

Bowling Together: Investigating American Community Sustenance and Social Bonds

Nina Morozova
nina.moroz.nik@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In today's political climate, where extreme societal nuclearization are increasingly prevalent, pervasive feelings of loneliness and social disconnection have become prominent and damaging features of American life. While the decay of social capital is extensively documented in contemporary sociology, a critical research gap remains in understanding the specific mechanisms that enable some communities to resist national trends and maintain long-term cohesion. This paper explores the factors sustaining community longevity by identifying the specific motivations that drive individuals to form local collectives and the structural elements that keep them active within a contemporary suburban setting. This research argues that community resilience is not a passive state but a continuous, active practice of collective action, facilitated by a critical symbiosis between residents and local infrastructure, in which small businesses serve as essential social anchors. The investigation was conducted using a qualitative-methods approach in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, integrating qualitative interviews with residents and an ethnographic study of real-time interactions in communal spaces. The findings contribute to social capital debates by identifying core mechanisms that collectively transform a typical neighborhood into a supportive and shared home. This research provides an insider perspective on community sustainability by demonstrating that organic leadership and the intentional preservation of shared communal spaces are the most vital requirements for reversing the current tide of social disintegration.

Keywords: *Neighborhood community, community longevity, third places, social capital, social closeness*

1. INTRODUCTION

With each decade since the 1950s, the United States has shifted its focus from community to individualistic isolation (Putnam, R. D. 2000; Carney 176). All the while, modern “western” society in the 21st century faces systemic problems akin to social disintegration: extreme disunity and nuclearization (AEI Social Capital Project 2018), political and ideological polarization leading to hatred (Carney, T.P. 2019), hopeless class stratification (Social Capital Project 2024), alienation of individuals from the results of their labor (AEI Social Capital Project 2021), a reduction in lively communication (Putnam R.D. 2000; Social Capital Project 18), and the accelerated disintegration of traditional families, kinship, and neighborhood ties (Putnam R.D. 2000). However, in the face of a crisis in the modern concept of global individualism, society has clearly seen a strengthening of countervailing forces that unite people through community-led collective-impact initiatives and neighborhood associations (Riley et al. 2021; Israel et al. 2006; Lohmann 2002)

According to the 2024 American Social Capital Survey, approximately 24 percent of adults with only a high school education report having no close friends, a staggering increase from just 3 percent in 1990 (Cox et al. 2024). In the general population, 7 percent of Americans report the same experience, with this issue disproportionately affecting lower-income groups and those with less formal education. These individuals often live in “civic deserts,” a phenomenon characterized by a lack of social infrastructure, such as parks, libraries, or local establishments that typically serve as hubs for community connection (Cox et al. 2024; Carney T.P. 2019). This scarcity of community space bleeds into issues affecting older generations and homelessness; for example, the share of retiring adults living within 10 miles of a relative fell from 68% in 1994 to 55% in 2014, leaving many to “age alone” (Social Capital Project 2024). Similarly, homelessness is often both a cause and a result of low social capital, as being unhoused further severs individuals from the labor market and personal support networks (Lay et al. 2021). Such vulnerable groups are unable to access informal support due to low levels of community engagement. Also, 70% of college graduates have someone they could borrow \$200 from in an emergency, but only 44% of those without a degree have such a resource (Cox et al. 2024).

Despite the lack of infrastructure, such as “third places” locations where people can interact outside of home or work, and an unfavorable social climate, some communities do not just persevere but thrive in contemporary America (Social Capital Project, *The Geography of Social Capital in America*; Carney 1004, Durand et al. 2025). These communities not only alleviate isolation and polarization but also provide spaces of inclusion for their members (Carney 1097; Richardson 2594; Israel et al. 1028). Such environments improve mood and well-being among older adults (Riley et al. 1520; Social Capital Project, *The Geography of Social Capital in America*), while also providing younger participants with a sense of belonging and civic agency through participation in shared spaces (Durand et al. 1431). Because humans are inherently social and collectivist creatures, they benefit profoundly from belonging to an active community (Putnam 1361; Richardson 2633). This study seeks to answer the question: What mechanisms enable specific communities to maintain long-term cohesion and mutual support in an individualistic

American society, while others dissolve over time? More precisely, it aims to identify the factors that sustain communities, using Lawrenceville Township, NJ, US, as an example.

To achieve this goal, a qualitative-methods approach is employed, including a thorough literature review, to explore the forms of social activity in a typical American urban community that contributes to the community's longevity. The study uses ethnographic methods and interviews, as the researcher is closely associated with the communities under study and will gain greater insight by conducting interviews in their residences. This qualitative approach demonstrates that an insider perspective is just as beneficial as an outsider's. Thus, the research itself becomes more community and connection-centered. In addition to using both ethnographic research and individual interviews to gain insight into local organizations, this paper builds on existing literature. However, while prior research largely focuses on macro-level trends, formal institutions, and policy-driven approaches to social capital, this study examines the everyday, informal mechanisms through which community is actively sustained. Lastly, background information drawn from city archives, cross-referenced with online sources, provides insights on the studied communities to corroborate the ethnographic findings and general information about them. This paper therefore contributes a contemporary, micro-level perspective by emphasizing insights found through observing community area less developed in existing literature.

This paper has 4 significant findings. First, it confirms previously established theory about third spaces and how they aid communal bonding, as shared spaces were integral to day-to-day interactions. Second, it finds that consistent willingness to engage, rather than mere presence, drives community activity. Third, a high level of mutual trust was observed among community members, where individuals regularly support one another. Lastly, the most distinct finding is that small businesses actively participate in social life and function as social anchors, often serving as third spaces in areas with limited formal infrastructure, especially for teens and young adults.

The research results provide insight into specific mechanisms of community longevity such as repeated interaction and where those interactions occur. For instance communal spaces that are run the communities members: small business, libraries, community centers. This is written to possibly help address a fragment of the current nuclearization issues in the United States by providing people with the knowledge to connect more efficiently, without intervening as an outsider, while allowing local leadership to use it most effectively as they see fit.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes research on community longevity in the United States and the factors that contribute to its decline. As America moves forward, the separation and loneliness of its inhabitants become increasingly evident, particularly in the absence of community life (Carney 259; Putnam 1365; AEI Social Capital Project 2018). Understanding the reasons for this decline can inform the criteria for community maintenance, thereby improving the current situation. Using Google Scholar as the primary

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database, this review draws on studies from 2000 to 2024 that cover social capital, third places, community longevity and sustainability, community organizations, and collective action and participation. Studies were explicitly selected to cover the United States to ensure the accurate use of the literature review.

Across this literature, three main themes emerged that structure the current review. The first addresses the evolution and decline of social capital and its effects on America at a broader scale (Putnam 1364; AEI Social Capital Project 2018). The second covers structural and collaborative models for community development, focusing on organizational frameworks and formal association designs to sustain or improve local well-being and community longevity (Lohmann 1287; Riley et al. 1520; Richardson 2587; Israel et al. 176). The third theme focuses on the sociopolitical and pathological consequences of social disintegration (Carney 303; AEI Social Capital Project 201)

Table 1: Selected literature review

Study	Methods	Country	Factors	Findings
Israel et al. (2006)	Qualitative comparative	United States	-Community trust -Sustained community engagement -Leadership and Funding	-Long-term community well-being depends on sustained, equitable community partnerships, not short-term projects. -Loss of funding weakens partnerships unless community trust and institutional backing are already established.
Hildreth, J., et al. (2024).	Qualitative narrative case study	United States	-Community leadership from within -Participation and empowerment -Grassroots decision-making	-Closeness increases when leadership emerges from community members themselves, not external authorities. -Community initiatives fail when participation is symbolic rather than embodied, highlighting the importance of relational, bottom-up leadership for lasting community cohesion.
Riley et al. (2021)	Quantitative	United States "Beach Cities"	-Collective-impact framework -Backbone leadership -Process/program/policy interventions	-Studied city communities showed greater improvements than similar US cities and the national average → meaning employed methods worked -Policy and program changes alone were weaker or negatively associated with short-term well-being without strong community engagement.
Lohmann (2002)	Qualitative	United States	- Grassroots, associations. -Community autonomy	-Neighborhood associations enable residents to address local needs and protect shared interests collectively. -Active associations build social capital, manage shared resources, and strengthen responses to external threats.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Shared local resources -Resident participation and engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Long-term community well-being relies on a bottom-up, neighborhood-level, community-driven organization.
Putnam, R. D. (2000).	Mixed methodology	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Breakdown -Civic Disengagement -Volunteer rates -Attendance at public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community closeness weakened as participation in local, face-to-face groups sharply declined, even while population and education increased. - Decline in traditional community organizations: bowling leagues, PTAs, unions, churches, neighborhood associations
Carney, T. P. (2019).	Mixed methodology	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Absence of Community institutions -Cultural disengagement from institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Social capital is now a “high-end good” accessible mainly to college-educated Americans. -The American Dream requires social capital
AEI Social Capital Project (2018).	Quantitative	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Social capital index -Civic participation (volunteering, group membership) -Community institutions -Geographic inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Low social capital shows breakdowns in community relations, limiting everyday social interaction. -Community closeness failed most severely in areas that reinforce isolation. -Loss of community networks is a key reason communities struggle to recover or act collectively

AEI Social Capital Project (2021).	Quantitative	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Social capital density -Civic participation -Religious and civic institutions -Trust and reciprocity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Communities with high social capital have frequent face-to-face interaction through a third organization -Economic investment alone cannot rebuild a community without restoring local social ties and participatory institutions.
Kirshner and Ginwright (2012)	Qualitative narrative case study	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Youth civic agency -Third spaces -Collective action and voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Community closeness grows when youth are given meaningful roles in collective community action. -“Third spaces,” Foster said, foster closeness, though giving youth a space to engage with one another freely

2.1 EVOLUTION AND DECLINE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital in the US peaked in the early 1960s and fell thereafter (Putnam, 2000; Carney, 2019). According to Putnam (2000), traditional civic group memberships peaked in 1957 and dropped after 1969. This trend shifted from “doing with” community members in person to “doing for” them through staff-led advocacy organizations (Putnam, 2000). Worker-class neighborhoods have the worst “social disintegration” (Carney, 2019). The abandonment of “middle institutions” such as families, local businesses, and churches has led to widespread alienation (Carney, 2019). US social capital patterns are examined analytically in both studies. Putnam (2000) finds a national pattern in American leisure time. In post-industrial and rural locations, Carney (2019) shows the disparity between “elite bubbles” and “social deserts” using 2016 primary election data. The main causes of social atomization differ even when similar techniques are used. Putnam (2000) attributed half of the decline to “generational succession” and virtual entertainment at its center. According to Carney (2019), big government and business have “crowded out” local mediation organizations like community banks and neighborhood charities due to structural overcentralization. Despite agreeing that religious congregations constitute a major source of social capital in America, their remedies to their slow decline disagree (Putnam, 2000; Carney, 2019). Since the religious community is the most accessible source of social capital, its removal generates “social vacancies” for the average citizen. Carney (2019) claims that “unchurching” is a working-class phenomenon. Finally, Carney (2019) claims that the highly educated are self-segregating into homogeneous enclaves, “hoarding” social capital while abandoning other groups, contrary to Putnam (2000).

2.2 STRUCTURAL AND COLLABORATIVE MODELS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Formal “backbone organizations” and collective-impact frameworks that coordinate cross-sector initiatives toward common social goals help establish community development models (Riley et al., 2021). Leadership teams and community coalitions increase population-level well-being more than separate programming efforts (Riley et al., 2021). Sustainable collaboration requires human ties, knowledge capability, and basic infrastructure funding (Israel et al., 2006). Religious “wards” or formal organizational structures institutionalize shared duty and service as “middle layers” of society (Israel et al., 2006; Social Capital Project, 2017). Creating a “third space” gives youth civic agency and collaborative advocacy, according to Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Durand et al., 2025).

In conclusion, leadership is often organic and “praxis-informed” as communities demonstrate social uplift and hospitality (Richardson, 2024). Because it connects individuals to the community and gives them agency, bottom-up leadership is preferred. Study results disagree on the immediate benefits of large-scale policy changes. Riley et al. (2021) found that policy and built-environment changes initially had a negative effect on life evaluation, likely due to community resistance and the time lag required for benefits to accumulate. Israel et al. (2006) argue that translating research findings into institutional policy

is a powerful strategy for long-term sustainability. Israeli et al. (2006) suggest a formal Center framework with specialized personnel to coordinate complex projects and provide technical support. LAsPutnam (2000) does, the Social Capital Project (2017) warns that a shift from a community-based organization to a staffed, professionalized advocacy organization can limit citizen mobilization and decrease social capital. This supports Richardson's (2024) finding that the most resilient community models are authentic and organic to residents.

2.3 THE SOCIAL AND PATHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION

Studies show that the “withering of associational life” is linked to major public health crises, such as the rise in “deaths of despair” from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcoholism. Opioid-related mortality has quadrupled since 1999, reaching record levels. These consequences are related to “social disintegration,” when interpersonal ties break down, creating a “social vacancy” that people often try to fill with drugs. Many of these crises occur in “social capital deserts” where marriage and church attendance have declined, leaving citizens feeling like “strangers in their own land”. As harmful as smoking or obesity, social isolation has also been linked to a plateau in American life expectancy. While Carney (2019) and Social Capital Project papers (2018, 2019) examine the emergence of “alienated America,” they focus on distinct causes. In Carney (2019), sociopolitical is stressed. Social Capital Project (2019) is more clinical and historical.

Studies dispute the role of “despair” itself. According to Carney (2019), the lack of communal purpose causes the “American carnage” of addiction and inactivity. The Social Capital Project (2019) notes that self-reported misery began growing in 1990, a decade before despair deaths. This shows that the mortality crisis may be caused by increased lethality of synthetic opioids like fentanyl, rather than solely by psychological distress. Lastly, while both sources agree that marriage provides a protective “premium” against these outcomes, the Social Capital Project (2018) shows that never-married and divorced men account for 71% of opioid overdose deaths.

2.4 CONNECTION TO RESEARCH PAPER

My study specifically addresses the lack of papers about more modern communities and what structures, outside of churches or local governments, hold them together. While existing literature effectively explains the decline of social capital and highlights the importance of formal institutions and large-scale structures, it pays less attention to how informal, everyday interactions sustain community life in contemporary settings. This study contributes by focusing on these micro-level mechanisms, particularly how shared spaces and small businesses are actively used and socially produced by community members to maintain cohesion over time.

3. RESEARCHER METHODOLOGY

This explanatory paper will employ a qualitative methodology to collect insights through interviews with residents, and an ethnographic study will also be conducted. At the same time, interviews will provide the

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researcher with more in-depth insights, which cannot be obtained through a survey. The ethnographic study focuses on the behavior of locals during gatherings, in local businesses, and in communal spaces, while corroborating the information collected in the interviews. The empirical setting would be based in the United States, with the sample drawn from Lawrenceville Township. Lawrenceville was chosen due to the researchers' proximity to it and the community's long-standing existence, despite limited infrastructure beyond parks and a historic Main Street. The Lawrenceville Village hosts numerous non-required events that are ideal for observing the residents' behavior.

Additionally, many communal gathering spaces are available to residents daily and are essential to the research process. Because of the researcher's close association with the observed individuals, no one was inconvenienced by the interview approach. Such a connection also fostered a deeper understanding of the communities under study and encouraged residents to be more candid and trusting in their responses.

3.1 ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

The ethnographic study is conducted on the chosen population of Lawrenceville Township to observe residents' everyday actions and establish a behavioral framework that promotes community longevity. Such collected information data has then been compared with information derived from the interviews and used to identify the specific factors that sustain community over time in an individualistic society. Previous research has described sustainable behavior within the community as ongoing practices that preserve members' sense of belonging, shared identity, and mutual support, thereby enabling the group to continue functioning over time (Cubeddu and Martini, 2025). As a result, this ethnographic study has observed real-time interactions in communal spaces, local businesses, gatherings, and school-linked events. It has identified "how support happens" (help, advice, sharing resources), "how belonging is produced" (rituals, language, norms), and "how closeness is sustained" (interactions, consistent communication, willingness to engage)

3.1.1 FIELD SETTING

Lawrenceville Township was chosen as the appropriate empirical setting for the study due to its suburban nature and relatively small infrastructure, similar to that of most other towns in America. Said infrastructure, which also functions as third places, is limited to a church and parks, once again mimicking the rest of America. However, historically, the Lawrenceville community was quite close, and this persists to this date, **making** the location ideal for studying mechanisms that support community longevity. And Lawrenceville has several community gathering spots, where interactions among members occur frequently. These comparisons might not apply to all American locations, since they differ greatly by income and geography. But the interactions in the studied community should be considered universal in their application. So the main areas of observation have been restricted to "third places" such as local shops, where residents most frequently gather due to accessibility, and communal spaces such as the local library and the church community center; all because these are likely present in most American communities.

3.1.2 RESEARCHER ROLE AND POSITIONALITY

The researcher's role in the field has been that of an observer-as-participant in all cases, as they were already part of the established community. This prior familiarity allows the researcher to blend in during everyday casual gatherings, and the residents have acted more naturally and openly because they already know the researcher.

Date	Location	Unit of Observation
January 9, Friday 12:00-15:00	Ooika, 25000 Main Street, Lawrenceville Township	Routines and overall mood in communal space average community gathering/lunch break 24 customers, 3 workers
January 17 Saturday 13:00-17:00	Final Boss, Comics and Games, Lawrenceville Township	Routines and overall mood in communal space 3 employees (one left at 13:30), 11 customers, 3 kids
January 15, Thursday 13:00-17:00	Small community Center by the Lawrenceville Presbyterian Church, Lawrenceville Township	Routines and overall mood in communal space 8 older men, 3 older women, 1 young woman volunteer
January 22, Thursday 14:00-19:00	Mercer County Library (Lawrenceville Branch), Lawrenceville Township,	Events, Routines, and overall mood in communal space. 6 staff, 5 teens, 6 children, 19 adults

Also, interaction with the researcher, if it occurs, has been similar to how all the other community members treat one another. However, this prior closeness can lead to errors in how the researcher views the community, causing some information to be missed or exaggerated. To reduce this margin of error, the notes from the studies have contained only observations, and subsequent interpretations have been carefully reflected on to avoid bias, with external peer debriefs to aid the process. As a final safeguard, the insights has been compared with the additional interviews conducted.

3.1.3 ACCESS, GATEKEEPERS, AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

It is unlikely that there has been much gatekeeping regarding the events/everyday routines observed, given that the locations are public and easily accessible. But when staying in the shops for long stretches, permission has been requested from either the business owner or the on-site employees. Additionally, when attending the community center, permission from the volunteers has been requested due to the space's connection to the church. Either email or in-person contact has been used for the latter. Furthermore, to foster an ethical presence, aside from maintaining good social etiquette, the researcher

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has ensured not to get in the way of other people or be intrusive in their observations, such as focusing on particular people and recording only their interactions in precise detail. If photos have been taken, children have not been included. And if any of the residents have seemed uncomfortable with being observed or have asked the researcher to stop, the request has been fulfilled.

3.1.4 SAMPLING

The ethnographic sampling has used purposive and theoretical sampling rather than demographic representativeness, focusing on groups and spaces most relevant to understanding how community longevity is sustained. The researcher began with a broad range of communal sites and then narrowed the focus to groups in Lawrenceville Township that exhibit consistent interaction and integration within the community. The main framework has been established to examine the Lawrenceville area specifically, given the researcher's familiarity with it and the prevalence of communal spaces. The specific locations in the area were chosen for both their popularity as gathering spaces and the diversity of people who use them. The four locations were chosen precisely to include as many varied subgroups as possible, ranging across ages, classes, and positions. Additionally, 10 to 15 key informants, such as business owners, volunteers, organizers, and long-term residents, have been identified for their support an accurate understanding of observed social mechanisms.

3.1.5 INFORMATION COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The information collection procedures for the ethnographic study have been conducted as planned. They have been held for 4 weeks, with 1 observation session per week, on a mix of weekdays and weekends. Each session has lasted about 4 hours. The main observation types have been everyday routines in communal spaces, but have included informal hangouts depending on the participants in attendance. The researcher has used field notes to record interactions between participants and to note specific patterns or standout events. There has also been an analysis of the locations set up and of the pamphlets and leaflets present in all locations for further inspection.

3.1.6 ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDS

For reasons of consent and privacy, staff permission was requested beforehand, and the purpose of note-taking was explained to anyone who asked. No identifiers, such as names or specific descriptions, were included in the notes; no covert recording was done, and all photos were taken carefully and only with permission. If a participant requested that certain information be withheld, it was not included in the paper. Names were also not used in event descriptions or direct quotes, with shorthands or pseudonyms used instead. Since all observed settings were public or semipublic, these procedures should be enough to ensure ethical observation. Extra precautions were taken when minors were present: for school-linked events, permission was obtained from the relevant organization or administration; when observing children with parents, parental permission was asked; and no photos included minors.

3.1.7 ANALYSIS PLAN FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

The ethnographic material has been analyzed through an organized, iterative coding process that moves from raw notes into mechanisms that answer the research questions. Field notes were stored in a database with date, site, and observation type, allowing comparison across locations and time. The analysis began with open coding based on field observations, then shifted to focused coding that grouped recurring behaviors, and finally to mechanism-oriented themes that connect actions to the maintenance of community longevity.

The first mechanism, *access to varied infrastructure*, shows how different groups rely on different settings: the church community center was mostly residents over 50, while cafés, shops, and the library were dominated by younger people, with teenagers gathering in the library. Still, younger residents frequented local shops without buying anything and interacted with staff, showing businesses also function as social infrastructure. The second mechanism, *consistency and willingness of engagement*, is visible when residents choose to interact beyond necessity: in the matcha shop, an employee spoke with two women for several hours, people in a short line discussed matcha grinders, and at Final Boss customers often spent at least fifteen minutes talking with the owner, with regulars present even without purchases, and even extending to moments like an elderly couple giving a high-school-aged boy advice about college. The third mechanism, the *presence of third organizations and third places*, shows how gathering spaces are created not only by formal infrastructure but also by small businesses. In the comic shop, a group of kids stayed for hours after school without buying anything. It was still welcomed as the “Carter Crew,” highlighting how these spaces allow voluntary interaction. The fourth mechanism, *reciprocity and respect*, was evident in polite language, cleaning behaviors, and care for shared spaces. In contrast, the fifth mechanism, *organization and participation*, was reflected in flyers, events, and small adjustments such as clearing space or adding chairs. Finally, *mutual trust* emerged as both a result and a sustaining force: an older woman felt comfortable borrowing a stranger’s phone to locate her own, and children spent afternoons in the comic shop with little supervision, suggesting trust is built through repeated interaction and maintained as residents continue to rely on it.

3.1.8 ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

To ensure that the findings are not unduly shaped by the researcher’s prior familiarity with the community, the study has included multiple quality checks to safeguard the validity and ethical integrity of the interpretation. *First*, triangulation has been used by comparing ethnographic observations with interview data and archival patterns, so that observed behaviors are checked against with documented community patterns suggest. This prevents the analysis from relying on a single method and helps confirm whether mechanisms appear across different forms of evidence. *Second*, member sense-checking has been implemented by sharing non-sensitive summaries of interpretations with a few participants, focusing on whether the described patterns feel recognizable and accurate from their perspective. This allows the study to confirm that it is capturing community dynamics fairly, without exposing private details. *Third*, an audit trail has been maintained, meaning the researcher has kept a clear log of decisions,

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sampling changes, and the reasons for designating specific sites as focal sites. This makes the research process transparent and allows the study's logic to be followed step by step, rather than making it appear as though conclusions were chosen without evidence. *Finally*, a reflexive journal has tracked how the researcher's familiarity with Lawrenceville Township may shape interpretations, including moments where expectations might influence what stands out. It has also drawn attention to disconfirming evidence, such as cases where interaction fails, exclusion occurs, or the mood of a space is less welcoming. Together, these checks ensure that the ethnographic findings remain grounded in observable practice, and that the final explanation of community longevity mechanisms is supported by multiple layers of evidence.

3.2 INTERVIEWS

This study focused on interviewing people from Lawrenceville township, 33 interviews in total. All people were from Lawrenceville Township: average residence, 2 librarians, 4 shop owners/employees. Each interview lasted up to 8 minutes, with some outliers lasting 20 minutes. All interviews were conducted during the day, either during lunch break (12:00) or in the late afternoon after work (15:00-18:00). Table 2 presents the interview questions asked of the participants and selected verbatim responses.

Table 2: Selected Interview Verbatims

<p><i>Hi! My name is Nina Morozova, an 11th-grade student studying at The Lawrenceville School. Through this research, I aim to assess the opinions and actions of local community members and to understand the main factors that affect community cohesion and longevity. Additionally, the collected information data will be used to determine which actions help or hinder the community by cross-referencing it with previously collected information from both archives and community members. Please give your consent for this interview for academic purposes. I assure the confidentiality and security of your data. Thank you!</i></p>			
Interview Questions	Interview Responses	Keywords	Factors
<p>1. What are your thoughts on being part of the community here in Lawrenceville? What specifically do you enjoy about it? Why?</p>	<p><i>“Lawrenceville is a lovely place because of how connected it is. All the businesses know one another. It is nice to see people show up for one another” (P1, 37 yrs old, Male, Shop Owner/Resident)</i></p> <p><i>“It’s great, the people here are hella friendly. Even the landlord is way more chill. His family spent three generations here, so I guess that makes sense” (P2, 32 yrs old, Male, Shop Owner)</i></p> <p><i>“What I enjoy most about being part of the community is having the opportunity to work with patrons of Bunn Library because I find fulfillment in helping others.” (P5, 27 yrs old, Male, Librarian)</i></p> <p><i>“What I enjoy is the consistency, seeing the same faces at the library, the café, the park. It is comforting. It reminds me that I am not just passing through life alone.” (P7, 78 yrs old, Male, Retired Engineer/Resident)</i></p> <p><i>“I like the mix: families, students, older residents, shop owners. It makes the town feel alive. You are always bumping into someone</i></p>	<p>“connected,”</p> <p>“businesses know one another,”</p> <p>“show up for one another,”</p> <p>“friendly,”</p> <p>“fulfillment,”</p> <p>“helping others,”</p> <p>“steady kindness,”</p> <p>“consistency,”</p> <p>”</p> <p>“comforting,”</p>	<p>- Local business connectivity</p> <p>- Human interaction</p> <p>- Personal fulfillment from helping</p> <p>- Comfort in consistency.</p>

	<i>who adds a new perspective.” (P11, 34 yrs old, Female, Barista/Resident)</i>		
<p>2. How do you participate in social events? If not, why not?</p> <p>Do you have any favorite events you want to share?</p>	<p><i>“I always come to stop by when I can. We try to host some events ourselves. Mostly comics-related events, such as signings or Free Comic Book Day, are very popular with everyone. But Ooika does some markets in the fall, so I would say that” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“I volunteered for the set-up of a market in the park during the spring. My family also participates in the leaf clean-up events that happen around the same time” (P3, 17 yrs old, Female, Resident/Student)</i></p> <p><i>“Unfortunately, I do not participate in many social events at Lawrenceville, largely due to other commitments to my family off campus. My favorite social event that I attend each year is The Health & Wellness Fair & Vaccine Clinic for faculty and staff.” (P5)</i></p>	<p>“markets,”</p> <p>“volunteered,”</p> <p>“greeting familiar faces,”</p> <p>“chatting on benches,”</p> <p>“community nights,”</p> <p>“food trucks.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizing niche events - Volunteering for seasonal cleanup - Barriers due to family - Commitments - Routine social interactions
<p>3. Why did you join this specific event or club?</p> <p>How did you find out about it?</p>	<p><i>“Transportation can be a challenge for teens. However, when things are nearby or earlier, participation is much easier. Though I do like the buses, they are convenient and the same. But they are kinda late all the time” (P4)</i></p> <p><i>“They make me feel useful and appreciated. Being able to contribute or simply attend gives me a sense of purpose.” (P7)</i></p> <p><i>“The challenge is keeping traditions alive while welcoming change. But I think this community is doing a good job trying to balance both.” (P8)</i></p> <p><i>“They make my work feel meaningful. I am not just serving customers: I am part of a community, and everyone treats me like that” (P11)</i></p>	<p>“Transportation”</p> <p>“convenient,”</p> <p>“feel useful,”</p> <p>“sense of purpose,”</p> <p>“keeping traditions alive,” “free,”</p> <p>“low-cost.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proximity and transportation - Legacy of family involvement, seeking a sense of utility, and financial accessibility

<p>4. How do you describe your relationship with neighbors or residents? How would you like it to be?</p>	<p><i>“I cannot speak for myself since I spend most of my time in school, but my parents are really involved. They trade gardening tips, and I think my dad is in a book club with one of them” (P3)</i> <i>“My neighbors are kind and attentive. We look out for one another, and I hope that sense of care is passed onto my grandkids” (P6, 71 yrs old)</i> <i>“There is a strong sense of mutual respect. I am happy with how it is and would simply like to keep seeing the community stay engaged.” (P7)</i></p>	<p>“good friends,” “talk to most of my neighbors,” “book club,” “look out for one another,” “sense of care,”</p>	<p>-Casual social gatherings, -shared hobbies -mutual watchfulness</p>
<p>5. Is there something the Lawrenceville community can improve? What specific aspects are detrimental, and why?</p>	<p><i>“One area the Lawrenceville community might improve upon is raising more awareness regarding the resources available to them through the Library. Similarly, not raising awareness about these resources can be detrimental because they can provide stable educational support.” (P5)</i> <i>“More seating areas would help us(older residents) stay involved.”(P6)</i> <i>“The community does well socially, but information sharing could be clearer. Maybe more leaflets would be nicer, I do not like the Instagram updates” (P7)</i> <i>“It is mostly positive, but better advertising through social media would help everyone know what is happening.” (P15)</i></p>	<p>“lose enthusiasm,” “raising more awareness,” “eating areas” “leaflets”, “Instagram updates,” “playgrounds” “central hub.”</p>	<p>- Declining enthusiasm - lack of awareness of resources - physical accessibility for seniors - types of communications</p>
<p>6. Where do you most often interact with members of</p>	<p><i>“I am in a lot of clubs. You know, Magic: The Gathering, book club. But I always stop by to say hi to those who aren’t a part of them”(P2)</i> <i>“Most often interact with members of the Lawrenceville community at the Bunn Library and Mercer County Library.”</i></p>	<p>“shop,” “clubs,” “Mercer County Library,”</p>	<p>- Widely accessed spaces - Public libraries - Recreational</p>

<p>your community?</p>	<p>(P5) <i>"I spend a lot of time at the community center and at home. Neighbors stop by, we get some tea, and chat. I go to the new community center in the church if I want to knit with company. It is a lovely spot"</i> (P6) <i>"Mostly in places I get to talk to others in the park since my kid gets to run around. I also like the lunch rush in the sandwich shop, everyone I know usually stops by"</i>(p9)</p>	<p>"cafés," "community center,"</p>	<p>parks -Multi-use spaces.</p>
<p>7. How often do you interact with people living around you? <i>If little: Is there a specific reason for the lack of communication?</i> <i>If a lot: What types of interaction are they?</i></p>	<p><i>"If talking to someone online counts, then I am doubled up since I talk to real people during the day, especially during lunch. And I get to play some video games on a server rim with some nice folks there"</i>(P2) <i>"Less frequently than I would like because of my schedule. When I do, I try to make it meaningful, so just getting coffee makes me feel kinda good inside"</i> (P10) <i>"Almost daily through work. It is usually short conversations, but with regulars or when I get lucky, I get to chat for longer"</i> (P11) <i>"In performing my job duties, I frequently interact with library colleagues and students. I do not interact with a large number of faculty and staff outside of Bunn Library very often because my schedule and location on campus do not typically intersect with theirs."</i> (P5)</p>	<p>"Daily," "talking to someone online," "video games," "server," "a few times a week," "meaningful," "short conversations ."</p>	<p>- Daily professional interactions - Digital connections through gaming - Making time for meaningful short interactions.</p>

<p>8. How supported do you feel in Lawrenceville? If you needed help, what are the chances of receiving it from the community?</p>	<p><i>“The people here show up for one another pretty consistently. One time, a girl came by looking for a piece of a transformer toy she lost, and half the shop searched the entire main street for it” (P2)</i></p> <p><i>“Secure would be the right word. People check in on me. It feels like a good place to live after retiring. I do not even need to have my daughter with me.” (P7)</i></p> <p><i>“I feel well-supported as a parent. Everyone is willing to help out when it’s just one of those days. And I very rarely get complaints or bad looks for having my son around so much” (P9)</i></p>	<p>“consistently”</p> <p>“approachable” “check in,” “want each other to succeed,” “willing to help.”</p>	<p>- Proactive community assistance</p> <p>- Approachability of local figures</p> <p>- Lack of judgment for parents.</p>
<p>9. Are you able to describe how close you are to your community and the specific reasons?</p>	<p><i>“I do not know, it feels like bragging, but I think, like, at this point I know everyone, and everyone knows me. And the reason is simple, you just show others that you care” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“I feel close because people recognize me and treat me with respect. Being acknowledged regularly makes the community feel smaller and safer.” (P4)</i></p> <p><i>“While I am not necessarily close with many members in the Lawrenceville community, the connection I do have with my colleagues at the library, as well as the students I serve, is of great importance to me.” (P5)</i></p> <p><i>“I am involved with everything so much that it feels that the whole neighborhood is a part of the home” (p. 9)</i></p>	<p>“recognize me,” “respect,” “mutual understanding.”</p>	<p>- Mutual recognition,</p> <p>- longevity of residency</p> <p>- identification with specific subgroups.</p>

Consistent interactions appeared as one of the strongest themes across the interviews. Participants from all groups described frequent interactions with their communities, which were consistently framed in a positive light. When asked about communication frequency, one participant explained, “Daily. It is the best part of living and working here. Most of the time, I make sure to check in on all of the people who come by to Final Boss” (P1). These short but frequent exchanges help members stay connected and feel recognized within the community. As another participant noted, “I feel close because people recognize me and treat me with respect. Being acknowledged regularly makes the community feel smaller and safer” (P4).

Much of this communication is centered in public spaces such as cafés, parks, libraries, and community centers. Several participants emphasized that most interactions occur in these locations, highlighting their importance to community life. One participant stated that they “most often interact with members of the Lawrenceville community at the Bunn Library and Mercer County Library” (P5). At the same time, a younger resident explained that interactions happen “mostly [in] public places, after-school spots, cafés, and sometimes the library” (P4). For older residents, these spaces also provide comfort and accessibility: “I spend a lot of time at the community center and at home. Neighbors stop by, we get some tea, and chat... It is a lovely spot” (P6). Work routines can also shape access to interaction, as a library worker noted that their schedule rarely overlaps with others outside the library (P5). Businesses also function as important community nodes. Many are described not only as gathering places but as integrated parts of local social life. Daily work creates repeated contact, as one participant shared: “Almost daily through work. It is usually short conversations, but with regulars or when I get lucky, I get to chat for longer” (P11). Over time, these interactions become relationships: “I have a good rapport with regulars and nearby residents... these familiar faces become good friends over time” (P11). Businesses also intentionally contribute through events that bring residents together. One owner explained that they “try to host some events ourselves... signings or Free Comic Book Day are very popular... Ooika does some markets in the fall” (P1). As this participant summarized, closeness is built through consistent presence: “You just show others that you care” (P1).

Finally, the interviews show how participation varies across age groups yet remains connected through shared spaces. Older residents linked involvement to the ability to remain present in public life, with one noting that “more seating areas would help us stay involved” (P6). Younger residents described limits such as transportation and timing, explaining that “when things are nearby or earlier, it is much easier to participate” (P4). Despite these constraints, public spaces and small businesses allow different age groups to remain part of the same community routines.

6. DISCUSSION

The main themes derived from the interviews all focus on the interactions among residents. They touch upon the frequency, meaningfulness, and location of this interaction. This emphasis on communication is a major factor in answering the research question, and it is through specific methods of interaction that communities stay close and functioning.

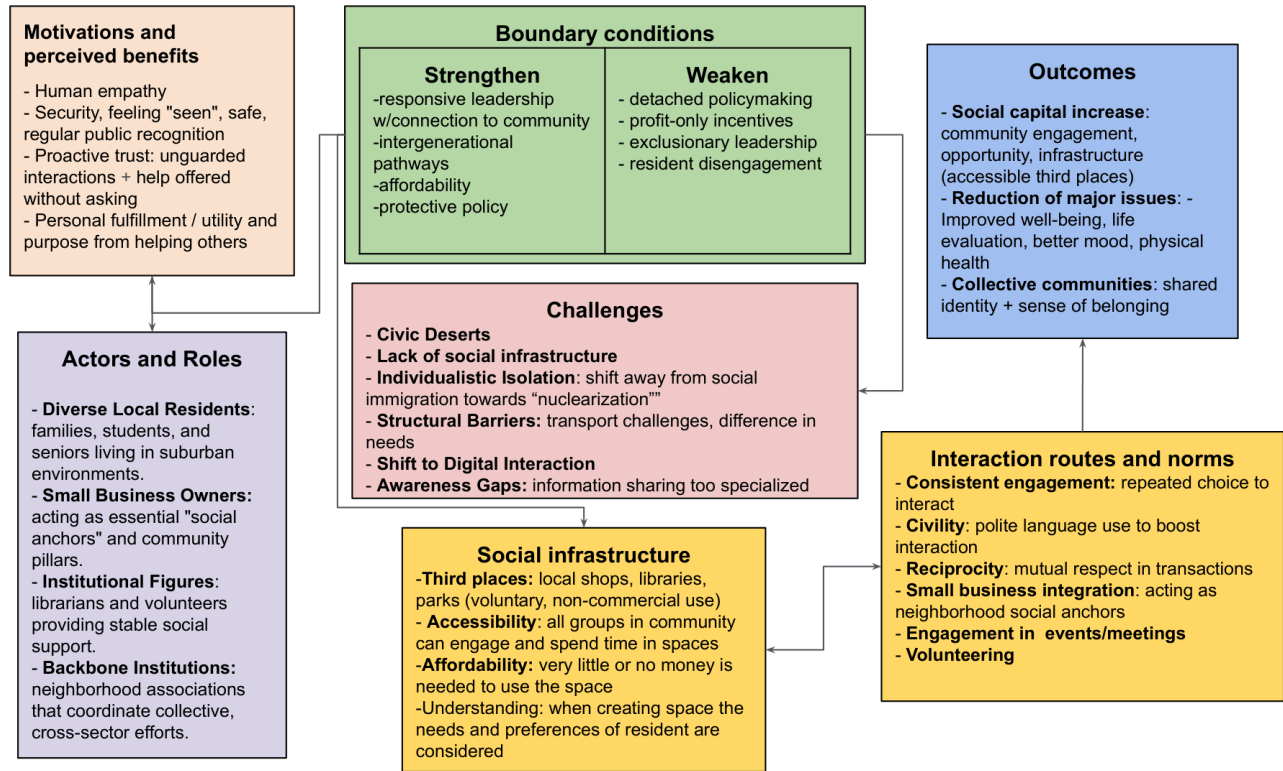


Figure 1: Framework Diagram

A framework for the communities’ longevity is mapped out through the interactions among key factors discussed in the paper.

The steady decline of American social capital and the rise of “social deserts” since the 1960s have led to increased individualistic isolation and the erosion of traditional civic organizations. To address these challenges, research focused on Lawrenceville Township identifies specific mechanisms of longevity that allow communities to thrive despite these national trends. A central finding is the vital role of “third places”, such as local cafés, comic bookshops, and public libraries, which act as social anchors where residents can engage in frequent, voluntary, and non-commercial interactions. These spaces facilitate a self-sustaining cycle of mutual trust and reciprocity, where consistent face-to-face engagement and polite social norms make residents feel “seen,” secure, and proactively supported by their neighbors. Furthermore, the study suggests that the most resilient communities are those in which small businesses are deeply integrated into the social fabric and in which bottom-up, organic leadership fosters authentic participation, effectively transforming a neighborhood into a collective home.

7. IMPLICATIONS

These findings expand the knowledge around social capital in the modern day. Specifically the implication behind the finding of small businesses being an integral part of the community through supporting gatherings and communication, amplifies their importance. Previously in earlier studies these factors were overlooked. Here the information can serve as an additional pillar for policies aiming to support communities

The finding that communities rely on multiple forms of third places, and that these spaces both serve the community while being part of it, shows how societies adjust to changing infrastructure and to the lack of accessible formal spaces. This adds an important factor to the study of human organization and community, since in these cases, businesses are no longer detached from the people around them. This reinforces existing literature on social capital while expanding it to include informal and hybrid spaces that operate outside traditional institutional frameworks.

The findings also show that belief systems that require trust in one's neighbors are integral to community closeness: even when other factors strengthen trust, its absence weakens the community. Involvement is also key, since community cannot be experienced passively. This supports prior research emphasizing participation and engagement (Putnam, 2000), while also demonstrating that such participation is often maintained through small-scale, routine interactions rather than formal membership in organizations.

Literature on social capital and the American community often overlooks the role of small businesses that coexist with surrounding communities. At the same time, newer research relevant to current social systems, especially with the rise of AI chatbots and even greater partisan division, has either not yet been produced or does not address the same issues of social capital. By identifying small businesses as active social anchors, this study contributes to a more contemporary understanding of community sustainability, particularly in environments where traditional institutions are less central or accessible.

These findings can be applied to policies affecting community building and infrastructure. Beyond again emphasizing the importance of public infrastructure, they suggest that funds can also be allocated directly into communities so they can organize more efficiently themselves, and that protections or benefits for small businesses involved with their communities could help maintain these important pillars. More broadly, these results suggest that policy approaches should not only prioritize the creation of physical spaces, but also support the conditions that allow repeated interaction, local engagement, and informal leadership to emerge.

Beyond policy, this research can also be used by people themselves to adopt behaviors that strengthen their own communities. Such actions could significantly increase social capital and, in addition to creating spaces of belonging, make it easier for people in need to find help and support. In this way, the study highlights that community sustainability is both structurally supported and individually enacted, reinforcing the idea that long-term cohesion depends on continuous participation rather than passive belonging.

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8. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the mechanisms that allow certain communities to maintain long-term cohesion and mutual support in an increasingly individualistic American society. Focusing on local collectives in Lawrenceville Township, New Jersey, the study examined both the motivations behind community formation and the factors that sustain these groups over time, especially amid rising social isolation and declining traditional social capital.

Six core mechanisms of community longevity were identified: access to varied infrastructure, consistent engagement, the presence of third places, reciprocity and respect, organization and participation, and mutual trust. One of the most important findings was the role of local small businesses as essential third places. These spaces provide social availability and foster a sense of belonging, often independent of commercial exchange. The study also found that brief, positive face-to-face interactions are one of the main ways community members feel seen, recognized, and secure. Together, these findings show that community is not a passive condition but something actively produced through repeated everyday actions in public and semi-public spaces. Social capital, in this setting, survives through a symbiotic relationship between residents and local infrastructure, including businesses that have adapted to act as social anchors. Mutual trust appears both as a prerequisite for and a product of repeated interaction, creating a self-sustaining cycle of closeness.

At the same time, the study has several limitations. Its focus on a specific suburban setting, Lawrenceville Township, means the findings may not apply directly to all American regions, especially those shaped by different economic or geographic conditions. The researcher's position as an observer-as-participant and community member helped produce more candid insights. Still, it may also have introduced personal bias or caused certain details to be emphasized more than others. In addition, the ethnographic sampling was purposive, concentrating on long-standing groups with consistent interaction rather than aiming for demographic representativeness. Future research should examine contemporary transformations in social capital more closely, particularly the effects of digital life and growing partisan division. It would also be useful to explore these mechanisms across different economic and cultural contexts, such as post-industrial social deserts or high-density urban areas, to determine whether these factors are broadly shared or more context-dependent. Researchers should pay greater attention not only to the decline of social capital, but also to the conditions that allow it to persist. These findings also have practical use. Policymakers can apply them to community-building efforts by investing not only in public infrastructure but also in locally rooted, self-organized initiatives. Protections or benefits for small businesses that serve as pillars of the community may help preserve social cohesion. Residents can practice polite engagement, participating in local third places, and contributing to everyday forms of reciprocal support.

In conclusion, integrating intentional everyday interactions and preserving shared communal spaces offers a promising way to reverse social disintegration in the United States. By understanding and advancing the mechanisms of longevity, society can progress toward a more interconnected future, offering individuals the vital resources of belonging and reciprocal support.

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Appendix

A1.Observation Guide

A. Collaboration mechanisms

- Who initiates coordination, how tasks are allocated, and how commitments are enforced.
- How newcomers are onboarded into group routines.

B. Boundary-making and subgroup emergence

- Insider language, jokes, references, and “unspoken rules”.
- Signals of membership (rituals, roles, symbols, dress, volunteering status).
- Moments of inclusion and exclusion.

C. Mutual support in action

- Practical help: childcare, rides, job leads, information sharing, resources.
- Emotional support: listening, encouragement, crisis support.
- Reciprocity patterns: immediate exchange versus delayed payback, and how obligations are tracked.

D. Sustainability and decline

- Attendance trends, leadership succession, conflict episodes, and burnout.
- Money and time constraints, and the role of institutions (schools, churches, local businesses).
- How competitive pressures show up (status, networking motives, reputational dynamics).

6.3 Informal conversations

- Distinguish informal conversations from formal interviews.
- Clarify how notes will be taken and how consent will be handled when conversations become substantive.

6.4 Artefacts and “trace data” gathered ethnographically

- Flyers, newsletters, WhatsApp or Facebook group norms (only with permission), meeting agendas, volunteer rosters, and local bulletin boards.
- Spatial notes: where people gather, who occupies which spaces, and how spaces enable repeated interaction.

6.5 Fieldnotes and documentation practice

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- Jotted notes during observation (when appropriate).
- Full fieldnotes written within 24 hours.
- Separate analytic memos that track emerging mechanisms and hypotheses.