

Building Stronger Communities:

The Role of Charities as Social
Infrastructure



Briefing Document

From: Carleton University's Charity Insights Canada Project [CICP]

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Subject: Building Stronger Communities: The Role of Charities as Social Infrastructure

Executive Summary

Charities are a vital component of Canada's social infrastructure. They create opportunities within communities across the country for people to participate in community life, build social connections, and access essential services, programs, and spaces. They work alongside governments and businesses to provide support to Canadians and respond to community needs. Data from the sector help to demonstrate the breadth of this role. The charitable sector functions as essential infrastructure that connects people and organizations, strengthens community capacity, and amplifies the impact of efforts across sectors.

Introduction

Social infrastructure includes shared spaces, services and programs, organizations, and networks that enable people to develop social relationships ([Hollis et al., 2023](#)). Strong social connections have a positive multiplier effect across many aspects of individual and community well-being ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)). Social connection is associated with better mental, physical, and cognitive health, as well as positive outcomes related to educational attainment, economic circumstances, and overall well-being ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)). Conversely, loneliness and social isolation are associated with poorer physical and mental health, premature mortality, and higher health-care costs ([World Health Organization, 2025](#); Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Meisters et al., 2021). The benefits of social connection also extend beyond individuals. At the community level, higher levels of social connectedness are associated with stronger outcomes in areas such as resilience, economic prosperity, and public safety ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)). Together, this evidence highlights the importance of the spaces, organizations, and relationships that help foster connection and participation. This briefing examines the role charities play as part of Canada's social infrastructure. The findings show that charities create opportunities for people to participate in community life by building social connections, providing essential services, and offering programs and spaces that help individuals and communities thrive. Charities collaborate with governments, businesses, and other organizations to achieve greater impact. As Canadians face rising costs and changing social needs amid broader economic pressures and changing international trade relationships, strong social infrastructure is an important resource for communities across the country.

Research Overview

This brief draws on data collected through the Charity Insights Canada Project's (CICP) national survey panel, comprising roughly 1,000 Canadian charities from across the country. The panel changes annually and is constructed using CRA T3010 records. It includes a randomized selection of registered charities from a range of sub-sectors with exclusions for hospitals, universities, colleges, and places of worship (with some exceptions). Data were collected through short weekly surveys, administered between 2022-2026. While the panel is designed to reflect the diversity of the sector, findings should be interpreted as indicative of broader sector trends rather than strictly representative. The consistency of responses, combined with the breadth of participating organizations, provides a robust evidence base for identifying patterns and emerging sector-wide challenges.

Research Findings

Charities create opportunities for people to influence and participate in the social, civic, and economic life of their communities.

- Charities offer a range of volunteer roles, including serving on boards and supporting programs and service delivery (CICP 4.04.12; 4.05.17).
- Charities seek input from the people they serve, including through service evaluation (43%) and advisory or other committee roles (41%) (CICP 1.11.45).
- Most charities have specific strategies to engage youth, including through volunteering (46%), participating in events (46%), and program co-design or youth-led initiatives (25%) (CICP 3.04.10).
- Charities are also significant employers. In 2025, 84% of CICP responding charities employed full-time paid staff, while 70% employed part-time employees (CICP 3.10.35).

Charities provide supports and services that bring down costs for people and are adapting in response to changing community needs.

- In 2026, almost three quarters (73%) of charities reported offering programs or services free of charge; 45% offer them at reduced or subsidized rates. One-third (33%) help people access or navigate public benefits, and more than one-quarter provide goods at low or no cost (28%) or provide financial assistance or direct aid (27%) (CICP 4.03.08).
- Over the last two years, participating CICP charities improved efficiency and long-term sustainability (48%) and responded to changing community needs (41%) (CICP 3.08.28).
- These innovations have had positive outcomes for service delivery (46%), partnerships and collaborations (25%) and stakeholder or community engagement (19%) (CICP 3.08.28).

Charities regularly work together with other sectors to strengthen impact

- Nearly all charities report collaborating with governments (89% at least occasionally), with other charities (95% at least occasionally), with nonprofits (87% at least occasionally), and with for-profit organizations (80% at least occasionally) (CICP 1.02.08).
- Charities most commonly collaborate with others to access more or different kinds of resources (79%), achieve greater impact (77%), improve services (75%), and increase their ability to serve wider audiences (69%) (CICP 1.02.08).
- 64% of charities said they participate in networks or working groups with government at least occasionally, 43% co-deliver programs/services with other charities or nonprofits often or always, and 79% share resources or infrastructure with community groups/informal networks at least occasionally (CICP 4.07.25).

Discussion

Creating opportunities for participation and connection

Charities create multiple pathways for people to participate in community life and connect with one another. They provide opportunities to volunteer, serve on boards, attend community events, and participate in programs and activities. As employers, they also contribute to local economies and create opportunities for people to develop and maintain social networks. Research suggests that employment is associated with larger social networks and a stronger sense of belonging compared with unemployment (Parkin & Ayer, 2022).

Volunteering is an important part of this infrastructure. Most charities offer volunteer opportunities in addition to board participation, and 56% report providing opportunities for social connection among

their volunteers (CICP [4.04.12](#); [3.10.35](#)). Charities also create spaces where people can interact informally. ONN's State of the Sector survey found that 71% of Ontario nonprofits run programs designed to connect community members, while 52% host in-person events that engage the public (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2025). Libraries, community centres, and other community organizations can also serve as “bumping spaces” or “third places” where people encounter one another outside the home or workplace, helping to foster belonging and local social ties (Australian Unity, 2026; YMCA Canada, 2024).

Providing access and responding to changing needs

The services, programs, and spaces provided by charities are another important component of social infrastructure. Daycares, settlement services, arts and recreation programs, affordable housing, museums, seniors' services, mental health supports, and food banks can all affect whether people are able to work, remain in their communities, and participate in community life (Barroll, 2026). CICP data indicate that most charities provide programs or services at reduced or no cost, helping to reduce barriers to participation and providing support during periods of hardship (CICP [4.03.08](#)).

This infrastructure is also responsive to changing needs. Charities have demonstrated an ability to adapt and pivot their programs and services, including during the COVID-19 pandemic (CICP [1.5.20](#)). This capacity is increasingly important as demand changes: in 2026, 55% of charities reported that the number of people they served had increased over the previous year, while 47% reported that the complexity of their clients' needs had increased (CICP [4.07.22](#)). Together, these findings suggest that charities contribute not only through the services they provide, but through their capacity to adjust those services as community circumstances change.

Building networks, collaboration, and resilience

Charities also contribute to social infrastructure by building relationships across organizations and sectors. In 2025, 88% of charities described their involvement in collaborative or partnership work as moderate to very high, and 65% described the impact of this work as very or mostly positive (CICP [3.07.25](#)). Charities collaborate in a range of ways, including co-delivering programs and services, coordinating referrals, sharing resources, and participating in shared networks (CICP [4.07.25](#)).

These relationships can extend beyond organizations' immediate areas of activity. A majority of charities (81%) work with organizations outside their primary subsector at least sometimes to address complex problems, with 65% reporting positive outcomes from this work (CICP [1.08.34](#)). Such networks can provide an important foundation for collective action and resilience, particularly when communities face emergencies or rapidly changing circumstances. For example, during the extreme heat experienced in Vancouver in 2022, the City of Vancouver built on an existing program to work with community-based organizations, including charities, to provide heat-related supports tailored to different neighbourhoods and communities (Vancouver Emergency Management Agency, 2023).

Taken together, these findings illustrate how charities function as social infrastructure: they create opportunities for participation and connection, help people access services and remain engaged in their communities, and build relationships that enable organizations and communities to respond collectively to changing circumstances.

Conclusion

Charities are an important part of Canada's social infrastructure, shaping the conditions for social connection, economic security, and collective well-being. Simply put, charitable organizations help build strong communities. At a time when social connections are declining, with implications for volunteering, charitable giving, and participation in community events, maintaining strong social infrastructure is increasingly important ([CanadaHelps, 2024](#)). Evidence from the United Kingdom also suggests that investment in social infrastructure can generate significant economic value, with a 2025 study estimating a return of approximately £3.50 for every pound invested in social infrastructure in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, not including many of the associated social benefits ([Frontier Economics, 2025](#)). Supporting the sustainability of Canada's charitable sector therefore supports the infrastructure that helps people connect, access essential services, and participate in their communities. In turn, this contributes to individual well-being and to healthier, more resilient, and prosperous communities ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)). Canada's 85,000 charities are important social and economic partners, particularly as communities respond to economic pressures and changing social needs.

The CICP will continue to monitor these trends and surface evidence to inform responsive, forward-looking strategies for the sector.

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