



ADVANCING A CANADA-WIDE STRATEGY FOR BELONGING

BRIEF 7: CULTURAL CONNECTION AND BELONGING

Written by Danya Pastuszek, Erika Massoud, Jorge Garza, Justin Williams, and Nathan Li

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When people can express their cultural identities through language, food, land, arts, and storytelling, communities become more connected, resilient, and equitable. When they cannot, the costs are borne by individuals and communities alike.

The data reflects this clearly. [Less than half of people in Canada \(48%\)](#) report a strong sense of belonging to their local community. Among newcomers, the share who report feeling part of and participating in society has dropped from 90% in 2022–23 to 79.7% in 2024–25, according to [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada \(IRCC\)](#). Structural support and cultural connection are both essential to belonging, and both remain underinvested. Many newcomers still face significant barriers to legal status, housing, and employment. At the same time, the cultural conditions that foster belonging are equally underfunded. Addressing one without the other will not produce lasting belonging.

This brief, the seventh in a series supporting the call for a [Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging](#), makes the case that cultural connection is foundational to community wellbeing, not an optional addition to policy frameworks. It presents four key findings, a set of data-driven questions, a story of community-led action from the Kahnawà:ke First Nation, and four concrete recommendations for policymakers, funders, sector leaders, and advocates ready to act.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

This brief establishes cultural connection and identity as foundational pillars of a Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging, and as the conditions that allow communities to connect, contribute, and thrive together.

Cultural connection encompasses the ways people express who they are through language, food, land, arts, and storytelling. When these expressions are supported, communities become more connected, resilient, and equitable. When they are not, costs such as social isolation, civic disengagement, and relational poverty are borne by individuals and communities alike.

Grounded in an asset-based approach and a commitment to equity and anti-racism, this brief highlights how celebrating cultural identities, including those of Indigenous Peoples, Black communities, racialized groups, 2SLGBTQ+ communities, newcomers, and official language minority communities, moves policy conversations toward active co-ownership and shared leadership. It is designed to support policymakers, sector leaders, and advocates in taking action.

KEY FINDINGS

CULTURAL BELONGING IS DECLINING, PARTICULARLY AMONG NEWCOMERS

The gap between initial settlement and cultural belonging is growing. According to [IRCC departmental data](#), the percentage of newcomers who report feeling a part of and participating in society has declined from 90% in 2022–23 to 87.5% in 2023–24, and further to 79.7% in 2024–25.

This trend points to an opportunity to evolve how policy and funding support the settlement ecosystem. In Canada, federal (IRCC) and provincial governments fund settlement services, but they generally do not deliver them directly. Community-based organizations, such as [Local Immigration Partnerships](#) like the [Peel Newcomer Strategy Group](#), lead the frontline work of helping newcomers navigate complex administrative systems, legal status, housing, and employment.

Settlement supports provide a vital starting point for newcomers as they establish themselves, recognizing that belonging is an ongoing journey. Sustaining belonging requires ongoing investment in relational infrastructure: creating opportunities for individuals to express their identities, build cross-cultural connections, and feel genuinely seen, valued, and safe in their new communities.

LANGUAGE IS A VEHICLE FOR BELONGING

Language shapes how people think, connect, and access power. In Canada, this is reflected in a [vast linguistic landscape](#) that ranges from [more than 60 Indigenous languages](#) rooted in land, identity, and knowledge systems, to [official language minority communities](#), newcomers, and [allophones](#). This diversity also includes [sign languages](#) as well as accessible communication formats, such as [Braille](#) and non-verbal communication systems. Hearing one's language or using one's primary mode of communication in public life communicates inclusion. When these modes of expression are suppressed or absent, people are isolated, not only from services, but from their own sense of belonging.

Language and accessible communication are not merely tools; they are vital sources of identity, dignity, and social connection.

CULTURAL PRACTICES ARE A FORM OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Some of the most effective tools for building cultural belonging are the ones least likely to appear in a formal policy framework: a shared meal, a community ceremony, a land-based gathering, or a story passed down across generations.

Across the Tamarack Institute's work with member communities, these practices consistently emerge as vehicles for trust, connection, and identity. In [housing co-operatives](#), sharing meals and diverse cultural experiences has helped members build bonds and reduce isolation. In Laval, a [community bread oven](#) inspired by a newcomer's cultural traditions became a catalyst for neighbourhood connection. These are not informal add-ons to community life. They are forms of social infrastructure that build trusted relationships and shared experiences, enabling belonging to happen repeatedly and sustainably.

The bread oven story illustrates how cultural policy frameworks often overlook the way cultural practices build connection across communities, not only within them. Robert Putnam's [distinction](#) between bonding social capital (connections within shared groups) and bridging social capital (connections across different groups) is useful here. For a pluralistic society to thrive, it needs bridging capital; without it, cultural diversity can lead to isolated silos rather than meaningful connection. When Lenka introduced a bread-making tradition from her homeland into the parks of Laval, she opened it as an invitation. That is what cultural connection as bridging looks like in practice.

Cultural practices do not happen in a vacuum. For generations, the cultural practices of many First Nations communities were actively banned, not simply underfunded. The [Potlatch](#), central to many First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast, was prohibited under the Indian Act from 1885 to 1951. The consequences of that ban, including disruptions to cultural transmission and the loss of ceremonial belongings, continue to shape communities today. Embedding cultural connection into policy means recognizing and addressing these historical and structural inequities directly.

FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT-LED CULTURAL REVITALIZATION STRENGTHENS COMMUNITY WELLBEING

Connecting First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youth to their cultures through language, land, food, ceremony, and art directly improves outcomes in mental health, educational engagement, community pride, and belonging. Across the Tamarack Institute's [Communities Building Youth Futures](#) network, this pattern is consistent. In Kahnawà:ke First Nation, a youth-led traditional food program reconnected students with their ancestral practices and transformed classroom engagement. At Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, a [youth-led radio station](#) brought youth voices and language to the airwaves. In [Yellowknife](#), intergenerational land-based gatherings supported youth identity and social connection. Cultural connection is a living, community-led strategy for belonging, health, and identity, one that must be designed and led by FNMI communities themselves.

KEY QUESTIONS

1

What would it look like for policymakers and funders to recognize cultural connection as a core investment, alongside housing, employment, and education? What frameworks, indicators, and funding mechanisms would need to shift to make this possible?

Recognizing cultural connection as a core investment requires treating it as essential social infrastructure, bridging the gap between material support (housing, jobs) and community cohesion. To operationalize this shift, policymakers and funders must update key tools:

- Frameworks and indicators: Expanding existing national tools, such as Statistics Canada's [Quality of Life Framework](#), to track cultural safety, inter-group trust, and gathering frequency alongside standard economic metrics.
- Funding mechanisms: Transitioning from short-term, project-based event grants toward multi-year core operational funding for cultural hubs, gathering spaces, and [relational](#) programs.

2

How can institutions create space for cultural expression across languages, traditions, and identities? What does creating welcoming communities look like in practice?

Institutions create welcoming spaces by shifting their role from sole decision-makers to enablers of community-led priorities. In practice, this means embedding co-design and shared governance into institutional funding and planning processes.

For example, the Region of Waterloo implemented a trust-based [participatory grantmaking model](#) that positioned First Nations, Inuit and Métis, African, Caribbean and Black, and racialized community members as direct decision makers. This enabled over 40 cultural events attended by more than 10,000 people, alongside housing supports, culturally relevant

services, and mental health programming. A Social Return on Investment evaluation of this model demonstrated a 2.4x return on an initial \$4.1 million investment, a compelling case for co-designed, community-led approaches to foster cultural belonging.

3

How do we measure cultural belonging, and who is being left out of current data?

Belonging is difficult to measure, in part because the tools we have were not designed with cultural connection in mind. Existing frameworks, including Canada's Quality of Life Framework, provide a useful starting point. However, aggregate data alone cannot tell us whether people feel they can express their full cultural identity in the places where they live, work, and gather.

Developing disaggregated measures, broken down by cultural identity, language, FNMI identity, newcomer status, and generational status (including 1.5 and second-generation Canadians, who often report distinct belonging challenges but do not show up in standard newcomer data) would allow governments and organizations to identify who is experiencing belonging and who is not, and why, to direct resources more effectively.

This kind of data is not only useful for evaluation. It is a tool for accountability. When governments commit to cultural connection as a policy priority, they need indicators that can track whether that commitment is producing change.

4

How does fostering belonging and cultural connection among youth impact their long-term wellbeing, and how can institutions support this?

Cultural connection is a powerful vehicle for youth belonging. When young people feel valued in public life, isolation gives way to civic pride and personal resilience. Findings from the Communities Building Youth Futures network show that cultural practices, ranging from land-based learning to creative arts, serve as vital entry points for youth engagement and holistic wellbeing. To embed cultural connection and belonging into youth policy, practitioners should execute three actions:

- Prioritize intergenerational knowledge sharing: Support programs that bridge youth and Elders to preserve traditions, languages, and cultural identity.
- Fund cultural hubs: Provide sustained core funding for local spaces where youth can gather, create, and build connections.
- Embed youth governance: Ensure youth co-design and lead local initiatives, shifting institutional roles from program providers to enablers of community vision.

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNITY IN ACTION: RECONNECTING KANIENT'KEHÁ:KA YOUTH TO THEIR FOOD, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Context: In Kahnawà:ke, a Kanien'kehá:ka community in Quebec, colonial systems disrupted young people's connection to ancestral food traditions. Recognizing that traditional food ways are foundational to cultural connection, local leaders sought a hands-on way to revitalize these practices for youth.

From idea to action: Over one school year, 200 students at Karonhianónhnha Tsi lonterihwaienstákhwa, a school in Kahnawà:ke, participated in an immersive seed-to-table experience that included planting, preserving, hunting, cooking, and eating traditional foods. The impact was immediate and profound. Students who struggled with behavioural issues in standard classroom settings became some of the most involved and attentive participants in the greenhouse and kitchen. When students brought traditional meals home, parents and families actively engaged, even participating in workshops like moose hide skinning and tanning to honour sustainable practices. Following its initial success, the program secured additional funding to continue serving future generations of Kanien'kehá:ka students. This initiative demonstrates how community-led cultural connections serve as vital social infrastructure, turning traditional knowledge into a living vehicle for belonging.

LEARN MORE

PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

To systematically embed cultural connection into local, provincial, and Canada-wide policy priorities, policymakers and civic leaders can take three concrete actions:

Name cultural connection explicitly in belonging and wellbeing strategies.

Cultural expression through language, food, arts, ceremony, and land is a core dimension of belonging. Action plans and strategies that address belonging, health, housing, or poverty reduction can strengthen their impact by naming cultural connection as a priority and committing resources to the conditions that enable it. This includes integrating disaggregated data on perceived cultural acceptance and connection into standard evaluation criteria.

Recognize and fund cultural spaces as essential social infrastructure. Physical and social gathering spaces, such as community kitchens, cultural hubs, language centers, and land-based learning sites, are as vital to community resilience as transit or housing. Rather than viewing cultural activities as optional recreation, governments and funders must treat community-led cultural infrastructure as a core public asset. Investing in accessible, multi-use spaces allows communities to gather, build inter-group trust, and foster everyday belonging.

Broaden how we measure belonging to include cultural connection. Existing policy tools, including Canada's Quality of Life Framework, provide a valuable starting point, but aggregate indicators alone cannot capture the full picture of cultural belonging. While federal programs frequently commit to delivering holistic supports for individuals, these supports must explicitly recognize cultural connection and identity as core components of wellbeing. Organizations and governments can begin this work by developing disaggregated data broken down by cultural identity, language, FNMI identity, and newcomer status. These measures help identify who is experiencing belonging and who is not, the reasons behind it, and allow resources to be directed more effectively.

Transition to long-term, trust-based, and flexible funding models. Short-term, project-based grant cycles undermine the sustainability of cultural initiatives. Funders and governments should adopt multi-year, flexible resourcing that provides operational stability for community-led initiatives across FNMI, newcomer, and equity-denied groups. Crucially, funding models must yield governance and decision-making power to the communities themselves, allowing them to direct resources according to their self-identified priorities without burdensome administrative conditions.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The questions below are designed to foster dialogue within your team, network, or community planning table. They can be adapted for groups of any size.

- **Part 1: Setting the Stage** offers general prompts to break the ice and get people talking about the intersections between belonging and cultural connection.
- **Part 2: Deep Dive** provides questions to help you reflect further on the ideas outlined in this brief.

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE

Suggested time: 20–30 minutes

- Think of a cultural practice (a food, a language, a tradition, or a gathering) that has shaped your sense of who you are. How has it connected you to others or to a place?
- Think of a space or moment where you felt genuinely welcomed, as yourself, with your full identity. What made that possible?
- Looking at the communities you work with, whose cultural practices are reflected in your programs, spaces, and services? Whose are not?

PART 2: DEEP DIVE

Suggested time: 30–45 minutes

- This brief argues that cultural practices are social infrastructure. How does that reframe what "infrastructure" means in your work?
- The data shows that newcomers' sense of belonging has declined recently. What does that tell us about current policy approaches?
- The story about Kahnawà:ke shows what community-led cultural connection looks like in practice. What would it take to create similar conditions to further cultural connection in your context?
- What is one policy change (local, provincial, or federal) that would most meaningfully advance cultural connection as a dimension of belonging where you work?

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- Global Centre for Pluralism (2023): [*Canada Monitor Report.*](#)
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- Braille Literacy Canada (2026): [Learn About Braille.](#)
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TAMARACK INSTITUTE'S RESOURCES:

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- Blog (2026): [Blueprinting Belonging: How Local Efforts Spark a Canada-wide Movement.](#)
- Blog (2026): [Reflecting on Loving Lessons from Our Equity Journey.](#)
- Blog (2026): [Reflections on Belonging: Montreal 2025 Roundtables.](#)
- Case Study (2026): [Region of Waterloo: Advancing Equity Through Trust-Based, Participatory Grantmaking.](#)
- Resource Page (2026): [Advancing a Canada-wide Strategy for Belonging.](#)

- Resource Page (2026): [Communities Building Belonging.](#)
- Resource Page (2026): [Community Acknowledgments.](#)
- Resource Page (2026): [Equity & Anti-Racism.](#)
- Tool (2026): [The Equity Card Deck.](#)
- Article (2025): [Building Belonging Through Linguistic Justice.](#)
- Article (2025): [Building Equitable Collaborations for Systems Transformation.](#)
- Blog (2025): [Belonging Beyond Borders: Building Bridges on Refugee Rights Day.](#)
- Blog (2025): [Engaging Equity-Denied Groups in Ethical and Community-Rooted Ways.](#)
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- Blog (2025): [Reflections on Seasonal Planning and Decolonized Practices.](#)
- Blog (2025): [Supporting Our Wellbeing as Racialized Equity Practitioners.](#)
- Case Study (2025): [Co-Discovering Belonging with the Tri-Cities Intergenerational Belonging Project.](#)
- Report (2025): [Forging a Future of Belonging: Building Awareness and Will for a Canada-wide Strategy.](#)
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OUR APPROACH TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Tamarack uses artificial intelligence thoughtfully to support aspects of our work while maintaining human oversight, community voice, transparency and accountability. We are committed to being transparent about how we use AI, where we choose not to use it, and the tensions we are navigating as these technologies evolve.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TAMARACK USES AI](#)