

# “Community” in Review in the United States: A Snapshot Examination of Its History, Salient Issues, Creation and Development in the United States

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**Abstract:** To introduce the inaugural issue of this journal, this paper was written to provide an extensive overview of the concept of community and its application in U.S. society. As such, the central contribution of this paper is an in-depth investigation of the several physical and social aspects of communities to showcase their importance to people and society as a whole. An extensive literature review was conducted to examine how communities are defined, how sociological research has historically explored communities, as well as the decline, resurgence, and fine-tuning of research approaches that have occurred, and discuss the different types of communities, their characteristics and importance to society. Moreover, this paper examines the methodology commonly used in community research, how these methods are applied to improve communities. Approaches to community development, the challenges communities face, and how a community interfaces with other socio-spatial units (city, county, and state) and with social institutions within the community are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Community, development, research methods, sociology, history.

## INTRODUCTION

Community has been the focus of commentary and study for hundreds of years. Ideas about community go back in time to the writings of Aristotle regarding the polis (Douglas 2010).

Writers such as Toennies and Durkheim during the late 1800s made distinctions between community and society (Gottdiener, Hutchison and Ryan 2015). Today, community research is alive and well, used in a variety of contexts and topics. For example, James (2024) advocates a longitudinal, community research-based approach to understanding how black adolescents transition into adulthood in Canada. Elliott *et al.* (2021) examine covid symptoms in the community. Ukhanova *et al.* (2021) examine community charity work in Russia.

The concept of community is also present in today's lexicon and focus of events. Recently, an area near Columbia, SC, held a festival for the “Crane Creek Community” (Carolina Panorama 2025). TD Jakes Real Estate Venture's The Global Exchange hosted a panel discussion on “Community-Building and Wealth Creation Through Real Estate” at Martha's Vineyard (TD Jakes Real Estate Ventures 2025).

Using a U.S. perspective, this article provides an overview of community as a topic of research, application, and action by conducting an extensive

review of the literature. The goal of this paper is to show the importance of communities in U.S. society and the relevance of studying this topic from multiple angles to better improve the social and physical aspects of communities to advance positive outcomes for residents. Part I of the overview begins with a discussion of the concept of community and what is and is not. This discussion is followed by a brief history of the concept of community and community research is presented. Next a discussion of the different types of communities and their features is presented. Third, why communities are important in society is examined, comparing strong versus weak communities, and some of the problems facing communities.

Part II focuses on a discussion of the research methodology of community studies. This includes data collection and analysis techniques used. In particular, the benefits of Community-Based Research and Community Engaged Research over traditional approaches are examined.

Part III focuses on the application and action aspects of community. These aspects include addressing the issues and challenges of communities, discussing potential solutions, and exploring community building and development. Community building involves several key social interaction and relationship factors that must be implemented for a community to be created. An exploration of these factors and their important contributions are examined. Community development is typically approached from one of three possible perspectives. These perspectives and the situations in which they are most useful are highlighted.

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Part IV discusses how communities are intertwined with the cities, counties, states, regions, and the country that houses them. Communities are also intertwined with the social institutions that are within and surrounding them. Aspects addressed include how local, state, and federal governments support and affect communities, how communities can impact all levels of government, and how social institutions play a vital role in the community.

## **PART I: DEFINITION, HISTORY, TYPES, AND IMPORTANCE**

### **Defining Community**

When people are asked what their community is, they can respond with a variety of answers. It can be place-based, like a city or a suburb or rural area. It can be based upon social ties or meaning. It can even go beyond a physical place into the virtual world (Carney *et al.* 2022). MacQueen and associates in their study of community collaboration for HIV vaccine trials asked different groups of men in different cities what “community” meant to them. They all gave answers that were place-based, involve social relationships and common viewpoints, and engagement in action (MacQueen *et al.* 2001). Cobigo and associates (2016) did a search of the scholarly literature for common elements in studies’ definitions of “community”. They found that physical proximity was the most mentioned element, followed by bounded, shared and group. Territory-free was one of the least mentioned items. They followed up their analysis of the scholarly literature with focus group discussions of what “community” meant with people. These discussions revealed that the element of physical proximity, followed by bounded, interaction, belonging, support and group, were most common. Territory-free was one of the least common elements mentioned (Cobigo *et al.* 2016).

Hence, a community can be defined as a location where people reside and have their needs met through social organizations and institutions (Brenan and Berardi 2023). Members of communities are brought together through common activities, beliefs, or interests. Communities function within a set of boundaries, geographical and social (traditions or expected behaviors). Members often share similar backgrounds, experiences, identities in addition to location and interests (Douglas 2010). Interactions between people in the location form the foundation for the life of a community and the actions taking place

within the location. In addition, as Wilkinson pointed out 34 years ago, community can be thought of as an interaction process that brought people together to create an entity more powerful than individuals operating alone (Brennan and Berardi 2023).

However, even with the inclusion of a place-based element in the definition, when it comes to operationalizing what a community is as a unit of analysis, there is considerable variation. Some studies refer to block groups as community; others use census tracts; and still others use even bigger spatial units interchangeably (Sherrieb *et al.* 2010). The looseness or lack of concreteness of the definition may be seen as problematic by some, because of the measurement issues, but the regular usage of the term “community” shows its relevance in society, and in some contexts excludes non-geographically based gatherings and lack of regular interactions (Lyon 1989).

Although many people think of a community as being rooted in a physical, geographic space, there are also virtual communities (organizations that exist solely in cyber-space) and place-based communities with a virtual presence. One example of a place-based community with a virtual presence is the City of Missoula, MT. On the website, there is information available to visitors, residents, and others about the government, departments within Missoula’s government, communities, and business. There is also information about paying bills, fines, or who to contact for a particular issue (City of Missoula n.d.).

Within the community portion of the website, there is information on history, arts and culture, events, state of the community, different neighborhoods within Missoula, and how to interact with urban wildlife. Within the different neighborhoods, you can find neighborhood profiles (statistics on a neighborhood, such as population size and growth, racial/ethnic composition, educational attainment, median age, median household income, and number of housing units), opportunities to pursue leadership training and serve on neighborhood councils, community assets (important sites and acres of open space and tree cover), and a detailed map of the neighborhood (City of Missoula n.d.).

For example, the Two Rivers neighborhood contains 1470 residents, with a median age of 48.3 years, 39% with a college education or more, 88.2% white, 2.8% Hispanic origin, and a median household income of \$66,500. The neighborhood has 381 acres of open space and 10% of the area covered in trees. Its

community assets include Fort Missoula, Milwaukee Trail, and Northern Rockies Heritage Center (City of Missoula n.d.).

Virtual communities are cyber sites where people can network with one another over mutual interests, seek social support, make career connections, and advance shared goals. The materials posted on-line are user generated and can provide a sense of belonging amongst members (Koh and Kim 2003; Porter 2004). These cyber communities can exist on multiple platforms simultaneously, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok, further expanding user access (Al-Jbouri *et al.* 2024).

Some of the benefits of virtual communities are expanding social connections beyond the local space and time zone of members, alleviates loneliness amongst those who may be house-bound or otherwise travel restricted, and provide useful information to members (Casanova *et al.* 2021; Gunnes, Løe, and Kalseth. 2024). Some of the drawbacks of virtual communities are misinformation being spread amongst members, issues of privacy and security, and in some situations, anonymity that promotes unwanted remarks and behaviors (Della Lena 2024; Shahbazi and Bunker 2024).

One example of a virtual community is The Basement, a site created by former pastor Tim Ross and maintained by Upset the World Studios. Ross created this community to advocate for greater open, honest, and transparent living amongst participants. This includes self-reflection, promoting counseling, and guidance from the Bible. Ross has a podcast called Wide Open, which is held live and recorded during each day of the work week. Listeners are encouraged to call in to have a conversation with Ross on the topic of their choice and receive feedback. Listeners also have the option of posting their comments on-line. Ross also has regular interviews with well-known and not so well-known people that he posts on-line. Some of the material can be accessed by anyone, while other material is reserved for members only. More recently, The Basement has been supplemented by a few meetings held in different cities to ticket holders (Upset the World Studios n.d.).

Virtual communities are useful during times of disaster. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many houses of worship increased their cyber presence to reach members of the congregation with worship services, sermons, encouragement, and community

information, at a time where many nonessential organizations were ordered closed and travel was severely restricted to obtaining required goods and services (i.e. food, healthcare) (Mosavel *et al.* 2022). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, many educational institutions switched from in-person classes to cyber classes to continue students' education and retain faculty and staff employment, despite the widespread damage and dislocation of residents along the Gulf Coast to other locations (Hartman and DeMatteis 2008).

### History of Community Research

Toennies in 1887 was one of the first to use the concept of community, in his publication *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (translated means Community and Society) to refer to a system or network of social interactions that occur within a geographical place, in his discussion of how society was evolving from preindustrial villages to urban, industrial areas (Douglas 2010). *Gemeinschaft* refers to a population in a small village where residents strongly identify as a group with a place, with emotions and traditions underpinning their identity, as well as family connections, and the residents see each other in their totality as people. *Gesellschaft* involves rationality, a strong sense of individualism, emotional distance, and people understand one another partially in an urban space dominated by industrial capitalism. These were two ideal types, with no place or group fitting exactly in either category but falling somewhere along a continuum.

Durkheim expanded on Toennies work, with the ideas of mechanical and organic solidarity (Lyon 1989). Mechanical solidarity refers to an interdependence between members of a preindustrial village: a small, homogeneous population with shared common experiences and kinship ties that bind the members of the village together. Organic solidarity refers to an interdependence found in industrial cities: a large, heterogeneous population held together through a complex division of labor, where specialization of roles is common, no one individual can meet their basic needs by themselves, and the population is bound together through laws and other formal mechanisms (Chriss 2023).

Community also played a major role as a topic in teaching and conducting sociological research at the Chicago School. The first sociology textbook was produced by Albion Small and George Vincent at the

University of Chicago in 1894 and a disproportionate share of the textbook focused on communities (Lyon 1989). During the 1920s and 1930s, Robert Park and his associates produced spatial maps of the different community areas within Chicago using census tract data. They defined a community as a population which occupies a specific geographical area that is well-established in the space that it occupies and the individuals in this population have a mutual interdependence upon one another (Lyon 1989).

The Chicago School sociologists also examined how forces such as migration, rapid urbanization, and social class conflicts shaped community location and functioning. Borrowing ideas from biology, Park examined how the processes of competition, symbiosis, and dominance operated within Chicago. Competition refers to the struggle for survival, where different groups seek to obtain the best resources, including land and social status. Those groups who were to acquire the best resources then exerted their control or dominance over the remaining groups. Symbiosis refers to the interdependence of groups on one another, such as customers needing paychecks and supplies, and businesses needing customers and workers. People then adapt to the environment in which they live.

Using Chicago community maps and Park's ideas, Ernest Burgess created the Concentric Zone model of urban development, which shows different types of residents and their communities occupying each zone (such as Chinatown and Little Sicily in Zone 2, the Transition Zone). Burgess also argued that urban areas grow through the dual processes of urban agglomeration and decentralization, where industry and businesses tended to locate in the center of the city, pushing other prior activities and people outward towards the edges of the city through spatial competition and dominance. Likewise, Park and Burgess borrowed from ecology the process of invasion and succession. This process was used to explain how new immigrants settled in the older areas of Chicago and pushed out prior residents to other parts of the city. Roderick McKenzie examined how types of transportation systems (pre-railways, railway, and automobile) influenced the spatial development of metropolitan areas.

Unlike Park, Burgess, and McKenzie, Louis Wirth did not examine how social factors influenced the spatial arrangements of communities within Chicago but instead focused on how the spatial conditions

surrounding residents impacted their behavior. He proposed that cities with their large, dense and heterogenous populations produce a distinctive urban culture or way of being. This urban way of life included anonymity and secondary relationships which would lead to social disorganization in the city, creating many of the social problems experienced in certain communities (Gottdiener *et al.* 2015).

Interest in social disorganization of communities was also a focus in the work of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay. Using court cases, they found that delinquency tended to be concentrated in certain communities of the city. Applying Burgess' Concentric Zone model, they found higher delinquency rates near business areas and in communities with high poverty rates, and that delinquency rates decreased as they moved further from the center of Chicago. This early community research formed the basis for the development of Social Disorganization theory of crime, which is still widely used today (Kubrin 2010).

While the University of Chicago sociologists were studying human ecology, Robert and Helen Lynd of Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College, respectively, were conducting a study of Muncie, Indiana. They initially set out to examine religious beliefs and practices but realized that religion was affected by other social institutions in the community. They produced a detailed description of small-town life called *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, using a variety of data collection methods. It was one of the first holistic studies of a community. The Lynds not only wanted to document the beliefs and actions of residents, but they wanted to understand why the city was the way it was. Later, they followed the Middletown study up with a second project, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, which described the role of local power and its distribution impacts people's lives.

Research focused on community power structure also extended beyond the Lynds to other community scholars. Floyd Hunter at the University of North Carolina in *Community Power Structure* (1953) investigated who really controls the decision making in Atlanta, GA. Hunter had been involved in community planning through Atlanta's Community Planning Council, but it seemed that their efforts at social change were being stymied. Through interviews with well positioned people, Hunter uncovered that there were forty people in business that had influence over decision making, but none of these people officially

held a position in government. He concluded that democracy was not functioning in local government.

However, Robert Dahl of Yale University found a different situation in his study of the power structure of New Haven, CT. He took a different approach to data collection than Hunter took, deciding instead to examine the actual decisions made in the community. He then examined who supported those decisions and who held countervailing positions. Dahl reported in *Who Governs?* (1961) that a pluralistic democracy is present in New Haven, with the mayor occupying a critical role in community decision making but that a distribution of power does exist in the community.

After the publication of these two studies, numerous researchers explored the distribution of power in many other communities. Yet, by the 1970s, the interest in conducting community-based studies began to wane. Some scholars even suggested abandoning the concept of community and focus instead on other geographic units such as place, neighborhood, city, or region. Still others argued that forces beyond the community were shaping people's lives, that we lived in a mass society, where the media, education, and migration processes have made communities more similar than different.

Then in the 1980s, there was a resurgence of interest in community research. The American Sociological Association formed a special section devoted to communities, with its own journal. There was also new scholarship focused on the development of models of community structure and holistic studies of communities. This renewed focus on communities came when scholars realized that significant differences do exist in local politics, economics, and lifestyles across places. Furthermore, *gemeinschaft* attitudes were still present in some locations (Lyon 1989).

In the 1990s, community studies experienced several important developments or transitions. First, there was a movement away from the traditional research approach to communities, where outside experts examined communities' processes and community issues with a detached disposition, deciding to study what the expert was interested in or considered important. Instead, researchers began consulting with community members about what were the salient processes and issues to study and directly involved community members in the research process (Community-Based Participatory Research or CBPR),

from the designing of studies and carrying out research plans, to developing action plans to address community issues.

Secondly, community researchers began focusing on inequities and historical exploitation of minorities and marginalized communities. A research emphasis was placed on the lay knowledge and experiences of ordinary community members (citizen science) and giving them credit for their knowledge. Also, there was a focus on disparities in the areas of health, education, and employment outcomes, and environmental justice and the right to safe environments.

Third, there was a movement away from documenting community structures and issues to being engaged in action to resolve community problems. An example of this is the focus on community development. Using science-based, empirical research to inform their actions, researchers and community members began creating strategic plans and initiating social programs to address long-standing problems like education and unemployment (Scammell n.d.).

From the year 2000 onward, more changes have occurred in community research. Community research has become more institutionalized, being recognized and accepted within academic circles and by government agencies. Additional refinements to the principles and methods of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and an expansion of its use in society has happened. Community research has expanded to other regions of the world, each with its own distinctive aspects, such as increased focus on issues of social justice and decoloniality. Finally, advancements in on-line platforms and other digital tools have made their way into community research, with data collection and storage, and dissemination of findings to the world (Horowitz *et al.* 2009).

### **Types of Communities**

There are several different types of communities (see Table 1 for a complete list of community types) ranging from urban areas to gated or planned communities. However, this paper is going to discuss the most common types of communities and their characteristics: Urban, rural, suburban, and small towns. Distinguishing between urban, rural, and suburban places, researchers typically use spatial typologies, such as Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes or the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) classification scheme. The RUCA

**Table 1: Typology of Physical Communities**

Community type	Key Characteristic	Example of type	Reference source
Urban	High population density Diversity	Downtown Neighborhoods	Wirth (1938)
Rural	Low density population Agriculture	Farming communities	Toennies (1887)
Suburban	Residential Close proximity to urban areas	Gated communities Suburban developments	Forsyth (2012)
Peri-urban	Transition area Swift Expansion	Urban fringe areas	Tacoli (2003)
Small-town	Mid-sized Self-contained communities	Towns away from urban areas	Green (2013)
Informal/Slum	Unplanned areas Underdeveloped	Impoverished neighborhoods	Davis (2006)
Indigenous/Tribal	Lands based on ancestry and heritage	Reservations	Alfred (2009)
Planned/Gated	Planned designed Enclosed with a gate	Retirement communities Gated communities in suburbs	Blakely and Snyder (1997)
Eco/Sustainable	Areas focused on protecting the environment	Eco-villages Eco-housing	Dawson (2006)
Temporary/Transitional	Short-term housing People are displaced or homeless	Refugee or migrant camps	Agier (2008)

codes are based on census tracts to differentiate between urban and rural areas. The CDC developed the NCHS scheme, which is applied at the county level. U.S. counties are classified according to six categories, large central metro, large fringe metro, medium metro, small metro, micropolitan, and noncore. These categories were created based on metropolitan status, population size, and location near major cities (McAlexander *et al.* 2022; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service 2025). Based on these spatial typologies, places can be more accurately characterized as urban, rural, suburban, or small-town.

Urban areas include a downtown area and many city neighborhoods that are characterized by diversity in terms of race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Hall, Kaufman, and Ricketts 2006). Systemic inequalities are present in urban places where disadvantaged neighborhoods contain residents with poorer health outcomes and limited access to infrastructure and other needed services, such as grocery stores (Geman and Freedman 2021). Urban areas have a high population density, which can result in an increased exposure to pollution, noise, and overcrowding leading to a host of negative outcomes

(Rocha, Thorson, and Lambiotte 2015). Finally, urban communities are largely segregated by race and ethnicity, with those communities being the most disadvantaged in terms of income, health, high population density, and poor environmental quality (Mastroianni 2023).

Rural communities tend to be characterized through their challenges and resilience (Fleming *et al.* 2018). Rural areas have low population density and are typically comprised of farming communities (Hall, Kaufman, and Ricketts 2006), thus residents do not experience the challenges typical of urban places, such as overcrowding. Thus, compared to urban places, residents in rural communities generally experience a better environmental quality with reduced air and noise pollution, but urban residents typically engage in healthier lifestyles, behaviors, and have greater access to healthcare services (Kurpas, Mroczek, and Bielska 2014). Moreover, rural communities tend to have higher overall poverty rates, limited educational opportunities and higher rates of illiteracy, higher occupational health risks, longer travels times to hospitals and clinics, and less educational knowledge (Rural Health Information Hub 2025). The higher poverty rates faced by rural residents has been linked

to the decline of the agricultural economy or farming, which is the main source of economic sustainability in rural areas. Nonetheless, some rural communities show resilience through close-knit social ties and bonds, consisting of residents who are interdependent and rely on each other (Fleming *et al.* 2018).

Suburban communities are areas near cities that consist of residential developments (Zuniga-Teran *et al.* 2017). These communities typically have a lower population density compared to urban areas, consist of mainly home-owners with socioeconomic homogeneity, higher level of education, income, and white-collar or professional occupations (Jackson 1985; Logan and Schneider 1982). Suburban communities are designed to yield an enhanced quality of life with larger single-family homes and sprawling land areas for separately zoned residential and commercial areas, but the infrastructural nature of suburbs make residents dependent on vehicles to commute to work, school, or to utilize any services. A car dependent infrastructure is associated with negative outcomes, including increased pollution, higher infrastructure costs to maintain the larger land areas and use, and obesity has been linked to suburbia living (Cervero and Kockelman 1997; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000; Ewing and Cervero 2010). Suburbs were typically comprised of white, middle to upper class households, but in recent years, suburban communities have been shifting demographically with increased racial and ethnic diversity and more varied socioeconomic statuses (Lewis-McCoy *et al.* 2023). Additionally, suburban areas have grown significantly more than urban and rural areas, particularly among immigrants and older adults creating more diversity in the suburbs (Bialik 2018). In tandem with the shifting demographics, suburban household compositions are also changing. The middle-class, white nuclear family is not the only household in suburban communities as more households are multigenerational and nontraditional creating even more diversity and inclusivity in a once exclusive bubble (Micklow and Warner 2014).

Small towns have a lower population density like suburban areas but are typically located further from urban places. As a result, small towns tend to be self-contained communities who experience limited infrastructure, such as a lack of sidewalks and transportation making small town residents car dependent for all their needs, including commuting to work and school to going to the grocery store or hospital (Blank 2005; Peters 2019). Small towns are

characterized by smaller job markets creating limited economic opportunities, higher poverty rates, and less economic mobility compared to urban and suburban areas (Peters 2019). However, this smaller job market comprises of local business owners who are integrated both socially and economically in their small-town communities. As a result, many small business owners encourage social cohesion and help to initiate civic engagement (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Finally, small towns exhibit strong social institutions, community ties and bonds, and a high level of social trust and strong collective norms. Social institutions, including churches, schools, community centers, and civic groups, tend to serve as the foundation for small town communities, which yields creating and maintaining strong social connections among residents. (Peters 2019).

### Natural and Physical Aspects of Communities

Communities consist of a natural and physical environment, and both aspects influence the health, opportunities, and overall well-being of residents and the community in terms of economic stability, job growth, and tourism. The natural environment of communities includes the presence of natural resources, specifically bodies of water (oceans, lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams), terrain (mountains or plains), weather (temperature, rainfall, snowfall, sunshine, cloud cover, storm risk), minerals, air, lumber (woods and forests), soil quality, vegetation and wildlife (the types of animals and plants in the area). The physical environment are man-made entities, such as roads, hiking and biking trails, parks, playgrounds and camping sites, housing, schools, churches and businesses, transportation, and utility services (e.g., water, sewer, and trash collection) (Peterman, Loy, Carlos, Arena, and Kaminsky 2021).

The natural and physical aspects of a community influence residents by affecting their physical and mental health status, overall social well-being (feelings of belonging, being connected to others and institutions, and feeling safe in one's community), and financial stability (the availability of jobs and economic growth) (Elsayed 2024). A community that has a strong infrastructure includes many components that can increase an individual's health. Strong infrastructures include walkways and bike lanes that promote physical activity and improved health. However, the availability of walkways, bike lanes and trails, and a community that encourages walking and biking can only be successful if residents feel safe enough to be outside interacting within their communities. Generally, positive

social connections among residents and institutions yield lower instances of crime. Moreover, investment in the physical aspects of communities, such as maintaining parks, walkways, hiking and bike trails, and other green spaces also results in lower crime rates (Elsayed 2024; Lindberg 2025).

Access to nature has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Parks and other green spaces improve the environmental quality of the community, which increases both physical and mental health. Well-maintained common areas that bring residents together helps to eliminate isolation and increases a sense of belongingness. Communities that sponsor events in common areas, such as concerts and festivals, also positively impacts the physical and mental health of its residents (Launch Centers 2025; Wolf and Rozance 2013).

Communities that invest in maintaining both the natural and physical aspects that help residents thrive also bring positive impacts to the community. For instance, such communities tend to increase residential and commercial property values, and invested communities tend to attract businesses who desire to move to a clean, cohesive, and beautified area. Additionally, invested communities attract new residents who want to live in a safe, integrated community with a thriving economy (Chen, Lin, You, and Han 2022; Israel and Wolf 2016). Communities who invest in their natural resources by developing recreational activities, such as camping, hiking, and boating, not only provides opportunities for residents, but for tourists who spend money and boost the local economy. There are several natural resources that draw tourists, particularly beaches and oceans, mountains, forests, lakes and rivers. Thus, invested communities can entice businesses to move, and they can utilize their natural resources to develop a strong tourism base creates economic opportunities and growth (Meier 2024).

### **The Importance of Communities**

Regardless of the type of community, their importance to the people and institutions within them cannot be underscored. They are the hub of human interaction and connection, support, and a major resource for various opportunities and services. Communities give residents a share sense of belonging and identity in conjunction with providing help during a personal crisis, such as an illness or a death, and collectively when the community faces a problem, like a

natural disaster or economic downturns. Strong communities build social capital, social cohesion, and trust, which results in greater civic engagement, equitable access to services, such as education, employment, and healthcare, and fewer social problems, including crime. Strong communities help shape individuals and positively impacts their physical, mental, and social well-being by providing emotional connections to others, social capital, and by fulfilling needs, reducing isolation, and increasing resilience (Wolf and Rozance 2013).

Weaker communities, characterized by disorder and disorganization, play the same important role as a strong community, but such communities shape their individuals and institutions negatively yielding poor outcomes. For instance, higher rates of depression in adults are correlated with neighborhood disadvantage, including an absence of social cohesion and mistrust. Despite the benefits of a strong community, scholars have discussed the significance of declining communities in the post-industrial era. Communities characterized by social cohesion, social capital, and civic engagement has eroded due to increased modernization resulting from the industrial revolution, capitalism, and individualism. Scholars further argue there is a decline in community participation and more focus on individualistic values and behaviors due to modern social forces, including suburbanization and busy schedules have led to a decrease in time and money as resources to invest in one's community (Putnam 2000; Wolf and Rozance 2013). In recent years a multitude of revitalization projects have been initiated across the United States and the world to help restore communities, yet research shows people are more disconnected to their communities than ever before, but there are differences based on social class, education, and race that need to be further explored. For example, college educated Americans tend to have more opportunities to gather and make connections within their communities, and more opportunity and resources to invest in community projects (Cox and Pressler 2024). Thus, community dynamics have evolved over the years and continue to evolve, making research in such areas vital to improve the health and overall well-being of all citizens and the spaces in which they live, work, worship, and go to school.

### **PART II: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ON COMMUNITY STUDIES**

For community-based research to fully examine and understand community dynamics and their outcomes,

researchers must be fully engaged with the community by embracing multidisciplinary approaches and utilizing mixed methods. Community-based research is considered participatory involving engagement that emphasizes the involvement of researchers from academic institutions with community partners. This partnership must include equal input yet be flexible and reflective with cooperation from all participants. This forms a team involving academics with non-profit agencies, health professionals, activists, grass roots organizations, government agencies, hospitals and health professionals, and schools (Cargo and Mercer 2008; London *et al.* 2024). The multi-disciplinary approach of community-based research increases the relevance of the research questions and methods used to gain understanding of the specific needs of the community under study, along with improved accuracy and validity. Research that combines academics and practitioners, and is truly participatory, involves community members in the process, thereby giving them a voice. A multi-disciplinary team also ensures that outcomes are not simply reported but are being applied to improve the community. Finally, a collaborative effort can bridge the gap between academics and the community, by creating long-term relationships that results in trust, and outcomes that produce intervention programs that are aligned with the community's culture, values, and beliefs (Dwivedi, Jeyaraj, Hughes, Davies, and Ahuja *et al.* 2024; Horowitz, Robinson, and Seifer 2009).

Two widely used community-based research approaches are community-based participatory research (CBPR) and community-engaged research (CEnR). CBPR is an approach that emphasizes collaboration between academic researchers and community practitioners and other members where both parties are equally involved in the research process (Israel, Eng, Shulz, and Parker 2017). According to Wallerstein and colleagues (2018), CBPR has been found to be successful in establishing trust among collaborators, creating mutually cooperative relationships, and applying outcomes to create the appropriate interventions for the community. CEnR also involves collaborative efforts that establishes community trust via practitioner/community member involvement in research, but the level of engagement in research with academics can range from an equal partnership to a consultant role. The level of engagement often depends on the type and purpose of the research, but CEnR emphasizes the application of outcomes in the community of practice and creating

policy. The CEnR approach is commonly used in policy research to assess needs and improve communities, the public health arena to determine best practices, standards, and how to improve community health, and the education sector to improve schools, their curriculum and programs, and student well-being (Jagosh, Bush, Salsberg, *et al.* 2012; Khodakov, Stockdale, Jones, Mango, and Lizaola 2013).

One approach is not better than the other, the decision as to which community research method utilized depends on the goal of the research and the needs of the community. Additionally, there are clear similarities and differences between both approaches, where collaboration and outcome application are key similarities, while the depth of collaboration and research goals are clear distinctions. Below are two case studies that illustrate how CBPR and CEnR are applied to study vulnerable populations, disparity issues, and improve communities.

#### **Case Study #1: Using Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in a Public Health Nursing Study on African American Infants**

CBPR was used in an ethnographic pilot study that examined African American infant health. A public health study, researchers wanted to determine how aspects of CBPR, such as community participation and partnership, can help recruit participants, retain participants, better understand cultural norms of a community, and data collection of vulnerable populations. Researchers worked alongside community partners as a team from developing research questions, recruiting participants, and analyzing the data.

This study employed a qualitative approach using an ethnography, exploring themes related to community partnership involvement, co-learning, how the community and researchers benefit, and sharing findings to the community and among academia.

Several key findings were revealed:

- Community participants were important as they shared information on community culture, were instrumental in recruiting participants, and were involved in the data analysis process.
- Recruitment and retention were heightened due to the trust built between researchers and the community.

- Using CBPR resulted in a richer understanding of the participants and their community, revealing the important role of culture that would not be captured through a simple survey.
- This study also revealed limitations to using CBRP, including the difficulty in balancing scientific methods with the need to uphold community needs and priorities, the amount of time needed to conduct ethnographic research.

This study supports the use of CBPR in public health research because when the community is involved and is viewed as an equal partner with researchers, trust can be built. Thus, participants will more likely share data on sensitive topics. To create a prevention or intervention program that will work for a community, researchers must understand the culture of the community. While ethnographic studies are time consuming, requires a great number of resources, and adaptability, this method can result in more significant and maintainable outcomes (Savage et al. 2006).

### **Case Study #2: Community-Engaged Research (CErN) to Address Health Disparities in Jefferson County, Arkansas**

Jefferson County has a higher level of chronic disease and mortality rates compared to state and national averages. Given this county is predominantly African American, it was suggested that health disparities were largely the result of the under-representation of Blacks in health research. Thus, this study was designed to connect community members with health research, including involving community members as partners who help to decide the pertinent research questions, assist with study design, and assist with data collection and analysis.

Applying Community-Engaged Research (CErN) involved creating new and building on existing partnerships, engaging partners in each step of the research design and analysis and developing a community infrastructure that will increase participation and ensure the research and subsequent findings are relevant to the needs of the community.

Using CErN resulted in the following outcomes:

- Increased involvement of community members as research participants and as voices who directly influence research priorities.
- Increased trust between researchers and community members and partners led to more

relevant research, such as addressing the many barriers to health care accessibility among community members.

- Applying CErN to develop an infrastructure that addresses health barriers takes time, resources, commitment, and continual involvement of all parties involved. Goals must be aligned with both parties, and transparency between researchers and community members is vital.

This study revealed how CErN can be used to fully engage a community by developing and adapting models or infrastructure and increase research equity. When the community is involved in the beginning and help with the initial research questions and problems, findings are generally more relevant and adherence to subsequent guidelines are more likely among members. However, there are some challenges of using CErN, such as ensuring research outcomes are truly benefiting the community, but if community partners and members are involved from the beginning, this is more likely. Power imbalances can also be an issue, and to create and implement programs that address health inequities requires vast financial resources and time commitment (Stewart et al. 2015).

Regardless of approach, there are several research methods that can be used to collect data. First, qualitative methods are employed to gather in-depth data to produce a nuanced understanding of a community. Qualitative methods involve interviews that allow researchers to extensively explore experiences of community members, focus groups consisting of community members for researchers to better understand community concerns, and participant observation that involves observing community dynamics and relationships (Wallerstein *et al.* 2018). Another qualitative method involves using visuals, such as photographs and art, to represent the experiences of community members. This approach has been mainly used to gather information from underrepresented groups, thereby enabling such groups to express their needs (Wang and Burris, 1997). Second, quantitative methods are used to collect information on a larger number of people to examine trends and patterns. The most used quantitative method are surveys, generally written by the research team, are used to examine perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of community members. Other methods include experimental designs and epidemiological research used to examine community-level health data (Belone, Lucero, Duran, *et al.* 2016).

Third, a commonly used method in community-based research involves triangulation or utilizing mixed method, which would incorporate surveys or experiments with interviews, observations, and/or focus groups. Mixed methods enable for a deeper understanding of community processes, as it pairs the in-depth information obtained from interviews and observations with the patterns and trends obtained from quantitative methods like surveys (Creswell, Clark, and Garrett 2008). Fourth, there are methods that are unique to community-based research, such as participatory action research and community forums and deliberative methods. Participatory action research involves a direct link between research findings and policy with an emphasis on planning and action and the involvement of community members as part of the research team. Community forums and deliberative methods derive information from workshops, town hall meetings, and other community information to develop a research plan (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006; Cargo and Mercer 2008). Table 2 illustrates the main similarities and distinctions between the most used community-based research approaches – CBPR and CEnR. Table 2 also presents distinctions between the three most used data collection methods – Quantitative, qualitative, and triangulation.

Although there are many strengths using community-based research, these researchers must

consider several ethical issues that can negatively impact communities and their citizens. Researchers are outsiders to the communities they study, which can lead to tensions if researchers do not understand community culture and norms and those who are a part of the community may feel conflicted sharing information with researchers and being cognizant of other community members’ feelings. Such tensions can also be a result of power imbalances between researchers and community members. Power imbalances refer to researchers having more resources, training, and power compared to community members and partners. This is an issue as it may result in community needs not being addressed and researchers prioritizing academic goals over the community (Mikesell, Bromley, and Khodyakov 2013).

Community-based research must navigate consent issues because consent is traditionally obtained from an individual, thus, how to acquire community level consent can be a challenge. Moreover, researchers who are a part of the community, which would be the case in participant observational research, must consider maintaining proper boundaries. This is challenging for researchers who take on a participant role and may also be a fellow peer to community members (Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift 2018). Communities that are small or tight-knit poses a risk to confidentiality because of shared-knowledge among

**Table 2: Main Similarities and Distinctions between CBPR and CEnR and Distinctions between Data Collection Methods**

CBPR		CEnR			
<b>Main Similarities</b>					
Establishes trust among collaborators		Establishes trust among collaborators			
Applies outcomes to create an improved community		Applies outcomes to create an improved community			
<b>Main Distinctions</b>					
Collaboration where all parties are equally involved in the research process.		Collaboration where researcher involvement can be equal to minimal role			
Applies outcomes to create appropriate interventions for the community.		Applies outcomes in the community of practice and to create policy. Emphasizes needs assessment, determines best practices, standards, and improving the community.			
Quantitative		Qualitative		Triangulation	
<b>Main Distinctions</b>					
Uses numerical data and statistics.		Uses narratives and descriptions, or written data		Uses both numerical and written data	
Mainly uses surveys, but other methods include experiments and epidemiological research.		Uses interviews, focus groups, participant observation, documents, photographs and other art		Combines quantitative methods with qualitative methods.	
Results in information on a larger number of people to examine patterns and trends.		Results in an in-depth understanding of community dynamics.		Results in a deeper understanding of community processes	

members and overlapping roles within the community. The nature of this type of community dynamic heightens the risk of exposing negative or sensitive information of participants (Strike, Guta, de Prinse *et al.* 2018).

Issues of data ownership arise in community-based research, and several questions must be considered. For example, agreement should be reached between the research team, community partners, and participants on who owns the data, how it will be used, how it will be disseminated and how the data will be shared. Transparency and clearly specified agreements on data usage are essential to avoid exploiting communities for the researcher's gain (Mikesell, Bromley, and Khodyakov 2013). Researchers who conduct community-based research may face conflict between adhering to scientific rigor and adapting the methodology to meet community needs and preferences. Some methodologies are not practical in community settings; thus, researchers must be flexible and adapt accordingly (Buchanan, Miller, and Wallerstein 2007).

### **PART III: CHALLENGES, ISSUES, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Communities vary widely, where some communities are characterized by healthy dimensions that support their citizens, while others face issues and problems. Such dimensions and elements depend on the type of community, including whether it is an urban or rural community, or a virtual community. Prior to delving into the problems and challenges faced by such communities, it is important to understand what creates a healthy community.

According to the Blandin Foundation (n.d.), a healthy community involves a place where its citizens' needs are met and where the community can work together to promote growth and securing a positive future. Healthy communities share nine commonalities that emphasize investment, participation, diversity, sustainability, safety and security, providing essential services, strong leadership, respect, and opportunities.

Healthy communities must invest in schools and community programs that foster learning and growth for citizens of all ages to fully participate in their communities, state, region, country, and globally (Cannon *et al.* 2018; Geelhoed *et al.* 2022). Encouraging organizations and the local government to seek out and inspire people to participate in the

planning, decisions, and events that impact their community is another important characteristic shared by healthy communities, along with practicing inclusivity and respecting diversity (Craig *et al.* 2024; Nanda *et al.* 2023). Research suggests communities who respect their citizens by supporting personal and cultural differences results in wellness in the community (Powers *et al.* 2019; Wells, Breckenridge, and Linder 2020).

Beyond investing in learning opportunities and inspiring citizens, healthy communities need to also invest in environmental quality and natural resources to create a sustainable future. This means communities ensure the proper management of environmental resources and a high level of commitment to work with environmental agencies, farmers and agricultural resources, and properly planning for the best use of natural resources (Danielsen *et al.* 2022; Hartman *et al.* 2021).

Healthy communities emphasize the important of safety and security of both members and institutions, such as investing in fire, police, and EMTs. Addressing violence is also key, and communities aim to address any issues related to crime by supporting victims and tackling the problem at the root cause to stop any future violence (Ross *et al.* 2024). In the same vein, communities need to provide citizens with essential health and social services, sufficient infrastructure, utilities that provide sanitary living conditions, and telecommunication capabilities. Even though providing services are vital, communities must also ensure its' members have accessibility to what they need through these services (Alcaraz, Vereen, and Burnham 2020; Del Rio *et al.* 2017; Nelson *et al.* 2021). In addition to essential services, healthy communities should also provide various recreational opportunities to their citizens of all ages, abilities, and interests. Examples of such opportunities include, but are not limited to athletic complexes, art museums and theatres, public parks and playgrounds, biking and hiking trails, cultural programs, and hosting cultural festivals (Jones, Kimberlee, Deave and Evans 2013; Sonke *et al.* 2025; Xu, Wheeler, and Zuo 2022).

For communities to be considered healthy and promote the wellness of its citizens, a sustainable economy must be maintained that does not sacrifice natural resources or exploits its members. For example, communities must provide economic opportunities for citizens to participate in gainful employment (Kammer-Kerwick, Takasaki, Kellison, and

Sternberg 2022). To achieve this and many of the elements discussed above, healthy communities need to implement a strong government and leadership base. Strong government and leadership are cultivated by ensuring elected offices are not held by the same group of people each voting cycle. Elections must be held regularly and there must be set term limits enabling members with diverse backgrounds and skillsets to run and hold office (Malcolm *et al.* 2023).

While healthy communities share these above-listed characteristics, many communities also face challenges and problems that prohibit health and growth. Different types of communities present with their own unique issues. For example, urban communities tend to experience several common issues, such as overcrowding, heavy traffic, air and noise pollution, higher crime, homelessness, gentrification, and aging infrastructure systems. Therefore, residents in urban communities may face a lack of safety due to crime, a lack of clean air to breathe, inadequate housing, and inadequate water supply and sewer systems. As a result, citizens experience poor health outcomes, such as respiratory illnesses, anxiety, and depression and eroded social well-being, including mistrust of other community members and officials (Journalism University 2023).

However, rural communities tend to experience a lack of access to various needed services. For instance, rural citizens lack access to health care services with fewer hospitals, clinics, and doctors located in rural communities (Gizaw, Astale, and Kassie 2022). Moreover, there are limited educational opportunities with smaller schools, fewer teachers, fewer enrichment programs (Mattingly and Schaefer 2021), and there is a lack of employment opportunities with fewer industries located in rural areas. Thus, rural communities tend to be impoverished (Tickamyer and Duncan 2019). Like urban communities, rural communities experience challenges with transportation and infrastructure. Rural areas tend to lack public transportation resulting in citizens having to travel several miles to access services. This contributes to a lack of accessibility. Rural communities also typically experience underfunded and neglected infrastructure, including roads, utilities, water systems, and poor internet and cell phone coverage (TRIP 2020; Rural Health Information Hub 2025). While creating a digital divide that limits opportunities, it also creates further inaccessibility to healthcare and other needed services with the increased use of telehealth or telemedicine and other agencies that rely on various online

applications (Haley, Martinez, Sanchez, and Scavette 2024).

## Community Development

The first educational program devoted to community development was established at Earlham College in 1947 (Lyon, 1989). Since then, many more educational programs and thousands of organizations (community development corporations) have been created to initiate community development. An important contribution of community development is the recognition that community is more than just a collection of buildings and other physical features of an area; that community development also involves a collection of people who face common issues and have an underutilized capacity for improvement (Pittman and Phillips, 2009).

Community development contains three components: Process, task, and outcome. Process refers to the creation and enhancement of community members' ability to act together as a group. For example, educating people on how to work together to solve a problem. Outcome refers to the improvement in some aspect of the community, resulting from action (Pittman and Phillips, 2009). For example, an outcome could be improving the health and wellbeing of community members. Task refers to the particular action, in the form of a tangible goal, which creates the outcome (Lyon, 1989). The building of a hospital is a tangible goal that will achieve the desired outcome of improving the health and wellbeing of community members. Moreover, community development is a value-laden exercise that everyone might not see as desirable. For example, everyone might not like the clearing of a forest to build the hospital (Lyon 1989).

When deciding to engage in community development, one of three approaches is typically taken. These approaches are self-help, conflict, and technical assistance. The self-help approach is used by a community when they are engaging in self-determination. Community members decide for themselves what the needs of the community are, how they are going to address those needs, and then they engage in the action necessary to meet those needs. The role of an outside community development agent is very limited in this situation (Lyon 1989). For example, in Chicago IL, an African American community used the self-help approach to address health and food issues. They decided to build greenhouses for growing fresh foods. This effort would assist residents with

acquiring not only food supplies, but as a healthy alternative to processed food, fast food, and “junk” food (Anderson *et al.* 2019).

The conflict approach is taken when the community perceives that there is an injustice occurring within or to the community. If an outside agent is invited to assist the community, he/she will identify the important characteristics of the community and help mobilize community interest in creating social change. There will also be efforts to reinforce or replace an existing organization with a new, stronger one, to initiate and win a confrontation with an opponent, and create away to deliver improved outcomes (Lyon 1989). For instance, Sacramento, CA, city officials began building a basketball arena which threatened to displace some

residents and increase housing costs of other residents in the area. Leaders from PICO California organized residents and faith leaders in the affected community, to confront Sacramento Kings NBA team owners, construction workers, and other officials involved in the project. The affected community was able to bargain with the stakeholders for a guaranteed allotment of new jobs being created by the facility, in exchange for the project moving forward quietly (Berkeley Bridging & Power Project 2023).

Technical assistance involves the expertise of outsiders who can provide guidance and evaluate community processes. Some examples of where technical expertise may be needed are economic development (recruiting new industry and employment

**Table 3: Features Needed for Community Building**

Features	Explanation	Reference
Shared identity	Shared identity created through interaction or stories	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Shared purpose	Community affiliates with a cooperative “why” or task	Claridge (2018)
Common objectives	Community coordinates actions to meet common goals	Claridge (2018)
Shared interests	Members interact based on shared interests, collective norms, or challenges	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Sense of belonging	Members feel they are accepted by others in the community	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Trust others	Members rely on each other with assurance	Moorman, Zaitman, and Deshpande (1992)
Effective communication	Transparent discussions that foster inclusion and coordination	Gardner (1990)
Interaction opportunities	Consistent face-to-face or meaningful interaction which reinforces and maintains social bonds	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Collective decision making	Members have an influence on group decisions	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Meeting member needs	Community satisfies practical and emotional necessities	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Quality leadership	Community leaders express community values, inspire and guide members, and buttress identity	Duran (2021)
Capacity building	Communities foster member skills and encourage collective agency	Claridge (2018)
Respect for diversity	Communities are enriched by the inclusion of different perspectives and identities.	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Empathy for others	Members align with other members and understand each other's experiences	Baek and Parkinson (2022)
Positive environment	Members participate because the community is safe, and their identity is affirmed	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Shared emotional connection	Bonds between members transpire via shared experiences and history.	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Relationships with larger institutions that transcend the community (Linking)	Communities linked to other institutions, including schools, churches, and government agencies or NGOs for mutual support	Hawkins and Maurer (2010)
Relationships with other communities for resources (Bridging)	Partnership and shared identity across communities encourage solidarity	United Way of the National Capital Area (2024)
Sense of control over the environment	Members feel permitted to form their community area	McMillan and Chavis (1986)
Collective action	Members rally together toward mutual purposes	McMillan and Chavis (1986)

to the community), social service provision (implementing fire services), and coordinating existing services (vocational training and workforce placement programs). In this situation, the outside expert is heavily involved in the development process (Lyon, 1989). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provided assistance to communities in creating green infrastructure during 2012-2015. The City of Atlanta received assistance from the EPA to revitalize part of Boone Boulevard. This area was run-down and frequently experienced flooding during storms. A green street redesign, complete with roadway improvements, was implemented. Other locales receiving EPA-assistance included Phoenix, AZ, Los Angeles and Santa Monica, CA, Denver, CO, and Clarkesville, GA. Projects ranged from green infrastructure to brownfield redevelopment, code review, and cost-benefit assessments. More information on the EPA-assisted projects can be found at Green Infrastructure Resources website of the EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2010).

Some of the activities that community members and/or their experts can engage in are asset building; visioning and strategic planning; establishing community-based organizations; developing community leadership abilities and skills; mapping, surveys and assessments; workforce training and development; retaining and expanding existing businesses; creating entrepreneurship opportunities; obtaining grants and other financial sources; and sustainability efforts (Pittman and Philips, 2009). Table 3 includes a summary of the needed features to build community development.

#### **PART IV: INTERFACING COMMUNITIES & SHARED GOVERNANCE**

Communities do not exist in a vacuum. They interface with the cities, the county, and the state that houses them creating a shared governance, and communities also interface with the social institutions that serve them. Given communities interact with different government levels and social institutions, this interfacing is quite complex involving three levels: Individual, organizational or local, and national and global. The relationship between communities and cities is reciprocal, as cities provide support and ways to foster civic engagement, provide resources, implement infrastructure, and enact city ordinances and municipal codes, but communities and their residents can shape and influence local governments. Thus, citizens, or the individual level, of a community can

voice what matters to them and where they live, impacting decisions on education, public safety, and community development at the local or organizational level. The city provides a community with a local government that helps to build, expand, and protect it, but the community's voice regarding needs is recognized and acknowledged. Public services are offered, and infrastructure is maintained by local and county level government agencies (local or organizational level), resulting in fulfilling community level needs (individual level) as community needs are that of its residents (Feiock 2013; Local Government in North Carolina 2021).

The shared governance between cities and the communities within them tend to be mutually supportive through hosting events to enhance community development, providing grant funding, and the means to increase civic engagement. Civic engagement is vital for a positive community and is achieved through having a shared governance involving not only the local government, but also state and federal governments. Specific examples of how the local government engages with communities are hosting public meetings and hearings, utilizing social media, sending e-mails, and disseminating online surveys to gather opinions and feedback from community members, and to share city and/or community updates. If a city level government can promote civic engagement via a major online presence, shared governance between communities and cities becomes more feasible (Hemings, 2025).

Communities also have a shared governance with the county and state levels of government by overseeing public services and infrastructure that serve rural or unincorporated areas that lack services provided by the local government (Feiock 2013). However, many county and state level governments work with community-based organizations to develop and fund various programs. Moreover, communities become vessels for higher level government agencies. State, county and local governments use communities to reach citizens to share issues, whether its political campaigning, public service announcements, or opportunities for communities to grow. Shared governance among all levels of government and communities is also vital because services depend on intergovernmental funding and accountability is generally the responsibility of the county and/or state (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015).

Shared governance means local governments must include state policy mandates and laws into their local

policies and ordinances. Additionally, shared governance means communities impact county, regional, and state level agencies and governing bodies. Communities are involved with county planning and zoning through hearing and advisory committees, and regional organizations integrate community needs with county and state level needs (Ansell and Gash 2008). Community members also elect officials to represent them at the city (city councils), county (county boards and positions, such as judges), and state (state legislature) levels. Thus, citizens of communities can directly participate to influence the decisions of local, county, and state governments, the development and delivery of services, and the planning and zoning of areas that impact the community. Communities can form alliance groups to impact all levels, but communities are also given the means to formally provide their input and feedback (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 2010).

Finally, communities interface with the social institutions that either directly serve them or are a part of the community fabric, such as the family, government, business and the economy, health care services, and education or schools. Interactions with social institutions also involve the individual, local/organization level, and national/global levels. Social institutions provide society with the policies and norms that shape how individual and local levels operate, yet modified policies and norms are generally the result of individual or group level social movements that typically enact positive change. Families are considered the foundation of communities, given families are a support system that provides members material and emotional support. Moreover, families are intertwined with other social institutions in the community since the health care system and schools offer extended care to families and community members (Berkman and Kawachi 2000). The family as a social institution has set norms on how a family should or should not function, which has impacts on all levels – individual, organizational, and national/global. Schools not only teach and socialize children in the community based on national level standards, schools, including universities, often establish partnerships with the community through creating events, courses, and other projects. Schools, as an institutional at the local and national levels, also benefit from the individual level as the community citizens will support, advocate, and invest in their educational quality by serving on school boards and the Parent Teaching Organization (PTOs) (Epstein 2011).

Another example of interaction at the individual, organizational/local, and national/global levels is health care. Communities rely on health care as a social institution for keeping its residents healthy, and by providing access to care via local clinics and hospitals. Also, public health campaigns at the state/national/global level will target communities to address the health needs of residents, such as mental health, disease outbreaks, or addiction (Israel 1998). Communities are vital for the growth of small, local businesses, which has positive impacts on the local economy. Local and county level government agencies support such businesses with grants and tax breaks. Reciprocally, businesses also provide jobs and services that sustain communities and their citizens (Porter and Kramer 2011).

## CONCLUSION

This paper provided an extensive overview of communities and community research, thus revealing the importance of communities not only for the people who live in them, but for society as a whole. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to provide an in-depth exploration of communities in the U.S. utilizing an extensive literature review. The unique contribution of this review is an in-depth illustration of the many aspects and issues pertaining to communities. These aspects and issues include: The definitions presented in the literature; its decades long history that discussed important contributors such as Durkheim, the Chicago School of Sociology, the Lynds, and Dahl; the different types of communities from urban, rural, and virtual; the important social and physical features of communities; how communities are studied and the various methodologies utilized; the salient features in community building and orientations to community development; and a discussion of community connections to other socio-spatial units and institutions within itself.

While this overview of communities is extensive, there are some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, an in-depth discussion of the different kinds of projects that communities can focus upon in community development are not presented. Second, a step-by-step discussion of how community research can be conducted is not presented. Finally, the focus of this paper has been on American communities from a sociological viewpoint, however given the multitude of aspects that impact communities, other disciplines need to be involved, such as health and healthcare, public health, social work, education, geography,

history, political science, psychology, engineering, urban development and planning, agriculture, and rural studies. This overview shows that community studies involve a myriad of issues that should be addressed using an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach.

Future studies could involve an examination of the histories and issues facing certain community types, such as the black community, border communities, and other marginalized communities. Moreover, community is a topic that requires an interdisciplinary approach to address the many issues and challenges present in many communities. Thus, future research should involve more interdisciplinary and collaborative research, not just among scholars, but for community stakeholders and residents as well. For example, to increase health literacy and education for those living in disadvantaged communities, research collaborations between health and healthcare, public health, social work, and sociology, in conjunction with community members, can determine the best practices and programs to implement based on cultural competency and the specific needs of these individual communities. Future research should also explore the role of digital communities within place-based communities (e.g., community social media sites and other community-based websites) and how technology has either positively or negatively impacted different communities (e.g., the digital divide, how make technology more accessible to marginalized communities, and how virtual or digital communities can create social cohesion and be an important means to build communities).

Given this paper's focus on U.S. communities, a second paper in this journal's issue solely examines communities from an international perspective, specifically investigating Europe, Asia, African, South and Latin America. While some aspects of communities overlap across all world continents, there are fundamental differences as well. To address these differences, this second paper also utilizes an extensive literature review to examine how communities are defined, the different types of communities in these regions, the methodologies used, challenges and issues, and how communities interface with other social institutions and governments, but from an international perspective

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Received on 15-09-2025

Accepted on 26-11-2025

Published on 08-12-2025

<https://doi.org/10.65879/3070-6335.2025.01.07>

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