

# The Value and Potential of Natural Supports in Calgary Communities

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# Background

*“The value of wholeness speaks to the totality of creation, the group as opposed to the individual, the forest as opposed to the individual trees. It focuses on the totality of constant flux rather than on individual patterns. This value is reflected in the customs and organisation of Plains Indian tribes, where the locus of social organisation is the extended family, not the immediate, biological family. Several extended families combine to form a band. Several bands combine to form a tribe or nation; several tribes or nations combine to form confederacies...”*

*(Leroy Little Bear, 2000).*

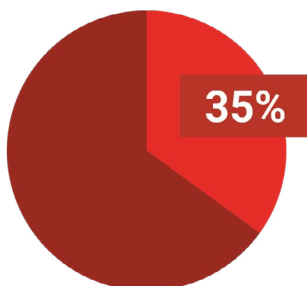
Naturally supportive communities are defined as involving individuals, organisations, groups, businesses and others who help each other achieve a sense of belonging and connectedness. The intention is that people who live in naturally supportive communities will be better able to cope with the stress of daily living (Reynolds & Tough, 2020).

With the arrival of the Covid pandemic, symptoms of loneliness and other mental health issues in communities have become more visible. In 2021, there were more people around the world experiencing strong negative emotions than there were at any given point in the last fifteen years (Gallup). Issues like financial poverty and dissonance in families have become even more exacerbated (Mohanty). Vulnerable populations, like low-income Calgarians, have also been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Enough for all advisory committee). The CMHA (2020) found that almost half of Albertans reported “isolation” as their top mental health concern. Being connected to natural supports in our local communities might have lessened the impact of the pandemic. Indeed, more than half of Albertans (CMHA, 2020) said that staying closely connected with their families was key to supporting their mental health during these difficult times. There is a clear need for a systems-oriented shift in our thinking around the power of these natural supports.

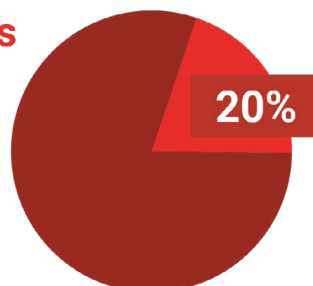
There are many observed benefits to natural social support systems to various populations. For example, a study done by Welsh et. al (2015) has shown that the presence of natural supports in an active military duty personnel’s life has been linked to “fewer depressive symptoms, heightened perceptions of mission readiness, and greater satisfaction with military life” (p. 76). Natural Supports have also been shown to be effective for populations going through drastic life changes. According to an exploratory study conducted by Barton Hirsch (1980), natural support systems “may significantly affect how successfully one copes with major life changes”(p.161). In this study, Hirsch examined two different groups of women (widows and students), and concluded that both groups were able to complete a smoother and less drastic reorganisation of their lives with the help of natural support systems. Other benefits of natural supports are clearly outlined in the Connections First Guide, developed by Reynolds, Tough, Walsh and Aquis (2020). Building on this work, Alberta’s Natural Supports Leadership Table and members of the Council of Champions’ Natural Supports Stream hope to strengthen natural supports systems, and bring their value into the mainstream.

## Percent of people who rated their mental health as poor or below average.

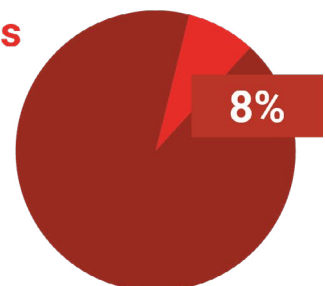
18–24  
Year Olds



Ages  
25+



Ages  
65+



## Research Question

**How might we create a natural support movement in Calgary? A practical follow up question that allows for further elaboration is: “What can be done to make our communities more naturally supportive?”**

# The Impact of Natural Supports on Communities

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Higher feeling of safety and stability

Focus on friendliness, kindness, inclusion

Reciprocal support, social connectedness

Utilising resources, volunteering, and building programs

## Key Findings and Recommendations

Results from this research clearly showed that natural supports have a positive and significant impact on individuals, families, communities, and systems. Further, this project identified four kinds of barriers that when addressed, will create even stronger frameworks of natural support. Taken together, these findings point to recommended actions that individuals, communities, and organisations may take to further create a robust natural supports movement in Calgary.

## Barriers to Natural Supports

### Use of Resources

- Build on the work of the Alberta's Natural Supports Leadership Table and use successful natural supports campaigns (like Social Snacking) to guide future programming (Connections First, 2021). Promote a common language for natural supports, share what works well, and engage funders, City planners, community partners, and professionals in promoting a natural supports movement. Advertising campaigns (akin to ParticipAction) could further help to popularise the idea of natural supports.

### Inclusion and virtual engagement

- A system of natural supports needs to address a wide array of individual needs. Simultaneously, the system needs to demonstrate that every individual has the potential of becoming a natural support to someone else. Engaging champions within diverse communities will be key to success. This could be envisioned as a way of decolonizing the concept of help and support.

### Awareness of natural supports

- Distributing findings about natural supports and its benefits will increase confidence in the approach. Encourage individuals and organisations to share what works well (e.g., #naturalsupports), create more spaces and opportunities for connection, and promote strategies to identify and enhance natural supports. Promoting successful programs (like Social Snacking) will be key to success (Connections First, 2021)

# Conclusion- Potential of Natural Supports

Using natural support approaches has been shown to be an effective method for decreasing loneliness and connecting with otherwise “hard to reach clients” (Baker, 1977). Results from this project also show that using natural supports lessens the demand for professional services, strengthens connections between community members, enhances trust amongst neighbours, and enhances individual well-being by demonstrating that each person has skills and resources that can be shared. Recommended steps needed to create and promote a Natural Supports Movement include steps for Now, Next and Later (described in the scholarly output).

## Now

(12-24 months)

- Identify champions in communities who already exemplify the power of natural supports (nominate a natural support in your community; community awards for natural helpers; develop resource banks within communities, etc.)
- Capture stories that illustrate the positive impact natural supports have on individuals and communities.
- Broaden membership on the natural supports leadership table to include new stakeholders.
- Identify successful campaigns or programs that use natural supports, and consider how they could be scaled up or used to model the way to further success.
- Introduce new campaigns based on the knowledge and plans of the natural supports leadership tables.
- Promote consistent and common language for natural supports.

## Next

(24-48 months)

- Measure the effectiveness (and fidelity) of natural support approaches.
- Help communities to label their activities and efforts as part of the natural supports movement (e.g., local ice rinks, community clean ups).
- Help individuals to identify the help that they might offer to another person (e.g., effective listening skills, practical support, knowledge, information, tangible resources) and promote learning resources to them, such as Natural Supports YYC.
- Ensure that the natural supports movement is aligned with the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Decolonizing the concept of “help” will promote assistance by all people, thus lessening pressure on professional services.
- Create a mass media campaign movement to promote the value of using natural supports.

## Later

(48-96 months)

- Consider how successful natural support programs might be scaled up and broadened out to other cities.
- Engage with urban planners to create intentional spaces (socially positive infrastructure).

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