising, and partnership management) with volunteer-led activity implementation • Partnership support to strengthen strategic functioning (e.g. public sector technical assistance to manage administrative and regulatory requirements; pro bono impact monitoring from evaluation partners) • Training, toolkits and co-ordination platforms to ensure volunteer-led decentralised service delivery align with core values and quality criteria
Dependence on volunteer support can lead to emotional and psychological burden when dealing with vulnerable participants with complex social and mental healthcare needs	• Ensure strong peer support and training networks for volunteers • Local government and healthcare partnerships to facilitate clinical referrals and access to crisis support for vulnerable or high-need participants
Compliance with hygiene standards, dietary requirements and administrative rules requires sufficient resources and co-ordination mechanisms to ensure safe and inclusive operations	• Formal food hygiene and safety training for volunteers and staff • Access to compliant kitchens and venues through partnerships with municipalities, schools, or community centres • Development of shared guidelines, toolkits, and operational manuals to standardise procedures (e.g. Kitchen Portal of the Men's Pie Club or DoFoodSafely in the Melbourne case) • Clear processes to accommodate dietary restrictions and cultural requirements, ensuring inclusion and safety (e.g. halal cooking clubs in Men's Pie Club and platform for Coeliac disease sufferers in the Multi-Generational House programme)
A stable physical space is necessary for food-based activities yet access to affordable premises or land can be limited	• Government support to ensure free or low-cost access to public land and buildings for community use • Community partnerships with local businesses, municipalities, or other community organisations to facilitate access to community meeting spaces (including kitchen and dining spaces) • Repurposing underused or vacant spaces (e.g. abandoned businesses or farmland) as community food hubs • Shared-use agreements with civil society partners, faith-based organisations, or educational institutions

Better understanding these shared challenges and proposed solutions enables policymakers to better design and implement food-based activities that are tailored to their specific (cultural) context and are responsive to local needs. Synthesising lessons from across the case studies yield six key insights for interested policymakers, as set out below.

Key insight 1: Food is a broadly accessible entry point for connection within and across communities

Food-based activities have a broad-based appeal (helping to fulfil a basic, universal daily need) and can usually be designed to enable accessible participation for people regardless of age, income, culture and ability, as exemplified by the variety of target groups across the cases. This adaptable aspect of food-based activities is recognised by all case studies highlighted in this chapter. Additionally, food-based activities can help promote widespread participation and strengthen the impact of social connection programmes through a number of pathways:

- These activities can help to lower *stigma* around social isolation and loneliness interventions. Joining a meal, gardening session or cooking activity is socially acceptable and purposeful, providing a reason to engage with others without the explicitly negative framing of being lonely. Both Men's Pie Club and Resto VanHarte purposefully design their shared cooking and eating activities to reduce the stigma associated with poor mental health and loneliness, or food insecurity, respectively.
- Food can have deep *cultural meaning*, allowing people to access memory, identity and tradition, making it an emotionally resonant way to connect and exchange across cultures and population groups. Within communities, locally meaningful foods and food practices can reinforce shared community identity and cultural heritage (as practiced in the WATALIS example). Across communities, sharing dishes and culinary traditions creates opportunities for intercultural exchange, mutual understanding and recognition of diverse backgrounds (such as in Share Kai's approach).
- Food is easy to *embed within broader activities*. A shared meal or food-related task can serve as an accessible entry point into wider support-oriented programmes, helping participants feel at ease, and meeting their basic need for nutrition, before engaging in other activities offered in the same setting (e.g. Multi-Generational House Programme and Cali's Community Dining Spaces).
- Finally, as food (especially meal-sharing) can be an *inherently pleasurable experience*, it can help to boost attendance and encourage participation in community events and activities. For example, the Boston Food Forest Coalition finds that community events taking place during harvest season generally have the highest attendance levels, and a number of national government anti-loneliness strategies use food-themed awareness campaigns and activity weeks to promote social participation, such as in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands (see Chapter 1).

The ways in which food-related activities are structured and experienced can also strengthen social bonds:

- When conducted on a longer-term, regular basis, they can act as *routine social anchors*, providing predictable and dependable opportunities for connection. As such, food-related activities enable ongoing and *increased contact over time*, allowing trust and familiarity to develop gradually. As a result, relationships often extend beyond the initiative itself into everyday life.
- Food-based settings also involve *hands-on shared tasks* that naturally encourage conversation and co-operation, such as gardening or cooking, which can foster teamwork, mutual support and a sense of collective achievement.
- To maximise the *inclusivity* of food-based activities, programmes need to also consider potential limitations and restrictions that individuals or population groups may experience around food, to the extent possible. For example, one of the Men's Pie Club cooking groups adopted halal food preparation practices to enable participation for local Muslim community members.

Key insight 2: Food-related initiatives can revitalise underused community social infrastructure

Beyond connecting individuals, food-based initiatives can strengthen the social infrastructure of communities by creating accessible “third places” outside the home and formal institutions, such as cafés, gardens, dining halls and community kitchens. Initiatives can enhance social infrastructure by reactivating and repurposing local assets that are often undervalued: vacant lots (Boston Food Forest Coalition), idle farmland (WATALIS) and underused community venues (WATALIS, Men’s Pie Club, Share Kai) become lively hubs of socialising. The venues that house these activities can sometimes provide residents with a central space to interact with one another on a regular basis, even *outside* the context of the programme’s activities. In revitalising these spaces, the initiatives not only generate social value, but also increase the worth of land and property and in-so-doing generate environmental and economic value within the local economy.

This dynamic aligns with the principles of Community Wealth Building, under which anchor institutions (e.g. municipalities, public agencies or other large local actors) can make unused land and property available for community-led purposes (The Scottish Parliament, 2025^[85]). Food-based initiatives demonstrate how such assets can be used to reinforce neighbourhood-level cohesion. This becomes particularly meaningful in contexts where traditional communal spaces have declined, become commercialised or feel socially inaccessible. In areas affected by economic restructuring, demographic change, or disaster, food initiatives help restore everyday gathering places and shared routines and bring together people across age, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. In doing so, food-based initiatives fill an important relational gap, ensuring that opportunities for connection remain embedded in the physical and social fabric of communities.

Key insight 3: Food-based initiatives can foster broader well-being co-benefits

The adaptability and broad appeal of food-based activities means that they can be employed to target different social connection aspects. These include, the frequency and duration of social contact, social confidence and interpersonal skills, greater willingness to open up and seek social isolation or mental health support, more diverse personal social networks, a sense of community belonging, transmission and preservation of local cultural heritage, and inter-group contact to foster social cohesion and multi-cultural awareness.

Yet, as was illustrated by the literature and intervention examples reviewed in Chapter 1, food-based activities can generate additional – often interconnected and mutually reinforcing – benefits for broader well-being outcomes and policy goals. Learnings from the above case studies reinforce the findings from the research literature, showing how food-based interventions can benefit:

- **Physical health:** Access to balanced meals or fresh produce helps improve nutrition, particularly for people experiencing food insecurity. Many initiatives also promote healthy eating habits and strengthen participants’ knowledge of nutrition and food preparation techniques (for example, Men’s Pie Club, Melbourne’s Community Meals Subsidy Programme and the German Multi-generational Houses). In addition, food-related activities often involve being physically active, particularly those linked to growing food, such as gardening and harvesting (the Boston Food Forest Coalition and WATALIS).
- **Mental well-being:** Evidence from the case studies suggests that participating in tangible tasks, such as preparing meals, harvesting produce, or producing food items, can strengthen confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of achievement. In some cases, initiatives also contribute to improved health literacy, for example by increasing awareness of poor mental health and available support services (e.g. Cali’s Community Dining Spaces link food activities to other local services, and Men’s

Pie Clubs strengthen mental health literacy amongst men who may not otherwise be willing to open up or seek help for mental health issues).

- *Economic participation:* Social enterprise models structure their activities so as to create income generation and employment opportunities for participants, such as the small-scale food production conducted by WATALIS, or the catering services offered by Share Kai's Cooks Collective.
- *Environmental sustainability:* Urban gardening and food forests can enhance biodiversity, promote urban greening, and support soil restoration and climate resilience. Activities linked to composting, reuse, and local processing contribute to food waste reduction and more circular practices²¹ (the subject of some programmes run by the German Multi-generational Houses). In addition, sourcing food locally can shorten supply chains (Boston Food Forest Coalition, WATALIS).
- *Skills development:* Volunteering and engaged participation in community interventions can help participants develop transferable soft skills as well as food-related technical skills (discussed further in the following section).

Key insight 4: Volunteers gain self-confidence and purpose alongside new opportunities for skills development

Many of the case studies examined here rely on volunteers to implement day-to-day programmatic activities. Reliance on (unpaid) volunteers is often for reasons of financial sustainability, and as Table 2.2 makes clear there can be downsides associated with the (over)use of volunteers such as higher rates of turnover and staff burnout from emotionally taxing work. Yet at the same time, these case studies make clear that there are many benefits volunteers themselves can glean from their participation in food-based activities. A well-structured volunteer programme can ensure these benefits outweigh the limitations.

OECD research has shown that volunteers tend to come from higher socio-demographic backgrounds; this is often because lower-income individuals have less time to devote to unpaid labour (OECD, 2024^[86]). Many of the case studies highlighted in this chapter source volunteers from the local community – and therefore, from the pool of potential programme beneficiaries, many of whom are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In lieu of monetary compensation, volunteers gain culinary, horticultural, socio-emotional and entrepreneurial skills through their efforts. For example:

- BCG Coalition stewards receive training in ecological skills (horticulture, permaculture, soil science, eco-landscaping) as well as managerial skills (team dynamics).
- In Cali's Comedores Comunitarios, volunteers are given dedicated trainings for the food industry (food handling, hygiene), small business ownership, and social and emotional skills development (self-care, conflict management, emotional regulation).
- Volunteers with Resto VanHarte report having gained concrete skills relating to the hospitality industry (including food safety).
- Share Kai volunteers in the Cooks' Collective receive food industry training (food safety) as well as sessions focussing on entrepreneurial and managerial skills (financial literacy, business skills, programme management).
- The Melbourne Community Meals Subsidy Programme provides volunteers with guidelines and free online resources surrounding food safety, accessibility standards and environmentally sustainable food practices (food waste and disposal).

Therefore, in the absence of funding for salaries, programmes can compensate volunteers in part with dedicated trainings to develop tangible skills that can benefit them beyond the confines of the specific programme and give them a foundation for future professional endeavors. Some programmes – such as the German Multi-Generational Houses – are structured such that beneficiaries are actively encouraged to volunteer in programme activities, gaining relevant skills and participating in civic life, gradually taking more ownership of programme activities.

Even with trainings, however, volunteers do not become experts in a given field and it is important that their labour be used as a complement to existing services, rather than as a replacement for professionals (OECD, 2024^[86]). For example, volunteers in the Comedores Comunitarios are given trainings to help them interface with participants experiencing poor mental health, but the programme does not expect the volunteers to provide mental health counselling to these individuals. Instead, the programme refers these participants to existing mental health services in the city. Similarly, the Men's Pie Club has a close relationship with the public health system in the United Kingdom, in that the NHS refers patients dealing with feelings of loneliness to a local Club, enabling synergistic benefits from Pie Club activities and clinical practice.

The act of volunteering brings intangible benefits to volunteers in the form of a sense of meaning and purpose, greater self-confidence, enhanced trust of both other members of one's community as well as in public institutions themselves (OECD, 2024^[86]). These outcomes were highlighted by volunteers participating in many of the case studies: for example, volunteers in Men's Pie Club reported feeling less lonely, more confident and having higher self-esteem as a result of their work; volunteers at Resto VanHarte report feelings of connection, fulfilment and purpose; Share Kai volunteer cooks report increased confidence and pride in their culinary skills; and people with disabilities volunteering with WATALIS reported increased emotional well-being and sense of collective agency.

Globally, women over-represent men in unpaid volunteer positions (although men make up a higher share of paid volunteer roles) (OECD, 2024^[86]), and this imbalance is often echoed in the case study findings. This may in part be reflective of the focus on preparing meals, an activity which is usually predominantly undertaken by women in domestic settings (Gallup and the Ajinomoto Group, 2023^[87]) (see also Chapter 1). Some programmes – such as New Zealand's Share Kai – are purposefully designed to target women and aim to develop their small business skills in addition to benefitting from their culinary knowledge. Other programmes – like Men's Pie Club – are designed to engage men in food-related activities, teaching them cooking skills while also encouraging socialising for improved mental health (and in many cases supporting their progression to become volunteer group leaders).

Key insight 5: Government support and cross-sector collaboration play a crucial enabling role for community-level interventions

Across the examples included in this chapter, the implementation and management of community-level interventions are most often led by non-governmental local entities such as charities, foundations, social enterprises and community volunteer networks. Such grassroots leadership can help ensure that food-based activities are grounded in the needs, relationships and cultural context of local communities, fostering trust and legitimacy, and enabling the participation of people who may hesitate to engage with formal institutions. For example, in some cases, former beneficiaries take on leading volunteer roles, helping to ground the initiatives in the lived experience of those they serve (e.g. Men's Pie Club or Resto VanHarte). Government support can provide crucial contributions for community efforts, through the provision of funding, access to venues or affordable land, guidance on alignment with local policy priorities, participant referrals (including through social prescribing) and other forms of support.

The City of Melbourne's Community Meals Subsidy Programme and the German Federal Government's Multi-Generational Houses scheme show how public sector support for food-based social connectedness activities can be institutionalised to provide longer-term funding stability for initiatives, as well as operational rigour in the form of standardised quality criteria and the establishment of impact monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The City of Cali's experience with community dining spaces also shows how government involvement can build on existing grassroots efforts to provide the necessary infrastructure to scale up and broaden the provision of essential services. In the case of Cali, social connectedness only became a direct objective of the community dining initiatives once local government took on a co-ordinating

role, providing the capacity-building, funding and institutional support necessary to expand activities beyond basic meal provision.

Formal government plans to tackle loneliness and social isolation also provide important political leadership on the need to prioritise efforts to boost social connectedness, as well as constituting strategic frameworks that position community-level action within broader nation- or locality- wide co-ordination efforts. Such national strategies tend to recognise that government action alone is insufficient, and that wide-ranging societal efforts are needed, at different geographic levels and involving actors from across different sectors, including the private and philanthropic sectors, non-profit organisations, and academia. National coalitions and public outreach platforms that often accompany national social connectedness strategies strengthen the ability of individual community actors to connect with potential participants and partner organisations. For example, the country-wide campaigns introduced in Chapter 1, such as Denmark Eats Together and the “chat checkout” introduced by Jumbo, the Dutch supermarket chain, as a part of the Netherlands’ National Coalition Against Loneliness, create opportunities to boost the profile and impact of food-based activities through co-ordinated action and public outreach. At the programme level, cross-sector partnerships and collaboration are essential to ensure operational functioning and sustainability in the face of funding constraints and other challenges (as described in Table 2.2).

Key insight 6: Better evidence on impacts and pathways for social connection outcomes specifically would help to make definite claims about “what works” for boosting social connectedness through food

In principle, certain core elements underpinning food-based initiatives – such as the use of food as a low-threshold and inclusive entry point for social interaction; the organisation of regular and predictable gatherings that allow relationships to deepen over time; and the facilitation of shared, hands-on activities to foster co-operation and collective achievement – can be adaptable across different geographic and cultural contexts, meaning that the examples presented in this report are potentially transferable models. However, the transferability and scalability of such approaches also depend on local enabling factors (including access to partnerships, infrastructure and cross-sector support as outlined in Table 2.1) as well as cultural factors within communities, or for specific target groups.

Overall, there is a need for stronger evidence on impacts and causal pathways to provide a more refined understanding of which elements work best for food-based community interventions. There is an existing literature on the links between food-based activities and social connectedness and broader well-being outcomes, as summarised in Chapter 1, however much of that evidence is correlational rather than causal (see Box 1.2), and regardless, there is still a need for high-quality impact evidence on social connectedness interventions at the *community* level (as opposed to *individual-level* interventions focussed on psychological support and interpersonal skills) (OECD, 2025^[27]; World Health Organization, 2025^[88]), including evaluation evidence allowing to understand cost-effectiveness considerations and long-term outcomes.

Most commonly, across the case studies considered here, programme outcomes are usually assessed through participant surveys or qualitative feedback. This is in part because rigorous impact measurement tools, including with causal designs, are costly and require technical know-how to implement. Qualitative feedback can be less costly to gather and has important value for understanding lived experience outcomes for participants and volunteers, but gaining a deeper knowledge of programme effectiveness requires both qualitative and quantitative assessments ideally. Government stakeholders could promote evidence-generating activities in this area through dedicated funding, and by facilitating partnerships between implementing organisations and academic researchers or evaluation specialists to collect good-quality impact evidence in a sensitive and non-stigmatising way (OECD, 2023^[89]). Existing measurement recommendations can provide guidance on how to collect social connectedness outcome data (Mahoney et al., 2024^[90]).

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Notes

¹ The case studies were developed through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders within the relevant lead organisations (see the Acknowledgements section for details) and supplemented with additional evidence where available. Any statements not accompanied by specific cited sources are based on information provided through stakeholder interviews. Each case study includes context on the well-being challenge that the initiative aims to address, a description of the initiative’s activities, including its target audience and the role of public actors, and a consideration of the outcomes of each initiative (including evaluation evidence when possible).

² A food forest is a human-made agroforestry system that mimics the structure and ecological processes of a natural forest while producing edible crops (Food Unfolded, 2022^[97]). It is typically composed of perennial plants, such as fruit and nut trees, shrubs, herbs and groundcover. Arranged in multiple vertical layers, it is managed as an integrated ecosystem rather than as individual plots, as is often the case for community gardens (BFFC, 2025^[41]). Food forests are often informed by permaculture and forest-gardening principles, which emphasise biodiversity, long-term productivity and low reliance on external inputs (Thwaites et al., 2025^[92]). In the city of Boston, the food forests managed by the Coalition range in size from 3 000 to 10 000 square feet (280-930m²) on the smaller end, to as large as 1 acre (43 500ft², or 4km²).

³ A 2022 study showed that areas lacking green space and tree canopy in the city experienced a 4.2°C disparity in daytime temperature when compared to more forested areas (City of Boston, 2022^[9]). The same study showed that racial and/or ethnic minority communities have 20% less parkland in their neighbourhoods than white Bostonians (City of Boston, 2022^[9]).

⁴ The Coalition prefers to purchase future food forest lots from the City to secure long-term protection of the land, however it is not a strict requirement. The Coalition has, for example, established food forests on land owned by non-governmental actors, such as churches or partner organisations, which it operates as “coalition sites”.

⁵ Originally created in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement, a community land trust (CLT) is a legal model of land ownership designed to ensure that land is held and managed in perpetuity for the benefit of a defined community (Davis, 2014^[91]). In a CLT, land is placed under the stewardship of a non-profit entity whose governance structure is deliberately designed to prioritise community control, democratic decision making and long-term public benefit (Moore and McKee, 2012^[100]; Gray, 2008^[99]). The

model has been applied internationally to support affordable housing, community facilities, green space and local economic development (OECD/European Union, 2025^[96]). In the case of the Boston Food Forest Coalition, the CLT model is used to legally protect the food forests from development and make them available to communities for gardening, educational classes and events. Its Board of Directors is composed of the community members for whom the land is being held, ensuring it remains protected in perpetuity (BFFC, 2025^[4]).

⁶ Relevant steward statements include: “I’m very grateful to be a part of this coalition. It makes me feel like I have roots in a way not many other things do”; and “Working as a steward makes me feel hopeful, because I know my work can help someone find a way to eat healthier, learn about food, and meet new people in their neighborhood. These things really matter right now” (BFFC, 2025^[2]).

⁷ WATALIS has not published these assessments publicly but has shared findings directly with the authors for use in this report.

⁸ The Club also has plans to expand into other regions in the United Kingdom.

⁹ Social prescribing is an approach in which health and social care service workers refer individuals to non-clinical, community-based activities to address the social, emotional and practical factors that influence health and well-being at large. The approach works particularly well for people who have one or more long term conditions, who need support with low level mental health issues, who are lonely or isolated, or who have complex social needs which affect their well-being (NHS England, 2025^[98]).

¹⁰ Men’s Pie Club has also made efforts to quantify the value of the unpaid work provided by its volunteers. With reference to the UK Office for National Statistics benchmark for volunteer time (GBP 14.43 per hour), MPC applies a rate of GBP 20 per hour to reflect the significant additional responsibility volunteers undertake in terms of leading sessions, supporting others and maintaining safe, consistent group environments, giving an value of GBP 130 000 for an estimated minimum of 6 500 volunteer hours.

¹¹ Participants were administered quantitative surveys, containing the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale and the Duke Social Support Index, both when they first join a local club and around 20 weeks later. Reported results compare outcomes before and after. There is no control group, and participants self-select into the programme, therefore the study cannot make causal claims, however the findings still provide useful insights into the well-being trajectory of programme participants.

¹² Examples of participant quotes from qualitative feedback include: “It’s amazing how much just doing something together at the same time breaks down barriers... it feels easier to talk to people”; “It brings together people that wouldn’t normally ever meet... and you realise there’s more similarities than there are differences”; “Since I’ve joined the Pie Club, I feel like I’ve got 10 or 12 new friends... you look forward to coming”; “I’m a completely different person to what I was... I’m happier, more open, and I’ve got more structure to my week”; “If it wasn’t for the Pie Club, I wouldn’t know where I’d be right now”; “It’s not just making pies. It’s a little community that you meet every week and have a good chat”.

¹³ While the dinners do not take place in a traditional restaurant, Resto VanHarte takes measures to recreate a restaurant experience: the meals are prepared under the leadership of a chef, the dinner consists of three courses, and volunteers act as servers and set-up decorated tables (Resto VanHarte, 2026^[95]).

¹⁴ The initiative plans to introduce more systematic tools, such as a dedicated volunteer survey, to better understand this dimension of impact in the future.

¹⁵ In 2018-2020, on average 7.5% of the population across OECD countries were estimated to have experienced moderate food insecurity – and this share is likely to have increased in the intervening years due to rising cost-of-living and food costs, thus increasing the need for food security and food assistance programmes (Giner and Placzek, 2022^[93]).

¹⁶ Applicants must also hold appropriate public liability insurance, have met previous funding and reporting requirements, and be in good standing with the City.

¹⁷ Alongside the Community Meals Subsidy Program, the framework also supports initiatives such as the Social Investment Partnerships programme (jointly addressing social issues with grassroots organisations), the Community Event Grants programme (fostering connection and belonging through local gatherings), and the Community Cool Places programme (keeping neighbourhood facilities open and welcoming during periods of extreme heat) (City of Melbourne, 2026^[67]).

¹⁸ Funded organisations are required to submit an acquittal report detailing the number of subsidised meals provided, any variations to the programme, the types of activities delivered, financial expenditure, and participant satisfaction ratings, and demographic information on participants.

¹⁹ Shared directly with the authors and not currently publicly available.

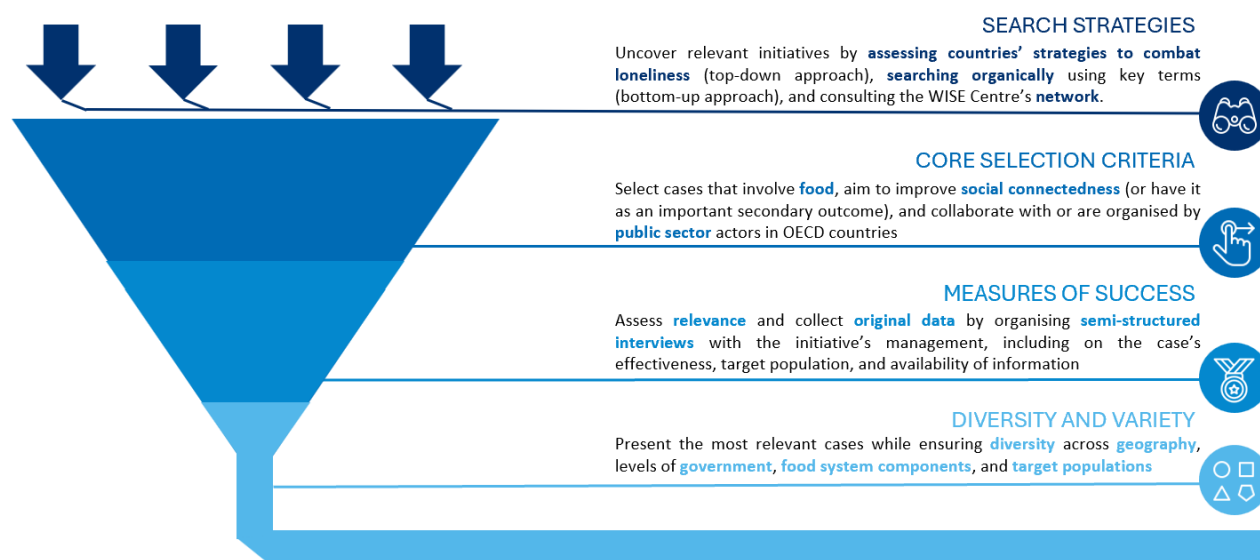
²⁰ The ministry has created a shared framework to guide the work of all participating houses, ensuring consistent standards while still allowing for local flexibility (BMBFSFJ, 2026^[79]; 2023^[80]). Core criteria, which all houses are expected to meet, include: (1) intergenerational exchange: creating regular opportunities for encounters between age groups outside the family context; (2) participation: offering low-threshold formats that enable people of all ages and backgrounds to take part in social and civic life; (3) social space orientation: aligning activities with local needs and co-ordinating closely with municipalities and other actors to avoid duplication and close gaps; and (4) volunteering: enabling and supporting civic engagement as a core pillar of activities and community life volunteering (e.g. structured recruitment, recognition and support for volunteers). The framework also specifies criteria for the open meeting space (e.g. being open at least 20 hours per week, being accessible and welcoming, and free to enter) and for sustainable, future-oriented development (e.g. environmental awareness, lifelong learning, democratic values and digital inclusion). The criteria also address organisational capacities such as the need for adequate infrastructure, professional co-ordination, and structured co-operation with local partners and institutions.

²¹ Circular practices refer to activities that prevent wasted resources, improve the durability of goods and products, and transform waste into new inputs (OECD, 2020^[94]).

Annex A. Case study selection process

The case studies presented in this report were chosen so as to present a range of intervention approaches, target groups, geographic areas, community types, organisational functioning (including different types of government involvement), and objectives (including some where boosting connectedness was not the primary project goal). The case study selection process is summarised in Figure A A.1 and described in further detail below.

Figure A A.1. Summary of case study selection process



Search strategies

A longlist of potential case studies was first compiled through desktop research and consultation of national government experts. The search comprised analysis of food-related activities in national and sub-national social connection strategies (see Chapter 1), as well as a broad web and AI-assisted search using key words and phrases related to food-based activities such as “community kitchen” or “food bank”. Searches were conducted in multiple languages and relevant knowledge hubs and networks were also scanned (e.g. Food Action Cities).

Core selection criteria

Initiatives were shortlisted based on their intended contributions to social connectedness and broader well-being outcomes, as well as the credibility of the lead organisation and extent of co-operation with public actors. Examples that involved national or local government actors (as a lead agency, funder, partner, or stakeholder) were prioritised in order to strengthen potential policy insights.

Measures of success

Examples with robust evidence of effectiveness and efficiency were prioritised where possible, although the availability of evaluation evidence was often limited, especially for programmes where improving social connections was an implicit, rather than explicit, aim. Previous OECD research has already highlighted the need for strengthening monitoring and evaluation activities regarding policy efforts to improve social connectedness and to better identify what works as it is a relatively new field of knowledge (OECD, 2025^[1]). The potential scalability and transferability of approaches to other contexts was also considered as one of the selection criteria, although robust assessments of these aspects fell outside the scope of this report.

Diversity and variety

The final selection was made to ensure coverage of OECD country examples in different world regions (Australasia, Europe, North America, South America, Southeast Asia) and to present a variety of intervention types and outcomes. The case study search revealed that community-level interventions are usually led and implemented by non-governmental actors in the non-profit and social economy sectors, with public sector actors providing funding and in-kind support in most instances. The selected case studies were thus also chosen to reflect a range of community implementation and public sector support models.

References

OECD (2025), *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries*, OECD Publishing, Paris, [1]
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Glossary of terms

The following definitions are used throughout this report. Unless otherwise specified, definitions are taken from the OECD report *Social Connections and Loneliness in OECD Countries (2025)*^[1].

Social connection terms

- **Social connection** is an umbrella term that encompasses the many ways that people interact with and relate to one another. It includes both the quantity and quality of time spent with others, and how much support people feel they have.
- **Social capital** refers to societal norms, shared values and institutional arrangements that encourage co-operation between groups.
- **Social isolation** refers to low frequency, duration and extent of interactions – i.e. objective conditions, such as spending little time with others, and/or having a small social network. Social isolation is distinct from experiencing loneliness: It is possible to spend time alone without feeling lonely, just as it is possible to feel lonely even when spending time with others.
- **Loneliness** is an unpleasant subjective experience that results from an individual's perception of being undesirably isolated, or from feeling that their needs are not being met in their relationships with others. Loneliness is one qualitative aspect of relationships, distinct from measures of relationship quantity (e.g. social network size, or the amount of time spent with others).
- **Social infrastructure** refers to the spaces and organisations that encourage social interactions and thereby strengthen social capital and feelings of belonging.
- **Third places** are informal and accessible spaces, beyond home or the workplace, that are predominantly used for conversation and social interaction. This definition overlaps with that of social infrastructure – though the latter emphasises physical (as opposed to virtual) spaces – and both are used by academic and policy communities.

Food-related terms

- **Food systems** include the elements and activities that relate to the production and consumption of food, and the ways that each subsequently affect economic, health, social and environmental outcomes (OECD, 2025)^[2].
- **Food practices** refer to the routine activities surrounding food consumption at an individual or household level, including meal planning, purchasing or obtaining ingredients, preparing meals, eating, storing or preserving, and disposal (Castelo, Schäfer and Silva, 2021)^[3].
- **Food insecurity** refers to a consistent lack of access to safe and nutritious foods, such that it impedes normal growth and development. There are four main dimensions: Availability (physical existence of food), access (resources to obtain sufficient quality food), utilisation (how people make use of food) and stability (the continuity of the preceding three dimensions over time) (Giner and Placzek, 2022)^[4].

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Promoting Social Connectedness Through Food

Promoting Social Connectedness Through Food presents food-centred evidence and case studies to contribute to practical knowledge on how government and non-government actors can work together to boost opportunities and spaces for connection within communities. As loneliness and social isolation rise on the policy agenda, the report focuses on how growing, preparing, and eating food with others can provide accessible and adaptable ways to improve connectedness among people alongside broader well-being outcomes, including for populations facing greater barriers to social participation (such as elderly or socio-economically disadvantaged people). The report also draws insights for well-designed programme implementation to combat loneliness and isolation – with relevance for food-based activities and beyond – such as volunteer support, models for cross-sector collaboration and the need for robust evaluation evidence.



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