

# BELONGING in the

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# EVERGREEN

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 **STATE**

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Understanding Sense of Belonging in Washington State's  
Main Street Communities



WASHINGTON STATE  
**MAIN STREET**  
PROGRAM

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# \* Acknowledgements

The Washington State Main Street Program is grateful to all of our collaborators and contributors for their invaluable support in developing “Belonging in the Evergreen State.”

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## Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council

We are indebted to **Over Zero** and the **Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council** for their report, “The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America,” which both inspired and guided our own research. Their insight on belonging’s co-benefits and research methods for measuring belonging across settings provided the foundation for “Belonging in the Evergreen State,” and we are incredibly grateful for their ongoing work and encouragement for others to build on their findings.

## Washington State Historical Society

This project would not have been possible without generous support from the **Washington State Historical Society’s Diversity in Local History program**. Funded by the Washington State Legislature, the Diversity in Local History program awards grants for paid internships that support inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility initiatives at heritage organizations that increase the stories they tell and the communities they serve.

## Main Street America

Our research and project framework were guided by the **research team at Main Street America**, which leads an inclusive, impact-driven movement dedicated to reenergizing and strengthening older and historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts nationwide.



## About Washington Main Street

**The Washington State Main Street Program** helps communities revitalize the economy, appearance, and image of their downtown districts using the successful Main Street Approach™, a comprehensive revitalization strategy built around a community's unique heritage and attributes. Washington Main Street is a program of the **Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation**, managed under contract by the **Washington Trust for Historic Preservation**.

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## Project Team

**Breanne Durham**, Washington Main Street Senior Program Director, developed and led this project. **Lydia Felty**, Main Street Specialist, handled project management for the pilot and edited and finalized this report.

**Liz Arias**, Main Street Representation and Belonging Research Intern (funded by the Washington State Historical Society's Diversity in Local History program), led the analysis, interviews, historical and contextual research, and writing of this report.

This work would not have been possible without the robust, enthusiastic support of our four pilot Main Street Communities and their Executive Directors:

- **Teresa Chanes**, Ellensburg Downtown Association
- **Ellen Gamson**, Mount Vernon Downtown Association
- **Rosa Pulido**, Wenatchee Downtown Association
- **Annalee Tobey**, Experience Chehalis

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**Mike Powe** and **Emi Morita** of Main Street America consulted on the vision for this pilot project, led the survey research, and provided critical insights and advice throughout the process.

**Shona Bell McCarthy** designed this report.

Thank you!

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# ✱ Letter from the Director

**For nearly 50 years, the Main Street movement has measured its impact in terms of historic buildings saved, small businesses opened, and monetary investment. These measures are extremely meaningful to local communities...but they don't tell the full story.**

For the last several years, sparked in part by Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's declaration of the epidemic of loneliness and subsequent Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, we have been asking ourselves questions like, "(How) is Main Street already creating positive social impact, in addition to well-documented economic impact?" and "How can we more intentionally and actively move the needle on increasing social connection in our communities?"

These questions come from a deep belief in the power of the grassroots nature of the Main Street Approach, which is designed to engage a broad swath of community members and provide a framework for pulling in the same direction to achieve local goals. We had seen the Approach help to steady communities through multiple economic crises; didn't it also have the potential to play a positive role in our current social crisis of loneliness?

**Main Street is both a physical place and a community-based organization—both are opportunities for increasing connection, belonging, and inclusion.**

We believe—and the research outlined in this report confirms—both that Main Streets are already making positive social impacts and that there is much more that must be done. Thank you for joining us on this journey.



**BREANNE DURHAM**  
Washington State Main Street Program

# \* Executive Summary

Belonging is often described as the invisible current that shapes how people move through work, community, and society. Yet until now, it has been difficult to measure in a way that accounts for both its complexity and its urgency.

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This report was developed to close that gap: to offer a comprehensive, data-driven view of how people in Main Street Communities experience belonging in their lives and what local leaders can do to strengthen it.

Building on “The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America,” produced by Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council, and drawing on survey data, interviews, and outside research, this report identifies conditions that expand or restrict belonging in four of Washington’s Main Street Communities. It reveals that belonging is not a static feeling but a dynamic exchange shaped by recognition, voice, and trust.

**Data shows that when people feel they belong, they report higher wellbeing, deeper engagement, and greater willingness to contribute to their community.**

When belonging is absent, the costs are immediate and measurable: increased stress, diminished participation, and weakened connections to institutions and peers.

The findings highlight both progress and persistent gaps. While many people report moments of belonging at work, in their neighborhoods, and in cultural spaces, inequities remain stark across race, gender, income, and age. Marginalized groups consistently report lower belonging, pointing to structural barriers that limit full participation.

At the same time, the research shows that belonging is malleable. Targeted actions—such as inclusive leadership practices, investment in community connection, and intentional recognition of individual contributions—can meaningfully increase belonging for all.

This report offers a new framework for understanding belonging on Main Streets, one that moves beyond sentiment and into strategy.



WALLA WALLA / PHOTO BY SYDNEE MORE PHOTOGRAPHY

By mapping belonging as an ecosystem, it equips leaders with insights to diagnose where belonging is thriving and where it is frayed. It also makes clear that belonging is not a “soft” aspiration but a measurable driver of social cohesion and organizational health.

Belonging in the Evergreen State is both a benchmark and a call to action. It provides a first-of-its-kind snapshot of belonging and sets the stage for future measurement over time. More importantly, it challenges all downtown stakeholders—Main Street organizations, civic leaders, institutions, employers, and communities alike—to recognize belonging as a shared responsibility.

Strengthening belonging will not happen by accident; it requires deliberate choices, consistent investment, and the courage to address exclusion where it appears.

By charting where belonging is strong and where it falters, this report equips leaders to create environments where more people can participate fully and flourish.

**In a moment when connection and trust feel fragile, belonging emerges not as a luxury but as an essential condition for resilience and shared progress.**

## Our Six Key Findings

Our research focused on four Main Street Communities with the aim of understanding belonging in Washington State and piloting a new model of studying the social impacts of Main Street organizations. Here's what we learned:

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### 1 Main Street organizations cultivate a sense of belonging.

Our data confirms that Main Street staff and volunteers report greater belonging, with 10-15% higher survey scores than residents, workers, and visitors who are not affiliated with their local Main Street organization.

This impact stems from intentional place stewardship and community building by fostering local culture and history, allowing communities to build and maintain local traditions through relationship-building that connects entrepreneurs to resources.

Main Streets transform downtowns from commercial zones into true community hearths. This social infrastructure fuels economic resilience, with high-belonging districts showing more than 50% greater volunteerism than cities with similar populations to those in this study.

### 2 Main Street community events nurture understanding of local collective identity and sense of belonging.

Main Street festivals, markets, and traditions serve as the living heartbeat of downtown belonging. These gatherings form the shared memories that bond residents and visitors to place and to each other.

As the primary organizers of these local traditions, Main Street organizations are curating the collective cultural identity that defines belonging for members of the community across generations.

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### **3** Main Street organizations are laboratories for innovative and creative solutions.

Main Street organizations innovate by facilitating outside-the-box thinking to meet a community's unique needs, from developing inclusive public spaces to creating community events that are accessible to all.

These innovations share a common thread: they address systemic gaps through experiments that can be adapted and scaled.

### **4** Strategic communication is key to unlocking Main Street's full potential.

Many downtown business owners interviewed for the study remain unaware of Main Street resources, limiting revitalization impact. Targeted solutions like peer ambassador programs and digitized Main Street guides demonstrate how intentional outreach and resource consolidation drive participation.

When Main Streets make their value visible with everything from storefront decals to success storytelling, they transform from silent partners into catalysts for equitable growth.

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## **5** Anti-racism and anti-discrimination are foundational to building belonging in our communities.

Everyone deserves to belong. Main Streets cannot foster belonging without addressing systemic exclusion, as evidenced by the low belonging scores among disabled, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ community members across all pilot communities.

To align with Washington's non-discrimination laws and succeed in our role as economic development hubs, Main Street organizations can leverage existing literature that shows how diversity is linked to economic growth, develop targeted resources for anti-discrimination, and amplify voices of diverse communities.

## **6** Intergenerational belonging is a community need that requires intentional design.

Our research reveals a generational divide in downtown belonging: while elders report moderate connection, youth and parents face more barriers, from limited gathering spaces to inaccessible business hours.

These gaps reflect physical and social infrastructure that fails to accommodate life's full spectrum. Intergenerational moments such as mentorship programs or family-friendly events are powerful catalysts for belonging.

Main Streets proactively design for these intersections through inclusive public spaces, adaptive programming, and policies that make downtown engagement possible across all ages. Success looks like a high school student, a busy parent, and a retiree all finding equal stake in downtown community life.

\* Executive Summary

## Application of Learning

As our key findings demonstrate, Main Street organizations and their partners play a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging for everyone who lives, works, and plays in their district.

This report dives into how we came to these findings, starting with why belonging matters, outlining our process and full findings, and concluding with actionable recommendations.

As we strategically build belonging into our work, we can advance our efforts, ensuring that our age-old saying, “Main Streets are for everyone,” is not just an adage but an ethos felt across Washington State.

## Prospective Impact

To bridge analysis with actionable change, this section adapts methods from the transformative research strategies outlined in the Othering and Belonging Institute's "Transformative Research Toolkit: Strategies and Resources for Community-Driven Knowledge and Action." The first three steps outline our organization's process—assessing belonging, diagnosing systemic roots, and co-creating solutions—while the final three identify community stakeholders' critical next steps: selecting interventions, ensuring accountability, and advocating for institutional change. Together, this structure aligns data-driven research with collective action to foster equitable belonging.

### What this report serves to do:



Analyze qualitative and quantitative data to examine community challenges, leveraging surveys and interviews to capture resident perspectives on belonging, alongside archival research and public agency datasets, to contextualize urgent local concerns within broader structural dynamics.



Assess community perspectives and systemic trends by analyzing the root causes of gaps in belonging through examination of existing policies, institutional practices, and cultural contexts.



Share and develop recommendations of potential solutions based on existing contributions from equity-focused organizations across systems of public service, civic engagement, housing and food service centers, advocacy groups, and nonprofits.



## Next steps for community stakeholders:



Evaluate potential belonging initiatives for feasibility, scalability, and cultural relevance, prioritizing solutions with the highest potential for measurable impact on belonging and inclusion.



Ensure accountable implementation of belonging interventions by establishing clear metrics, timelines, and responsible parties to ensure solutions are executed effectively, with opportunities for community feedback and planning.



Advocate for institutional commitments by mobilizing community voices to secure policy changes, resource allocations, and long-term commitments from decision-makers.

## ✦ Exploring Belonging



WALLA WALLA / PHOTO BY SYDNEE MORE PHOTOGRAPHY

Belonging is the profound human need to feel seen, valued, and connected to our neighborhoods, workplaces, and society at large.

In Main Street, we recognize that belonging is not just a social ideal but a measurable force that shapes health, economic vitality, and civic life. This section explores the science of belonging and defines key concepts including its physiological, psychological, and societal impacts. By understanding belonging as both a personal experience and a collective imperative, we can design communities where everyone thrives.

## Why Belonging?

This report, "Belonging in the Evergreen State," applies national insights from Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council's [Belonging Barometer](#) to Washington State, revealing how fostering belonging can strengthen individual health, economic resilience, civic trust, and community cohesion.

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### Belonging & Social Determinants of Health

Main Street organizations have proven their ability to foster belonging through economic revitalization and cultural programming, yet their potential to address deeper social determinants of health remains an opportunity.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention [defines](#) social determinants of health as "the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks."

When barriers such as inadequate transportation, unwelcoming public space, or housing insecurity limit community participation, Main Streets must carefully consider where their responsibility begins and ends.

**Main Street organizations operate at a critical intersection: they are neither social service providers nor political entities, but place-based facilitators with unique power to convene downtown users and shape physical environments that directly impact well-being.**

The challenge lies in defining how to wield that power intentionally without overextending limited resources. This requires clarifying organizational mission and boundaries. Using a "box and circles" framework, Main Streets can define core economic work (the box) while acknowledging concentric circles of potential impact on community health and equity.



For example, advocating for pedestrian-friendly downtown design falls clearly within their purview, while addressing regional housing shortages may require strategic partnerships. The [Downtown Everett Association](#) models this balance by sharing non-partisan candidate surveys during elections, informing voters about downtown priorities without crossing into political endorsement. This approach maintains focus while acknowledging how policy decisions affect Main Street's central goals.

Strategic advocacy and partnerships offer pathways to broader impact. Main Streets can collaborate with public health officials and transit agencies to demonstrate how investments in walkability or public spaces yield both economic returns and health benefits. For youth mental health crises, place-based interventions like pop-up art installations or activating vacant storefronts as teen gathering spaces address needs while staying rooted in downtown revitalization.

The key is to identify leverage points where placemaking intersects with health determinants, then marshal data and partnerships to amplify impact.

Ultimately, Main Streets don't need to solve every systemic challenge to make a meaningful difference. By focusing on their unique position as conveners and place stewards, they can address social determinants of health most directly tied to physical downtown environments and social infrastructure. This might mean championing accessible public spaces that reduce isolation or supporting small businesses that become informal community hubs.

**The most effective organizations will be those that consciously align their mission with community well-being, then deploy their specific skills—facilitation, design thinking, and local advocacy—to create healthier, more inclusive downtowns for all.**

The following research from the [Belonging Barometer](#) demonstrates clear correlations between belonging and traits of healthy people, workplaces, and communities.

# Belonging Barometer Research Summary

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## PHYSICAL HEALTH

A strong sense of belonging directly impacts the body's stress response and overall health. Studies show that when individuals feel connected to their communities, workplaces, and social circles, they experience:

### Lower stress & loneliness

both of which are linked to chronic inflammation, weakened immune function, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>1</sup>

### Higher life satisfaction & reduced pain

suggesting belonging acts as a buffer against mental health struggles like depression and anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

### Longer life expectancy

as social isolation has been found to be as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>3</sup>

In Washington, where disparities in health outcomes persist across racial and economic lines,<sup>4</sup> belonging interventions could help mitigate these gaps by addressing the root causes of stress and disconnection.

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## ECONOMIC & WORKPLACE BENEFITS

Belonging is a powerful driver of economic stability and workforce retention. Individuals who feel valued in their workplaces are:

### More likely to recommend their job

reducing turnover and strengthening local economies.<sup>5</sup>

### More productive & engaged

fostering innovation and collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

With Washington's growing tech sector and service industries, cultivating belonging in the workplace can enhance competitiveness and employee physical and mental well-being, particularly for marginalized employees.

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## CIVIC TRUST & SOCIAL COHESION

Belonging strengthens the fabric of democracy by increasing trust in institutions and neighbors. Those who feel a sense of belonging are:

### More engaged in civic actions

such as voting, volunteering, and community organizing.<sup>7</sup>

### More confident that residents can influence local decision-making

reinforcing participatory democracy.<sup>8</sup>

### More likely to trust local & federal government entities

reducing polarization and fostering cooperative problem-solving.<sup>9</sup>

In a state as politically diverse as Washington, belonging can serve as a bridge across urban-rural and ideological divides.

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## THE COST OF EXCLUSION

When belonging erodes, so does societal stability. The recent rise in hate groups and domestic extremism underscores the dangers of alienation. In Washington, where demographic shifts are reshaping communities, ensuring that no one feels like a "stranger" in their own neighborhood is critical to preventing marginalization and fostering inclusive growth.

Belonging is a *public health imperative*, an *economic asset*, and a *democratic safeguard*. By applying the science of belonging to policy and community programs, Washington can create a healthier, more resilient, and more united state.



## DIVERSITY & BELONGING: A MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT

Contrary to narratives that frame diversity as a source of division, research shows that belonging and diversity reinforce one another. Individuals with *diverse friendships report higher belonging*<sup>10</sup>, while those in ethnically mixed neighborhoods exhibit *less fear of demographic change*<sup>11</sup>. However, many Americans—including Washington residents—still lack cross-cultural connections, highlighting an opportunity for intentional community-building.

“Belonging in the Evergreen State” builds on the methods and frameworks of the Belonging Barometer to tailor these insights to Washington’s unique demographics, including health, graduation, homeownership, and poverty data.

**Our findings underscore that belonging is a necessity for thriving individuals and communities.**

## Developing the Research

Through “Belonging in the Evergreen State,” the Washington State Main Street Program presents a six-month research project to understand the sense of belonging for community members in four downtown districts across Washington State: Chehalis, Ellensburg, Mount Vernon, and Wenatchee. Each town has an established Main Street organization, and *our research seeks to understand if the involvement or presence of a Main Street organization has a positive impact on community members’ sense of belonging.*

Using the [Belonging Barometer framework](#) created by Over Zero and the American Immigration Council, Main Street organizers surveyed individuals with internal connections to the organization and external communities identified through intentional outreach. The results of the survey, alongside interviews with local community leaders, were analyzed using a variety of methods to answer the primary topic of our research.

This section, “Developing the Research,” lays the foundation for the subsequent “Findings” section. After outlining our goals for this pilot project and long-term impacts, we detail the process from site selection through data analysis with discussion of how each step was developed, what it means to analyze data through a belonging lens, and limits of this pilot.

✦  
**Research  
Goals**

✦  
**Site  
Selection**

✦  
**Methodology**

✦  
**Data  
Analysis**

✦  
**Research  
Limitations**

## Research Goals

By identifying key themes and defining the scope of the research, the following research goals serve as a clear roadmap for completing essential tasks and relevant research for the “Belonging in the Evergreen State” report.

These goals are designed to address gaps in sense of belonging for local community members, contribute to Main Street’s primary source data on local history, and inform practical applications of belonging-focused programs for Main Street organizations. Through a structured approach, our research seeks to achieve meaningful advancements in our understanding of sense of belonging for Washington communities.



PORT TOWNSEND / PHOTO BY ERYN SMITH



BELLINGHAM / PHOTO BY THE DOWNTOWN BELLINGHAM PARTNERSHIP



LANGLEY / PHOTO BY THE LANGLEY MAIN STREET ASSOCIATION



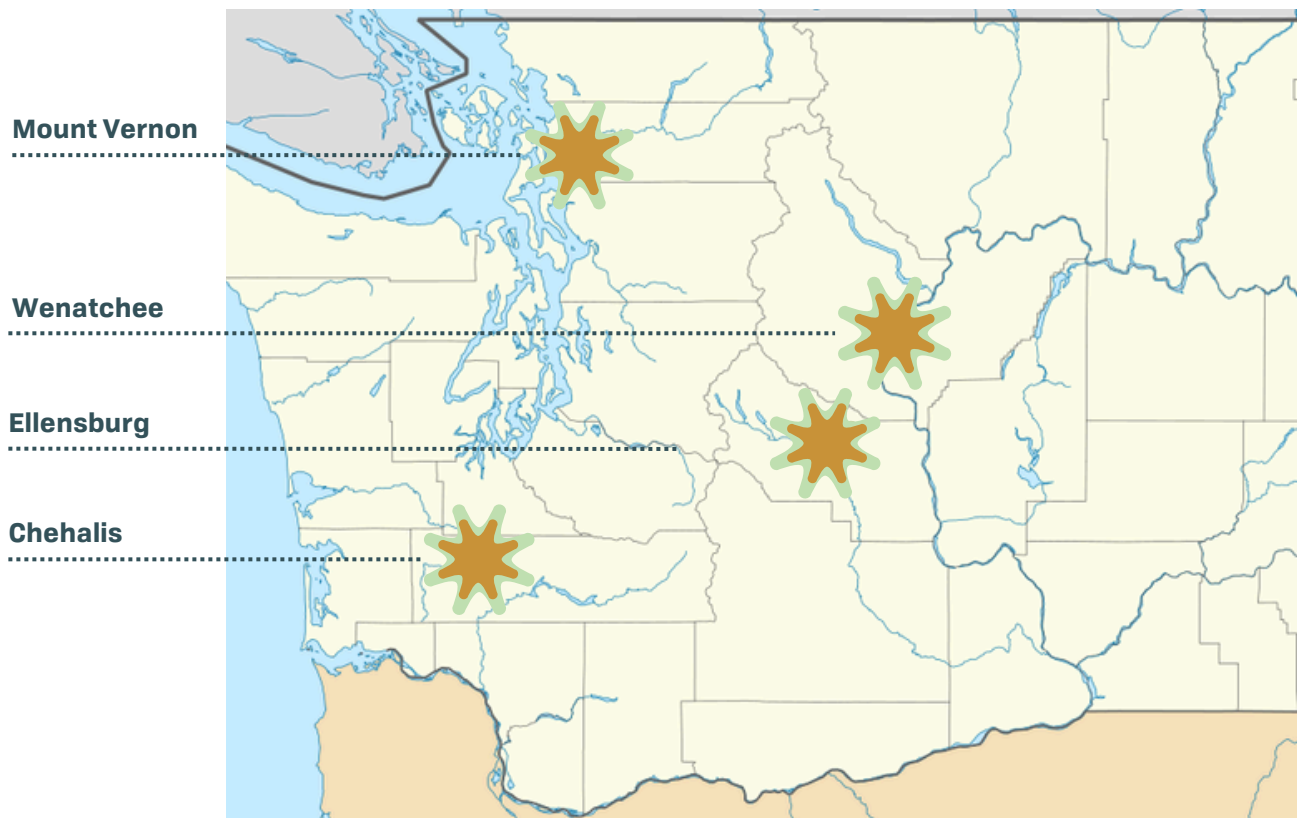
SNOHOMISH / PHOTO BY MAYGEN HETHERINGTON

**Our short-term goals** focus on this six-month research project (the pilot phase), and all aim to establish a baseline and lay the foundation for further work.

Short-Term Goals for This Pilot Phase		
<b>ASSESS THE IMPACT OF MAIN STREET ORGANIZATIONS ON COMMUNITY BELONGING</b>	<b>IDENTIFY DEMOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES IN SENSE OF BELONGING</b>	<b>EVALUATE RESEARCH HYPOTHESES</b>
<p><b>Utilize data analysis</b> to determine whether the involvement or presence of an established Main Street organization positively influences residents’ sense of belonging in the downtown districts of Chehalis, Ellensburg, Mount Vernon, and Wenatchee.</p>	<p><b>Analyze demographic data</b> to pinpoint gaps in which groups report a strong sense of belonging in their downtown areas and which populations may be underrepresented or excluded.</p>	<p><b>Hypothesis 1:</b> Residents engaged with their local Main Street organization report a higher sense of community belonging.</p> <p><b>Hypothesis 2:</b> Current belonging initiatives may not equitably serve all demographic groups, indicating opportunities for more inclusive strategies.</p>

**Our long-term goals** point to our hopes for further research, initiatives, and trainings, as we seek to understand how we can use a belonging framework to evaluate and shape our work moving forward.

Long-Term Goals for Future Directions		
<b>EXPAND METRICS OF SUCCESS TO INCLUDE SOCIAL IMPACT</b>	<b>ENHANCE EQUITY IN BELONGING INITIATIVES</b>	<b>ALIGN COMMUNITY OUTREACH WITH INTENDED OUTCOMES</b>
<p><b>Develop a framework</b> for measuring social return on investment, including belonging and equity indicators, with potential integration into regular local data reporting practices.</p>	<p><b>Investigate strategies</b> to broaden and equitably distribute a sense of belonging through Main Street programs, informing future tools, trainings, and capacity-building for Main Street professionals.</p>	<p><b>Conduct targeted engagement</b> to evaluate whether Main Street initiatives achieve their intended community impacts, including balancing economic development priorities with mitigating displacement risks.</p>



## Site Selection

The four cities in this study—Chehalis, Ellensburg, Mount Vernon, and Wenatchee—represent diverse geographic regions and were selected based on two key criteria:

1. Their demonstrated commitment to the Main Street Approach™ as a framework for downtown revitalization, and
2. Their proactive interest in leveraging this model to advance both economic growth and social outcomes, including fostering belonging among residents.

By focusing on these communities, this research establishes benchmarks for understanding the complexities of belonging across Washington State but also evaluates the direct and indirect impacts of Main Street initiatives and services on community connectedness.



## Methodology

The research methodology for “Belonging in the Evergreen State” utilizes a mixed-method approach to understanding belonging in Chehalis, Ellensburg, Mount Vernon, and Wenatchee. We designed the study to combine quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social and ecological factors influencing the lived experience of local residents in these downtown districts.

Grounded in the [Belonging Barometer](#) framework, our research aims to synthesize statistical inference, thematic analysis, and place-based methodologies to determine whether the presence or involvement of Main Street programs fosters a stronger sense of belonging across diverse Washington communities.

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### SURVEY

One primary research method for this study is quantitative research using data collected from a Belonging Barometer-style survey distributed publicly to internal and external Main Street stakeholders—including downtown residents, workers, business owners, and property owners—in each pilot community. The survey consisted of five

multiple choice questions relating to surveyor demographics, 10 questions relating to belonging measured on a five-point Likert scale, and one additional question to provide written comments and feedback. In total, there were 1,111 responses across four communities—175 responded in Chehalis, 495 in Ellensburg, 660 in Mount Vernon, and 55 in Wenatchee.

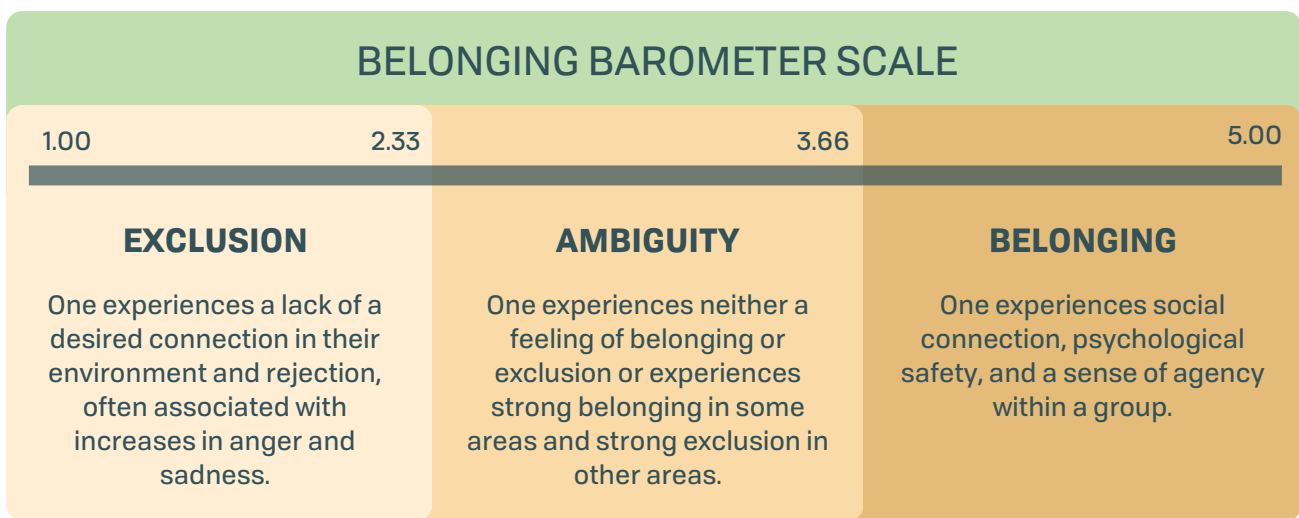
This data is analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequency distributions) to summarize demographic trends and belonging scores, followed by inferential statistical tests including t-tests to compare belonging scores between internal and external stakeholders. Results will be visualized using charts, graphs, and maps to highlight key patterns, such as geographic disparities in belonging composite scores or demographic correlations.

Surveys administered in each pilot community followed the 10-item design from the national Belonging Barometer report. The questions are adapted for the local community, encouraging participants to reflect on their social connections, psychological safety, and ability to participate and influence co-creation in their downtown districts.

Belonging Barometer items are rated on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Statements exhibit either exclusion or belonging, varying the structure to ensure respondents are evaluating each statement separately.

In evaluation, each statement's score was adjusted so that a 1 indicates exclusion and a 5 belonging.

To learn more about the process of developing these questions, please refer to the national [Belonging Barometer](#) report.



**BELONGING BAROMETER QUESTIONS** To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following? (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)

1. I feel emotionally connected to [name of respondent's local community].

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2. People in [local community] welcome and include me in activities.

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3. I am unable to influence decision-making in [local community].

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4. I feel unable to be my whole and authentic self with people in [local community].

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5. People in [local community] value me and my contributions.

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6. My relationships with others in [local community] are as satisfying as I want them to be.

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7. I feel like an "insider" who understands how [local community] works.

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8. I am comfortable expressing my opinions in [local community].

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9. I am treated as "less than" other residents in [local community].

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10. When interacting with people in [local community], I feel like I truly belong.

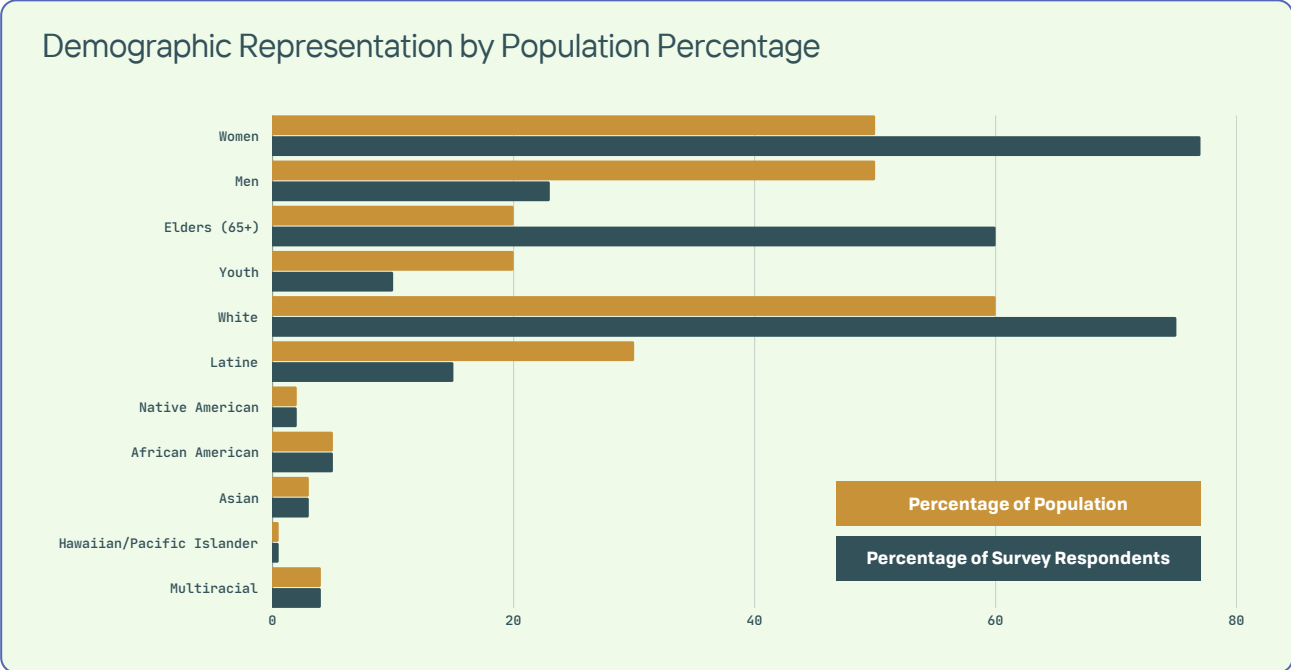
# REPRESENTATION

The Belonging Barometer survey—using Likert scales and open-ended questions—was administered in fall 2024 through partnerships with local organizations to solidify participation and access as many respondents as possible. While the administered survey resulted in a considerable sample size (1,111 responses across four communities), there were demographic disparities in participation based on race, gender, and age, per respondents’ self-reporting.

White survey responses were over-represented in the data (up to 2-24% greater than city population percentages), and Latine participation was proportionally low (by 9-27%). However, there was alignment between Census data and survey participation for Native American, African American, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial groups with regards to representation. Women (between 46.7-51.3% of city populations) represented between 70-83%

of survey respondents, and elders (ages 65+ and between 15.7-24.7% of the population) represented 53-67% of respondents, highlighting major disparities for genders and age groups. Additionally, youths represented fewer respondents (by 10-20% below city populations).

*The demographic disparities between survey respondents and current city populations limit how representative our survey data can be of sense of belonging in each pilot community.*





Each interview was transcribed and categorized based on recurring themes such as inclusion, participation, and emotional connection to ensure a systematic and transparent analysis process. Using narrative analysis, we examined participants' stories to uncover deeper insights into how Main Street organizations influence their sense of belonging, complementing the survey findings with nuanced, qualitative perspectives.



Supplemental research methodologies include comparative analysis of institutional data from sectors of public health, violent crime, civic engagement, and urban planning to evaluate the correlation between health and well-being, sense of belonging, and impact of established Main Street organizations.

## INTERVIEWS

Another primary research method for this study is qualitative research using data collected from 12 in-depth interviews with local entrepreneurs, community leaders, and property owners. Interview questions were developed based on the conclusions from the survey analysis and external research on the historical, cultural, and social context of each pilot community.



# Conceptual Framework for Data Analysis

This study employs a conceptual framework we refer to as the “Belonging Framework” to guide our investigation into the impact of Main Street organizations on the sense of belonging for downtown users in alignment with our organizational goal of amplifying the many voices of preservation and heritage in Washington State.

Informed by social, environmental, and institutional forces impacting belonging

for all members of the community, the Belonging Framework prioritizes analysis rooted in anti-racism, cultural and structural awareness, and equity.

The framework, based on existing literature from the [Othering and Belonging Institute](#) (OBI) at the University of California, Berkeley, identifies core variables of equity and justice for building belonging in our communities and is guided by OBI’s “Ten Principles of Belonging.”

## THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF BELONGING

For more information on the Ten Principles of Belonging, please visit the appendices (see p. 76).

1. The root of the problem is othering.
2. Everyone belongs.
3. Prioritize structural change.
4. Recognize and address power dynamics.
5. Foster agency and inclusive co-creation.
6. Embrace mutual responsibility.
7. Celebrate and value diversity.
8. Prioritize and value relationships.
9. Recognize that identities are multifaceted and dynamic.
10. Harness the power of interconnection.

## Limitations of Research

In this section, we acknowledge the potential constraints or flaws in the study design, considering factors that could affect the generalization or interpretation of the quantitative data. This includes sample size, demographic representation, and time constraints.

### SAMPLE SIZE

The primary limitation to the generalization of the survey results is the sample size. While the sample sizes in Chehalis, Ellensburg, and Mount Vernon are strong, the sample size in Wenatchee (55 respondents) is notably smaller. This sample size is particularly limited as Mount Vernon and Wenatchee have similar city populations (approx. 35,000). Wenatchee's survey sample size limits the diversity of data available about sense of belonging in their downtown district, impacting the accuracy or significance of our findings. One way to remedy this in future studies is to increase the number of interviews conducted on the site visit.

### DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION IN SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS

Another limitation of our study is the survey distribution method. Survey distribution was conducted internally with all stakeholders including board members, staff, and volunteers and externally to downtown residents and property owners.





Notably, many participants were affiliated with Main Street organizations. Their perspectives may introduce bias, as they often reflect institutional priorities rather than the full range of community experiences, particularly among marginalized groups. For example, white, cisgender, able-bodied board members frequently described environments as welcoming, while broader community data revealed disparities in belonging.

In the future, research should intentionally center voices outside organizational personnel to better assess the true impact of Main Street programs.

Due to time constraints, engagement with local Tribal and disabled communities—groups reporting the lowest belonging scores across all pilot communities in the study—was limited.

While interviews included invaluable perspectives from (high school and college age) youth, Black and Latine people of color, and non-citizens, broader community perspectives were underrepresented. This pilot underscored that meaningful community engagement requires significantly more time than is often anticipated, particularly for preparation, ethical outreach, conducting and transcribing interviews, and thorough analysis.

Future research should also prioritize deeper collaboration and relationship building with these underrepresented groups to ensure that their voices are centered in shaping equitable belonging initiatives.

## \* Findings

“I dreamed about a culture of belonging. I still dream that dream. I contemplate what our lives would be like if we knew how to cultivate awareness, to live mindfully, peacefully; if we learned habits of being that would bring us closer together, that would help us build beloved community.” –bell hooks<sup>12</sup>

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The vision of a beloved community offers a perspective of transformative change rooted in principles of empathy, inclusion, and interdependence—many of the core values inherent to the concept of belonging. Developed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and advanced by civil rights leadership,<sup>13</sup> the term “beloved community” embodies the framework we use in this report to communicate the complex nature of belonging.

By prioritizing structural change, celebrating and valuing diversity, and committing to the idea that everyone can and deserves to belong in our communities, Main Streets can utilize their tried-and-true organizing framework along with new measures of success to proactively increase community members' sense of belonging.

The Washington State Main Street Program aligns with this vision through its mission to strengthen downtown economies, preserve local character and identity, and steward vibrant, inclusive places for visitors, workers, and residents. This study began with a desire to understand the state of belonging for the downtown districts we serve in Washington State.

Through the administration of the Belonging Barometer survey and supplemental interviews, Washington Main Street researchers were able to investigate whether the involvement or presence of an established Main Street organization in a city has a positive impact on community members' sense of belonging in four specific downtown districts.



## State Trends

National survey data from the [Belonging Barometer](#) reveals widespread experiences of non-belonging across American institutions, with 64-74% of respondents feeling disconnected in workplaces, communities, and the nation—often as ambiguous belonging rather than outright exclusion.<sup>14</sup>

Even intimate spaces like friendships (44%) and families (40%) show notable disconnection, with 17% of Americans experiencing non-belonging across all life domains.<sup>15</sup>

Washington State's data mirrors this ambiguity at the local level. While those directly affiliated with Main Street organizations (staff, board, volunteers, etc.)

report strong downtown belonging, most demographic groups—including marginalized identities and frequent downtown users—show neutral or ambivalent scores.

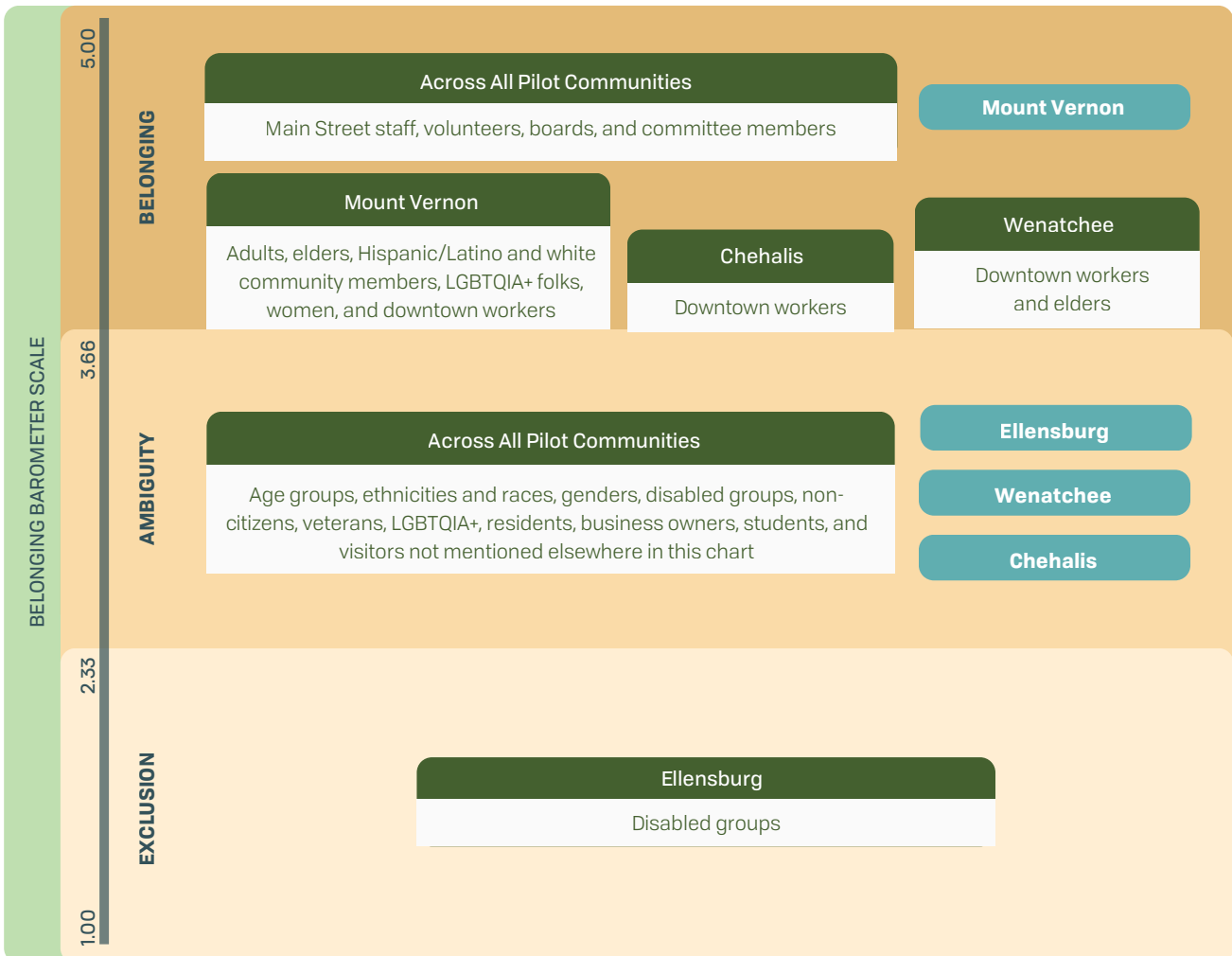
**This suggests that while intentional program engagement fosters connection, broader belonging gaps persist across communities, aligning with national patterns of social disconnection.**

## \* Findings

### Measuring Belonging: The Likert Scale

Across pilot communities, many respondents reported an ambiguous sense of belonging in their downtown district. Notably, several subcommunities reported a sense of belonging: Main Street staff, volunteers, boards, and committee members (across communities); downtown workers (in Mount Vernon, Chehalis, and Wenatchee); elders (Mount Vernon and Wenatchee only); and adults, LGBTQIA+, women, and Hispanic/Latino and white community members (Mount Vernon only). Disabled groups in the Ellensburg community were the only subgroup to report a sense of exclusion.

This chart categorizes these groups into three categories—belonging, ambiguity, and exclusion. Specific subcommunities are depicted in green, while each Main Street Community’s overall sense of belonging is depicted in blue. The following pages dive deeper into these findings.



## \* Findings

# By Community

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This section dives into each of our pilot communities—Chehalis, Mount Vernon, Wenatchee, and Ellensburg—with consistent metrics used for assessing, comparing, and tracking belonging in downtowns. Liz Arias, the Main Street Representation and Belonging Intern who conducted these site visits, introduces each place with a brief first-person narrative and a historical introduction to the area. Each community profile then presents the study's key data points in three parts: survey results, interview highlights, and structural data.

In each community, we worked with the local Main Street organization to distribute surveys and set up interviews during our site visits. Survey analysis that identifies individuals with organizational ties refers to the staff, board members, and volunteers of their respective local Main Streets: Experience Chehalis, the Mount Vernon Downtown Association, the Wenatchee Downtown Association, and the Ellensburg Downtown Association.

### Survey results

Quantitative findings from the Belonging Barometer, reporting sense of belonging scores across demographics and downtown roles (residents, workers, business owners, visitors).

### Interview Highlights

Direct insights from community members, including underrepresented voices (students, women of color, LGBTQIA+ migrants) and institutional perspectives.

### Structural Data\*

Publicly available research and local records on factors influencing belonging (e.g., infrastructure, historical inequities, policies).

\* Structural data was sourced from the AARP Livability Index™, which weighs 61 indicators of livability from 50+ data sources to quantify quality of life in cities and neighborhoods across the U.S. A perfect score (100) in any category indicates an area is “the best in the country in meeting all the metrics.” The highest overall livability score given in 2025 was a 73 out of 100. Learn more about the AARP Livability Index™ and view each community's full profile at [livabilityindex.aarp.org](https://livabilityindex.aarp.org).

\* Findings

## By Community

# Ellensburg

"On my last site visit, I witnessed something extraordinary—a farewell dinner for the outgoing president of the Ellensburg Downtown Association. As plates were cleared and laughter filled the room, he stood up, not to give a generic goodbye, but to read personal speeches he'd written for every single person at the table. One by one, he celebrated their contributions—the director who steered the strategic plan, the comm-

unity developer who organized festivals, and the intern who brought fresh ideas. That night, belonging wasn't an abstract idea. It was handwritten notes, called-out names, and the unshakable sense that no one was invisible here. In Ellensburg, even goodbyes were a reminder: this town doesn't just work together; it recognizes the worth of each other."  
—Liz Arias

## A CITY OF REVITALIZATION AND COMMUNITY PRIDE

Located on the ancestral lands of the K'ti'tas and Pshwánapam bands (now part of the Yakama Nation), Ellensburg has served as a natural gathering place since time immemorial. The city of 18,500 became a railroad and agricultural hub after 1886, famously rebuilding within days of the devastating 1889 fire. Today, it preserves its Western pioneer architecture as a National Historic District while celebrating its multicultural roots through events like the century-old Ellensburg Rodeo (established in 1923), Juneteenth Jubilee, and Pride Parade.

The Ellensburg Downtown Association, founded in 2004, fosters vitality through

initiatives like the Downtown Awards, Buskers in the Burg festival, and the "Possibilities Tour" of vacant storefronts. Collaborations with Central Washington University and local artists reflect their commitment to cultural programming, including walking poetry tours and mural restoration.

Ellensburg balances its Western roots, like rodeos and ranch culture, with progressive community-building, from hosting Washington's 1977 Women's Conference to recent equity-focused projects. Its identity thrives at the intersection of university life, agricultural tradition, and artistic expression.



## SURVEY RESULTS: ELLENSBURG

Ellensburg reports the lowest overall belonging (3.33/5) among all four surveyed cities, with significant exclusion risks for marginalized groups. While organizational ties foster belonging for some, most residents—especially disabled individuals and those with unreported demographics—experience weak social connections and psychological safety.

### \* **Belonging**

Individuals with direct organizational ties (board members, staff, volunteers) are the only ones who reported belonging in Ellensburg (4.05).

### \* **Ambiguity**

All demographic groups, including various age groups, racial/ethnic identities, genders, disability statuses, immigration statuses, veteran statuses, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and downtown user types (residents, business owners, students, and visitors) demonstrate ambiguous or neutral belonging scores.

Notably, white men and women, who represent the majority of the sample size and who report belonging in other pilot communities, report ambiguity in Ellensburg.

### \* **Exclusion**

No group scored in the exclusion range (1-2.34), but non-affiliated residents and marginalized groups, specifically gender-diverse residents and non-citizens, show weaker belonging on the lower end of the ambiguity scale.



ELLENSBURG / PHOTO BY THE ELLENSBURG DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION

## From the Ellensburg Community

Pulled from qualitative survey responses and on-site interviews, these excerpts share a snapshot of downtown stakeholders' relationship with and priorities for downtown.

*"Everyone has a story, and I think that's a way to improve a sense of belonging. It's just making people feel like they belong. I know that kind of sounds redundant, but I think that's kind of a fundamental aspect of it. **Telling the stories of the diverse communities that live in Ellensburg.** Telling people about the history."*

—Ellensburg Downtown Association volunteer

*"One thing I was so impressed with is **having a sensory space available this year.** One of my grandchildren is autistic. For children, if it just got too much and they just needed some down time, they could go there. Stellar call, absolutely wonderful. And they had a counselor there."*

—Ellensburg Downtown Association volunteer

*"The [Western] aesthetic of this town relies on a racist foundation of Native cultural exploitation and appropriation. The prevalence of Christian themes and churches combined with a noticeable absence of Native communities, studios, performance groups, businesses, opportunities, etc., really **demonstrates that this place is not for Native people unless they are assimilated Natives. We do not belong here.**"*

—Survey respondent

## Structural Data from AARP's Livability Index: Ellensburg

Ellensburg emerges as a relatively strong performer in overall livability, with its score of 58 placing it 10 points higher than the average U.S. city.

Strengths in civic and social involvement—including high voter turnout and access to culture, arts, and entertainment—are coupled with strong transportation and health indicators, like high drinking water and air quality, improving healthcare access, and a local Complete Streets policy to supplement Washington's statewide policy.

Housing presents a complex profile: high availability of multi-family housing and subsidized housing contrasts with high housing costs that present a burden to the average household, though access to grocery stores, parks, and libraries is high.

Opportunity gaps point to systemic inequities. Income inequality is high, and job availability is low. The percentage of patients satisfied with their health care is moderate, as is the percentage of people with access to exercise.

Ellensburg's high activity density indicates compact neighborhoods that AARP states generally "make it more likely that neighbors will have the type of chance encounters that build community."

### Livability Snapshot

#### CIVIC & SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

**Voter Turnout:** 71.8% (High)  
**Broadband Access:** 82.2% (Moderate)

#### HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

**Air & Water Quality:** High  
**Smoking Rate:** 11.1% (Low)  
**Near-Roadway Pollution Exposure:** 1.89% (High)  
**People with Access to Exercise Opportunities:** 74.6% (Moderate)  
**Preventable Hospital Rates:** Low  
**Patient Satisfaction:** 72% (Moderate)

#### HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION

**Housing Costs:** \$1,325/month (High)  
**Housing Cost Burden:** High  
**Housing Vacancy Rate:** 6.0%  
**Multi-Family Housing:** 49.8% of units (High)  
**Household Transportation Costs:** \$14,818/year (Low)  
**Walkability:** High

#### OPPORTUNITY

**Activity Density:** High  
**Income Inequality:** High  
**Job Availability:** 0.64 jobs/worker (Low)

#### PRIORITY INVESTMENTS

Address opportunity gaps and housing affordability to leverage existing strengths in connectivity, community engagement, health, and the environment.

AARP indicates whether cities score in the bottom, middle, or top tertile nationally. For simplicity, we have replaced tertiles with "low," "moderate," and "high" and included only straightforward quantitative data.

“Mount Vernon’s downtown embodies the power of intentional community-building. Wide sidewalks and pedestrian-friendly streets draw people together, creating spaces where young people, families, and business owners interact naturally.

“The Wabash Project, a beloved art studio and shop, exemplifies how Mount Vernon’s live-work spaces create deeper connections—where owners don’t just run businesses but

truly live alongside their customers, blending daily life with community service.

“In Mount Vernon, urban design and community values align to create a place where belonging happens organically—in sidewalk conversations, shared public spaces, and daily interactions that knit the neighborhood together.” –Liz Arias

## A CITY OF RIVERFRONT HERITAGE AND CULTURAL VIBRANCY

Nestled along the Skagit River, Mount Vernon’s history evolved in relation to the water, from the Upper Skagit Tribe’s centuries of stewardship to settlers’ 1878 development on the riverbanks. Despite frequent floods, the city has preserved its historic core, including landmarks like the 1926 Lincoln Theatre. Today, it thrives as a cultural hub, hosting events like the Tulip Festival Street Fair and Illuminight River Walk. Prominent industries uplifting the local economy include food processing and health care.

The Mount Vernon Downtown Association (MVDA), founded in 1999, drives downtown vitality through events, small

business support, and historic preservation. Recent initiatives include Main Street America’s Equitable Entrepreneurial Ecosystems program and business collaborations through the Mount Vernon Pop-Up, showing MVDA’s dedication to celebrating and valuing diversity in their local economy.

Mount Vernon’s culture balances deep Indigenous roots, agricultural pride, and a festive spirit—from its annual summer celebration to library tie-dye events drawing hundreds. Its identity is both historic and adaptive, honoring the river that shaped it while fostering inclusivity through multicultural partnerships.



## SURVEY RESULTS: MOUNT VERNON

Mount Vernon demonstrates the strongest sense of belonging among all surveyed cities, with an overall belonging score of 3.71—the only community of the four to reach the "belonging" threshold (3.67-5). However, variations exist across different groups and dimensions of belonging. Additionally, we recognize that the over-representation of white women (a group that tended toward high belonging scores) in the survey sample may skew the overall belonging score for Mount Vernon community members.

### \* Belonging

There is a broad sense of belonging across most groups in Mount Vernon. Adults, elders, women, and white, Hispanic/Latino, and LGBTQIA+ residents all report belonging level scores (3.67+). Individuals with direct organizational ties (board members, staff, volunteers) report the strongest belonging (4.10), with workplace connections also fostering belonging (3.81).

Additionally, individuals who identified as living, studying in, or visiting downtown Mount Vernon and downtown business and property owners report a sense of belonging (3.71).

### \* Ambiguity

Youth (3.56), disabled residents (3.63), Native (3.33), and multi-racial (3.46) residents fall in the ambiguous range. Men (3.52) and veterans (3.25) also report ambiguous scores. Survey participants who identified as Asian, Black, Middle Eastern and North African, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, non-binary, and/or non-citizens all reported sense of ambiguity, though sample sizes were not representative and therefore non-conclusive for the Mount Vernon populations.

### \* Exclusion

No group scored in or near the exclusion range (1-2.34).



MOUNT VERNON / PHOTO BY THE MOUNT VERNON DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION

## From the Mount Vernon Community

Pulled from qualitative survey responses and on-site interviews, these excerpts share a snapshot of downtown stakeholders' relationship with and priorities for downtown.

*"Although I may be connected to [downtown Mount Vernon], I feel the ethnic communities are not able to own buildings and have as much representation in stores as white people do."*

—Survey respondent

*"Kids feel they have to fit into this group that is violent because they need to be cool, or that's the only place they feel that they can belong is with people who are destructive to their health. Having a [youth] space and mental support—I think that's just really big at our high school."*

—Student and Mount Vernon Downtown Association volunteer

*"After COVID, we redesigned downtown to be more accessible—fixing sidewalks, widening paths, and improving crosswalks. These changes helped everyone. Parents with strollers, older residents, delivery workers—even people just window shopping found downtown easier to navigate. Good accessibility design doesn't just remove barriers for some; it creates a better experience for all. It's a great example of trying to foster belonging."*

—Mount Vernon Downtown Association volunteer

# Structural Data from AARP's Livability Index: Mount Vernon

Mount Vernon scores well on overall livability with a score of 54 (6 points higher than the average U.S. city), offering robust cultural assets, strong walkability, and high access to essential amenities like stores, parks, libraries, and cultural institutions.

The city excels in civic and social engagement, with high activity density (which contributes to community building), a local policy supporting Complete Streets, and roads designed for all modes of transportation, ensuring safety and comfort for all pedestrians, cyclists, drivers, and transit users. Connectivity extends into the home, with nearly every resident having high-speed, competitively priced broadband service.

Health metrics are generally positive, with low preventable hospitalizations and smoking rates, though patient satisfaction and access to exercise opportunities are average. High air quality supports health as well, but challenges persist with drinking water violations and near-roadway pollution.

The city struggles with housing affordability and supply, with vacancy rates dropping from 7.3% to 2.6% over the last decade. Housing cost burden (average housing costs as a percentage of income) has lessened in that time but remains high.

## Livability Snapshot

**CIVIC & SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

**Voter Turnout:** 68.3% (High)  
**Broadband Access:** 95.8% (High)

**HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT**

**Air Quality:** High  
**Drinking Water Quality:** Moderate  
**Smoking Rate:** 13.0% (Low)  
**Near-Roadway Pollution Exposure:** 5.95% (High)  
**People with Access to Exercise Opportunities:** 76.2% (Moderate)  
**Preventable Hospital Rates:** Low  
**Patient Satisfaction:** 69.5% (Moderate)

**HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION**

**Housing Costs:** \$1,535/month (High)  
**Housing Cost Burden:** High  
**Housing Vacancy Rate:** 2.6%  
**Household Transportation Costs:** \$15,329/year (Low)  
**Walkability:** High

**OPPORTUNITY**

**Activity Density:** High  
**Income Inequality:** Low  
**Job Availability:** 0.70 jobs/worker (Moderate)

**PRIORITY INVESTMENTS**

Robust civic and social assets provide a foundation for addressing housing challenges and supporting growth in categories of health and the environment.

AARP indicates whether cities score in the bottom, middle, or top tertile nationally. For simplicity, we have replaced tertiles with "low," "moderate," and "high" and included only straightforward quantitative data.

## By Community

# Chehalis

“In Chehalis, a city nestled in the heart of Lewis County, I was struck by the way people lit up when talking about their community. In my first interview, local business owner Stephanie Von Moos eagerly described her love for the small-town atmosphere and scribbled recommendations for backpacking trails in the nearby Cascade foothills.

“At a local coffee shop, the barista paused to explain how residents had shaped the downtown rejuvenation

plan through town halls and grassroots advocacy. When I visited Book N’ Brush, the owner proudly pointed to repurposed historic buildings, their stalls brimming with goods that told stories of local collaboration and connection.

“This was civic pride in action and a living testament to belonging. In Chehalis, the land, the trails, and the shared future of downtown are all threads in a tapestry of collective care.” -Liz Arias

## A CITY OF STRATEGIC LOCATION AND INDUSTRY

Strategically positioned along the Chehalis River and later Interstate 5, the city of 7,500 developed on the unceded ancestral lands of the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, becoming a hub for logging, agriculture, and World War II-era Boeing manufacturing.

Its downtown shifted with each era, from railroad-driven commerce in the 1800s to mid-century mall development, while retaining its identity as a crossroads between major metros. Experience Chehalis, the local Main Street organization, launched in 2008 to revital-

ize the historic core. Recent projects, like the Imagine Downtown Chehalis initiative and Nature’s Library mural, reflect its focus on small business grants (totaling \$168,000 to date) and cultural placemaking.

Chehalis embodies layered histories: the enduring presence of the Chehalis Tribes, a legacy of women-led wartime industry, and 21st-century efforts to honor its past while reimagining its downtown as an inclusive gathering space.

CHEHALIS / PHOTO BY JESSE SMITH



## SURVEY RESULTS: CHEHALIS

Chehalis residents report an **ambiguous overall sense of belonging (3.55/5)**, with scores falling in the mid-range across most groups. However, key insights reveal variances in how different populations experience inclusion.

### \* **Belonging**

Individuals with direct organizational ties (board members, staff, volunteers) report the strongest belonging (4.02), with workplace connections also fostering belonging (3.81).

### \* **Ambiguity**

Elders (3.58), disabled residents (3.30), and racial/ethnic minorities (3.52 average for non-white groups) hover near the lower end of the ambiguous range. Those unconnected to Main Street consistently report neutral to low belonging across all categories.

Participants who identified as youth, LGBTQIA+, and veterans also report ambiguous scores, but the sample size is not representative and therefore non-conclusive for the Chehalis population.

### \* **Exclusion**

No group scored in the exclusion range (1-2.34), but non-affiliated residents and marginalized groups show weaker belonging than those tied to local Main Street organizations.



CHEHALIS / PHOTOS BY JESSE SMITH

## From the Chehalis Community

Pulled from qualitative survey responses and on-site interviews, these excerpts share a snapshot of downtown stakeholders' relationship with and priorities

*"[Experience Chehalis] met with me, explained their work, and guided me through applying for a grant. Thanks to them, I got my signage. **Without that help, it would've taken me years to save up.**"*

—Business owner

*"I think our downtown core could really use **more public gathering spaces**—both indoor and outdoor.... The Imagine Downtown revitalization plans [a recent city-wide planning initiative led by Experience Chehalis] seem to prioritize this, which is **a great step forward.**"*

—Local resident

*"I wish there were **more family-friendly places** to visit downtown...things that keep my family spending time downtown."*

—Survey respondent

*"I feel as a citizen of Lewis County, **I have no ability to make my voice heard** or the state and city officials to properly take care of their responsibilities to us as the taxpayer."*

—Survey respondent

## Structural Data from AARP's Livability Index: Chehalis

Chehalis ranks just above average on overall livability, with a score of 51, three points above the average U.S. city, reflecting both community strengths and significant challenges.

The community demonstrates strong civic participation and maintains important cultural assets. Ample access to groceries, parks, and libraries pairs with high walkability and high activity density, contributing to regular opportunities for community interaction.

Critical service gaps appear in health care and environmental safety: a shortage of health care professionals has worsened over the past decade, as has patient satisfaction. Environmental factors emerge as a particular concern, with a significant percentage of residents exposed to near-roadway pollution and above-average exposure to health violations in drinking water, creating health equity challenges for vulnerable populations.

While high housing costs burden residents, that burden—based on a ratio of average income to housing costs—has improved over the past decade, and Chehalis shows progress in public safety with declining crime rates.

### Livability Snapshot

#### CIVIC & SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

**Voter Turnout:** 68.9% (High)  
**Broadband Access:** 91.8% (Moderate)

#### HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

**Air Quality:** High  
**Drinking Water Quality:** Moderate  
**Smoking Rate:** 15.4% (Moderate)  
**Near-Roadway Pollution Exposure:** 13.55% (High)  
**People with Access to Exercise Opportunities:** 57.4% (Low)  
**Preventable Hospital Rates:** Low  
**Patient Satisfaction:** 60.0% (Low)

#### HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION

**Housing Costs:** \$1,238/month (High)  
**Housing Cost Burden:** High  
**Housing Vacancy Rate:** 6.6%  
**Household Transportation Costs:** \$15,891/year (Low)  
**Walkability:** High

#### OPPORTUNITY

**Activity Density:** High  
**Income Inequality:** Low  
**Job Availability:** 0.59 jobs/worker (Low)

#### PRIORITY INVESTMENTS

Build on strengths in civic and community health to target investments in health care, including mitigating environmental risks, to address intersecting disparities.

AARP indicates whether cities score in the bottom, middle, or top tertile nationally. For simplicity, we have replaced tertiles with "low," "moderate," and "high" and included only straightforward quantitative data.

“The drive into Wenatchee prepares you for its magic. Sweeping valleys give way to the mighty Columbia River, a reminder of the natural abundance that shapes life here. This same spirit of vitality pulses through downtown, where elders take their daily strolls, greeting neighbors and shopkeepers with familiar ease.

“The transformation of the former industrial steel plant into Pybus Public

“Market epitomizes Wenatchee's innovative heart—now a bustling hub where diverse crowds gather over meals and music, its steel beams bearing witness to how this community reimagines spaces for connection.

“In Wenatchee, the spirit of belonging flows as naturally as the river, from mountain vistas to market squares.”

—Liz Arias

## A CITY OF REVITALIZATION AND COMMUNITY PRIDE

Wenatchee's downtown has evolved from solving practical issues like parking problems to becoming an award-winning model for urban revitalization, earning the prestigious Great American Main Street Award. Recent developments like the Majestic Apartments (212 units with retail spaces) and renovation of the historic Old Wenatchee Jailhouse reflect a shift toward vibrant, mixed-use downtown living. Grassroots efforts, such as business owner-led beautification projects, demonstrate the community's commitment to creating an attractive, thriving city center.

The Wenatchee Downtown Association, founded in 1986, drives economic growth through its Four Point Approach:

outreach, economic development, design, and promotions. The organization celebrates local businesses through annual awards and events like the 13th annual Girls' Night Out and community appreciation dinners that highlight downtown's role as the heart of Wenatchee.

Wenatchee embraces both its agricultural roots and urban aspirations, blending historic preservation with modern development. The community takes pride in collaborative beautification efforts and events that strengthen downtown as a gathering space, embodying the city's cultural identity through initiatives like the downtown awards program and volunteer-led design.



## SURVEY RESULTS: WENATCHEE

Wenatchee residents report an ambiguous overall sense of belonging (3.53/5), with most groups falling in the mid-range. While some positive indicators exist, the survey reveals significant gaps in social connection and inclusion for non-affiliated residents.

### \* **Belonging**

Individuals with direct organizational ties (board members, staff, volunteers) report the strongest belonging (3.78), with workplace connections also fostering belonging (3.78). Elders also report a relatively strong sense of belonging (3.71).

### \* **Ambiguity**

Adults (3.46), all racial/ethnic groups (3.36 average), men (3.43), and women (3.53) report a sense of ambiguity. Those unconnected to Main Street consistently report neutral to low belonging across all categories.

Participants who identified as gender diverse, LGBTQIA+, disabled, or veterans also report ambiguous scores, but the sample size is not representative and therefore non-conclusive for the Wenatchee population.

### \* **Exclusion**

No group scored in the exclusion range (1-2.34), but non-affiliated residents and marginalized groups show weaker belonging than those tied to local Main Street organizations.



## From the Wenatchee Community

Pulled from qualitative survey responses and on-site interviews, these excerpts share a snapshot of downtown stakeholders' relationship with and priorities for downtown.

***“Wenatchee Downtown Association inspires me to think bigger.... I wanted to bring more art-centered business to our warehouse space, and Rosa [the Executive Director] suggested our building could become the downtown Wenatchee art district.”***

—Local business owner

***“We need to truly understand what diversity means. Someone recently told me, 'Don't just say DEI. Say the full words—Diversity, Equity, Inclusion—and ask people: Are you really against these concepts?' Because **hiding behind acronyms lets politics distort what should be simple values we all share.**”***

—Staff at Northwest Equity Alliance

***“Downtown is such a special place because it's where connection happens. I really believe cities and governments have a responsibility to create spaces where people can connect and have a good quality of life.... A thriving downtown does so much: economic development, community connections, business growth, stewardship.... **It's really important for people to feel tied to their community**—no matter which parts they feel most interested in.”***

—Former city leader

# Structural Data from AARP's Livability Index: Wenatchee

Wenatchee emerges as a livability leader in our pilot communities, with its score of 60 placing it 12 points higher than the average U.S. city.

The city's social fabric shows vibrancy through strong civic participation and cultural offerings. High walkability and a local policy supporting Complete Streets complement each other to support community connections, as evidenced in high activity density.

Over the past decade, Wenatchee has seen significant increases in housing costs and declines in vacancy rates, but a concurrent increase in average income has eased the housing cost burden over that same time span. Crime rates are decreasing but remain higher than the national average.

Patient satisfaction has risen dramatically in the last decade, and shortages in health care professionals, though worse than the national average, are improving. High water quality, low smoking rates, and high access to exercise opportunities also support community health, though residents face high near-roadway pollution and experience days with unhealthy air quality at rates over twice the national average.

## Livability Snapshot

### CIVIC & SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

**Voter Turnout: 68.7%** (High)  
**Broadband Access: 93.9%** (Moderate)

### HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

**Air Quality:** Low  
**Drinking Water Quality:** High  
**Smoking Rate:** 12.6% (Low)  
**Near-Roadway Pollution Exposure:** 6.62% (High)  
**People with Access to Exercise Opportunities:** 84.9% (High)  
**Patient Satisfaction: 78%** (High)

### HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION

**Housing Costs:** \$1,202/month (High)  
**Housing Cost Burden:** Moderate  
**Housing Vacancy Rate:** 3.0%  
**Household Transportation Costs:** \$14,962/year (Low)  
**Walkability:** High

### OPPORTUNITY

**Activity Density:** High  
**Income Inequality:** Moderate  
**Job Availability:** 0.75 jobs/worker (Moderate)

### PRIORITY INVESTMENTS

Build on ongoing quality of life improvements and civic and social strengths to advance community health outcomes and economic mobility for all residents.

AARP indicates whether cities score in the bottom, middle, or top tertile nationally. For simplicity, we have replaced tertiles with "low," "moderate," and "high" and included only straightforward quantitative data.

## Systemic Issues Affecting Belonging

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This section examines systemic issues affecting belonging in Washington's communities—from intergenerational exclusion to institutional inequities—that extend far beyond any single organization's purview. While Main Streets are not governmental entities tasked with solving housing shortages, health care gaps, or structural racism, they occupy a unique niche as place-based stewards of downtown districts.

The following analysis explores where and how Main Street organizations can responsibly intervene within their capacity: by activating underutilized spaces, fostering connective programming, and advocating for accessible and inclusive design in ways that complement critical public services.

The subsections ahead confront uncomfortable truths about who feels unwelcome in our downtowns and why. These challenges demand clear-eyed recognition of Main Street's constraints: these organizations cannot single-handedly resolve youth mental health crises, undo centuries of settler colonialism, or restore faith in democracy. But they can leverage their grassroots

influence to create environments of belonging—whether through youth co-designed public spaces, anti-racism training for business owners, or partnerships with Tribal nations to honor Indigenous presence in downtown narratives.

The recommendations that follow are tailored to distinct downtown users (business owners, residents, workers, and visitors), offering actionable steps aligned with Main Street's core mission of historic preservation and economic vitality through community connection.

This is not a call to over-extend but to strategically focus on interventions where place stewardship and relationship-building can mitigate gaps in social infrastructure.

**When Main Streets play to their strengths—community connections, local knowledge, and public-space creativity—they become catalysts for belonging.**

## The Youth Belonging Gap: Building Inclusive Downtowns for All Generations

Survey data reveals a pattern across all four pilot communities: young people (ages 18 and younger) report lower levels of belonging than other age groups, often feeling uncertain about whether downtown spaces welcome them. Interviews with community members suggest this ambiguity stems from multiple gaps—limited youth-centered facilities, inadequate mental health support, and few opportunities for meaningful engagement. Many young people specifically expressed a desire for more volunteer opportunities and professional development programs, with one student proposing developing a centralized coordinator role to catalogue all available opportunities in the city.

When young people cannot find belonging in mainstream community spaces or pathways to contribute and grow, they may turn to alternative social environments that, while providing connection, could expose them to harmful influences or risky behaviors.

This dynamic reflects a broader public health crisis, with 50% of lifetime mental illnesses emerging by age 14<sup>16</sup> and alarming rates of teen depression, suicidal ideation, and disproportionate impacts on Native American and LGBTQIA+ youth.<sup>17</sup>

The data underscores an urgent need to reframe how communities invest in youth belonging. King County's [2016-2022 Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan](#) offers a valuable model, emphasizing proactive investment in root causes rather than reactive crisis management.

For downtown organizations, this means shifting from viewing youth engagement as peripheral programming to treating it as central to community vitality—whether through creating leadership pipelines, skill-building workshops, or better systems to connect youth with existing opportunities.

A Main Street cannot be truly inclusive while significant portions of its future residents—young people—feel disconnected from its spaces, decision-making processes, and pathways to meaningful participation.



Effective strategies must balance bold vision with practical implementation. This could include co-creating youth-designed spaces in underutilized downtown areas, establishing teen councils to inform Main Street initiatives, or partnering with mental health providers to offer services in accessible, non-stigmatized settings.<sup>18</sup> The goal should be to move beyond token "youth events" and instead embed young people's needs into the fabric of downtown planning—from physical design to cultural production.

A centralized youth opportunity portal, as suggested by students, could democratize access to internships, mentorships, and volunteer roles while giving organizations a clearer way to engage young talent. Particularly for marginalized youth, these efforts must be culturally responsive and developed in authentic partnership with the communities they aim to serve.

Main Streets have a unique opportunity to bridge this belonging gap by reimagining downtowns as intergenerational hubs for connection and growth. By applying lessons from frameworks like King County's plan—with its emphasis on measurable outcomes and adaptive approaches—Main Streets can help transform downtowns into places where young people don't just visit but truly see themselves as stakeholders and leaders.

This requires acknowledging that youth belonging is an economic and cultural imperative that shapes the future vitality of our communities.

**When young people feel valued, visible, and invested in public spaces—with clear pathways to contribute and develop skills—the entire community reaps the benefits of their engagement, creativity, and leadership.**



## Who Belongs? How Discrimination Shapes Washington's Public Spaces

From sundown towns to discriminatory housing policies, historical legacies of racial exclusion in Washington continue to shape barriers to belonging in our downtowns today.

National belonging research also reveals that homogeneous groups—communities lacking diversity—demonstrate reduced critical engagement with facts and increased insularity.<sup>19</sup>

When communities resist Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, they perpetuate systems rooted in colonial apartheid structures that deliberately marginalize Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, disabled individuals, and LGBTQIA+ populations.

Proactive DEI implementation is a moral imperative for public institutions, including municipal governments and Main Street organizations. This approach serves our marginalized community members and builds overall community resilience.

Testimonies gathered for this pilot reveal exclusion's human cost: youth finding belonging in harmful environments, people of color believing their opinion is irrelevant to democratic processes, and disabled community members encountering inaccessible spaces.

These are symptoms of structural failures, which require those not facing systemic barriers to belonging—white, elder community members, in particular—to actively repair harm through leadership diversification, policy reform, and yielding decision-making power.

**Inclusion requires accountability and reconciliation. True belonging demands moving beyond tolerance to an active celebration and valuing of diversity.**



## Unceded Spaces: How Settler Colonialism Shapes Indigenous Un-Belonging

Native un-belonging is not merely an absence of inclusion but an active condition enforced by settler colonialism.

**Structural violence shapes Native belonging as distinct from general racial equity frameworks, binding it irrevocably to land, sovereignty, and the unresolved legacy of unceded territory.**

As one survey respondent noted, “The [Western] aesthetic of this town relies on a racist foundation of Native cultural exploitation.... We do not belong here.” This reflects how belonging is not just about inclusion but power, often diminished for Indigenous community members through the erasure of Native presence in physical, economic, and cultural spaces, even as settlers appropriate Indigenous symbolism.

This erasure is institutional—our research found no formal Native cultural centers in any of the studied cities dedicated to connecting residents to Tribal history or contemporary Tribal communities.

Native economic participation is similarly marginalized; while Indigenous entrepre-

### What is Settler Colonialism?

“An ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of Indigenous peoples and cultures... [It] normalizes the continuous settler occupation, exploiting lands and resources to which Indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships. Settler colonialism includes interlocking forms of oppression, including racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism.” —Alicia Cox<sup>20</sup>

neurs exist, they are often limited to offering niche products within non-Native stores, rather than owning storefronts or civic spaces. In communities without treaties, this tension intensifies, as Tribal sovereignty directly challenges settler claims to land—yet the absence of Tribal gathering spaces and Native-owned businesses renders Indigenous residents invisible in the very places their ancestors called home.

Research into Native belonging faces structural barriers, including short timelines that hinder meaningful Tribal engagement and a reliance on intermediaries where direct relationships are absent. But the deeper issue is settler resistance to uncomfortable truths—like how social environments and local gover-

nments uphold exclusion.

The “perfect stranger” syndrome, where settlers avoid Indigenous histories to evade guilt or conflict, perpetuates harm by maintaining silence. Yet progress requires moving beyond this anxiety. Scholars urge settlers to become imperfect accomplices—embracing accountability over avoidance, supporting Indigenous leadership, and redistributing resources rather than just studying disparities.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, Main Streets must recognize Native non-belonging as systemic, not incidental. Measuring belonging without



acknowledging land repatriation, cultural erasure, and settler complicity risks replicating the very exclusion it seeks to document.

Centering Indigenous voices—even when uncomfortable—is essential to meaningful change.

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## Do We Belong Here?

### Distrust in America’s Democratic Systems

Our research reveals a troubling erosion of civic connection that undermines both democratic participation and fundamental human needs for belonging.

Paraphrasing political scientist Robert Putnam, Susan Geier writes, “Declining involvement in community institutions has harmed our civic infrastructure because it affects our feelings of trust, mattering, and belonging.”<sup>22</sup>

This insight captures the heart of our findings—when people disengage from civic life, they lose a sense of belonging and agency in co-creation.

The data paints a stark picture of this disconnect. Only 19% of Americans contact local officials in a year, with participation rates skewing toward older and wealthier residents<sup>23</sup>—a pattern mirrored in our study.

Survey responses across all four cities revealed recurring themes of exclusion, where participants cited feelings of being “ignored” or “unheard” by local decision-makers. Interviewees underscored how structural barriers exacerbate this divide: working-class residents rarely attend evening government meetings due to conflicting schedules, relying instead on



fragmented media summaries after the fact. As Geier notes, these disparities create a self-perpetuating cycle where “people who are older, have higher levels of education and higher incomes tend to be more civically aware and engaged,” while others are sidelined from decisions that shape their lives.<sup>24</sup>

One Lewis County resident’s concern—“I feel as a citizen...I have no ability to make my voice heard”—epitomizes this systemic alienation, where trust erodes as participation becomes a privilege of time and resources.

The consequences extend far beyond policy outcomes. When public meetings attract just 100 of 35,000 residents, as one Mount Vernon council member noted, the resulting decisions inevitably reflect narrow interests rather than community needs. This dynamic actively undermines social cohesion, creating what we call a “belonging gap,” where marginalized communities become disempowered and disengage from civic participation.

Breaking this cycle requires reimagining civic engagement as belonging-building. Traditional approaches like evening town halls have failed; we need mobile forums in workplaces and schools, participatory budgeting that demonstrates responsiveness, and cultural institutions serving as forum hosts.

Most importantly, we must recognize that civic participation is about restoring the foundational connections that foster a sense of mutual responsibility. Greater local belonging is most strongly correlated with more civic engagement and the view that locals can affect change.<sup>25</sup>

**When people believe their voice matters, they’re more likely to engage; when they see their engagement produces change, they develop the trust and belonging that sustains democracy.**

# \* Recommendations

MOSES LAKE / PHOTO BY THE DOWNTOWN MOSES LAKE ASSOCIATION



To cultivate a downtown where all stakeholders feel a sense of belonging,

Main Street organizations must engage with the distinct needs and power dynamics of each group. This section shares tailored recommendations for how Main Street organizations can support everyone who lives, works, and plays downtown.

## Downtown User Groups

Before we outline recommendations on how you can help bolster belonging in your downtown, we'll outline key downtown user groups. While many of our recommendations can support multiple groups, having these considerations in mind can help shape your approach and priorities.

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### Staff and Volunteers

Main Street staff, board members, and volunteers report the highest belonging scores statewide, reflecting their deep community ties and active roles in shaping downtown. Their participation reveals critical conditions for fostering belonging: trust built through shared purpose, direct investment in place, and opportunities for leadership.

Knowing that their perspectives may unintentionally dominate decision-making, risking exclusion of broader community voices, the following recommendations consider how an organization can deepen the sense of belonging for those currently involved and invite new people in with belonging at the forefront.

### Residents

Belonging is fractured at a societal level: nearly 20% of Americans reported non-belonging across all key life settings—family, friendships, workplace, local communities, and national identity.<sup>26</sup> Downtowns amplify or mitigate this crisis through design and engagement. Residents from core neighborhoods and periphery communities experience belonging differently: youth seek social infrastructure, elders need accessibility, and marginalized groups often face exclusion. Meanwhile, transient populations like tourists—though not this study's focus—reveal how belonging is contingent on who is prioritized in public spaces. Without intentional intervention, downtowns risk replicating systems of non-belonging.



SUMNER / PHOTO BY ATSUMI SULLIVAN

## Small Business Owners

Small business owners' existing relationships with Main Street organizations provide a platform to bridge commerce and community well-being. They invest significant capital in downtown development, and the majority of Main Street businesses contribute to local causes, hire locally, and use local vendors.<sup>30</sup> Often, they also face significant financial hardships and rely on friends and family volunteering as staff to stay afloat.<sup>31</sup> Without robust communities to support them, business owners can easily feel isolated—despite their critical role in local economic ecosystems.

Enhancing belonging for business owners may help balance these clear stressors, particularly as they are able to lean on their community of fellow business owners and other downtown stakeholders for support.

## Workers

Workers shape a downtown's daily atmosphere through their labor, but they face a national crisis of belonging: 64% of Americans report feeling out of place in their workplaces.<sup>27</sup> In downtowns, this alienation is often compounded by precarious conditions and exclusion from planning processes that directly affect them. Yet when workers do feel rooted—through fair treatment, voice in decision-making, or connections to community—they become anchors of local economic resilience. High workplace belonging correlates with higher employee retention, better health, and greater life satisfaction,<sup>28</sup> as well as increased job performance,<sup>29</sup> making belonging in the workplace a linchpin for thriving downtowns.



KENNEWICK / PHOTO BY SYDNEE MORE PHOTOGRAPHY

## Recommendations

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Our recommendations are divided into five categories. We start with internal recommendations for Main Streets—actionable items for your staff and board to dive into belonging on an organizational scale. Then we touch on each of the Four Points of Main Street: Outreach (sometimes called Organization), Design, Economic Vitality, and Promotion.

Many of our recommendations could fit into multiple categories, so we encourage you to organize your efforts however makes the most sense for your organization and community. Each recommendation is tagged as a “low,” “medium,” or “high” effort project, which can help you identify the right fits for your current capacity and plan for future work.

**Belonging is multi-layered**, which means no single organization can meet every need. Belonging researchers and practitioners emphasize the importance of building coalitions and wider connections with other organizations and groups who aim to strengthen community belonging, rather than attempting it alone. This can help Main Street leaders feel a greater connection to the mission and within the broader community, as well as strengthening your work from the ground up. Some of the recommendations include coalition and partnership building—something Main Streets are often well-versed in—but you might consider how you can use these recommendations to bring other organizations into the fold.

Finally, we encourage you to continue asking your community what they need. When do they most feel like they belong downtown? What barriers are they facing when it comes to belonging? How can we better support or cultivate belonging given those barriers?

**Recommendations will never be one-size-fits-all, but we hope these give you a framework of actionable steps as you seek to strengthen belonging in your downtown.**

# Internal






Intentionally focusing your efforts within your organization can help bolster belonging for current staff and volunteers, while ensuring that your Main Street is a place where everyone in the community can feel they truly belong.

As you review the following recommendations, consider: *How is culture is created in your organization? Whose voice is often heard, and why?* Addressing recurring problems as a group allows you to develop diverse solutions and reaffirm that everyone feels encouraged and empowered to contribute.

Recommendations	Effort
<p><b>Discuss this report</b> as an organization. Why does belonging matter to your organization?</p> <p><i>Activity:</i> Identify simple ways you can get to know and show appreciation for staff and volunteers (e.g., recognizing birthdays, noting volunteers' favorite snacks, etc.).</p>	<p>LOW</p>
<p><b>Review your work plan and apply a belonging lens</b> to current programming. How could you adapt the work you're already doing to increase your community members' sense of belonging?</p>	<p>LOW</p>
<p><b>Identify and address barriers to inclusion</b> for current and future board members and volunteers. As part of this, consider how you can diversify leadership pathways for underrepresented groups.</p> <p><i>Activity:</i> Review local <u>census data</u> alongside organizational demographic data to see how well your organization reflects the local community.</p> <p><i>Resource:</i> <u>"Building Inclusive Boards," Nonprofit Snapshot</u></p>	<p>MEDIUM</p>
<p><b>Convene an ad-hoc committee</b> of staff, board members, and volunteers to evaluate the current state of belonging at your organization, and develop an actionable, organization-wide plan for cultivating belonging.</p> <p><i>Activity:</i> Review Belonging Practice's <u>"Right-Sized Belonging Assessment"</u> as an organization.</p> <p><i>Resource:</i> <u>"Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace," Health Action Alliance &amp; Civic Alliance</u></p>	<p>HIGH</p>

# Outreach






Belonging thrives when residents view downtowns as “our district,” and our research shows that community members are interested in learning how to co-create the local economy. When we share the work of strengthening belonging, not only do we find broader perspectives and new ideas, we also bolster belonging just by bringing people together to work toward a common goal.

Recommendations	Effort
<p><b>Use the Belonging Barometer survey</b> to measure data in your own community. Reach out to the Washington State Main Street Program if this is of interest.</p>	
<p><b>Develop youth councils and/or equity committees</b> to give new volunteers the opportunity to contribute to this critical work.</p> <p><i>Example: “Youth Participation in Local Government in Washington State,” the Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC)</i></p>	
<p><b>Invite residents, workers, and other community members to share where and how belonging is thriving and where gaps persist.</b></p> <p><i>Tip: Incorporate opportunities for input into community events. For example, invite community members to share their answers on post-it notes at an event info booth.</i></p>	
<p><b>Intentionally build volunteer and decision-making opportunities</b> that enable residents to experience agency over place and to work shoulder-to-shoulder with each other through your Main Street organization.</p>	
<p><b>Build coalitions with local nonprofits</b> to increase the amount of volunteer opportunities for residents to participate in maintenance, beautification, and co-creation of downtowns.</p> <p><i>Example: Camas’ annual <u>Volunteer Summit</u></i></p>	

# District Design






Belonging and sense of place are correlated, suggesting downtown design plays a key role in ensuring the community feels a sense of connection to our downtown and by extension each other.

Thoughtful design can also signal who is welcome and who belongs downtown: accessibility initiatives ensure everyone is able to spend time downtown; amenities like public restrooms and parks enable people to linger; art and signage can visually welcome residents and visitors alike; inclusive zoning policies and incentives can encourage livability; and pedestrian- and bike-focused infrastructure can demonstrate that your Main Street is for people, not just cars.

Recommendations	Effort
<p><b>Conduct walk audits</b> downtown with all generations in mind. Invite youth, parents with young kids, and elders to participate to help ensure a comprehensive understanding of strengths and needs.</p> <p><i>Resource: AARP's <a href="#">"Walk Audit Toolkit"</a></i></p>	
<p><b>Identify and transform underused or vacant spaces that can serve as play areas during peak family leisure times.</b></p> <p><i>Resource: KaBOOM's <a href="#">"Play Everywhere Playbook"</a></i></p>	
<p><b>Encourage policies and incentives</b> that support workforce housing development in your district.</p> <p><i>Resource: Main Street America's <a href="#">"Policy Agenda 2025-2026,"</a> Recommendation 3.1 (pp. 23-24)</i></p>	
<p><b>Develop and adopt a Complete Streets policy</b>—a policy that ensures safe and easy use of downtown streets for everyone—for your downtown in partnerships with local stakeholders.</p> <p><i>Resources: <a href="#">"Steps to Adopting a Complete Streets Policy,"</a> Smart Growth America; <a href="#">"Complete Streets Overview,"</a> Washington State Department of Transportation</i></p>	
<p><b>Encourage public art by local artists that is focused on belonging</b> through partnerships with building owners.</p>	

# Economic Vitality & Small Business Support

Belonging is crucial for a truly vibrant and inclusive economic ecosystem. A strong sense of belonging in the workplace can help retain talent, inclusive business practices can boost profits, and a sense of community can help current and prospective business owners thrive and deepen local investment. By partnering with interested businesses and property owners, Main Street organizations can help bridge that gap to promote belonging not just as a social imperative but as an economic boon.

Recommendations	Effort
<p><b>Offer annual one-on-one consultations with business owners</b> to identify unmet needs for their business (including employees) and to provide support.</p>	
<p><b>Organize peer-learning roundtables</b> where business owners—and other downtown stakeholders, as appropriate—can problem-solve together.</p> <p><i>Resource: “Build Belonging; Challenge &amp; Conversation Guide,” Center for Creative Leadership</i></p>	
<p><b>Bring local economic development agencies and small business support organizations together</b> to identify available resources for business and property owners, define organizations’ roles in the ecosystem, audit gaps in support, and communicate what’s available to business and property owners.</p>	
<p><b>Talk with businesses about the positive economic impacts of inclusive business practices and high worker belonging</b> via newsletters, one-on-one, or even in a “win-win” workshop showcasing digestible data, easy actionable steps, and local success stories.</p> <p><i>Resources: “The LGBTQ+ Community’s Role in Economic Vitality,” Main Street America; “The Anti-Racist Farmers Market Toolkit,” the Farmers Market Coalition; “Cultivating Belonging in the Workplace,” Health Action Alliance and Civic Alliance; “Why Successful, Responsible Small Businesses Are Inclusive Businesses,” Beazley</i></p>	
<p><b>Develop resources and incentives for aspiring co-ops</b> to make collective ownership models tangible and low-risk. This could include developing partnerships with banks to offer start-up loans, co-hosting workshops with business administration consultants, or even offering support finding storefronts.</p>	

# Promotion

Belonging and promotion go hand-in-hand. The more people feel a sense of belonging downtown, the more likely they are to live, work, shop, play, and invest downtown. Harnessing the district’s unique characteristics, including what makes members of *your* community feel like they belong, helps deepen sense of place, and inviting the community to join in the co-creation of downtown memories enhances the sense of ownership that contributes to belonging as well.

Recommendations	Effort
<p><b>Share this report with civic partners</b> to help foster a shared commitment to belonging and justice that extends beyond your immediate work.</p>	<p>LOW</p>
<p><b>Share local success stories to incentivize belonging-focused initiatives from businesses, community members, and nonprofits alike.</b></p> <p><i>Example: Develop an annual “Belonging Business” Award for downtown businesses that foster belonging for their employees.</i></p>	<p>MEDIUM</p>
<p><b>Identify local needs for community connections and share them with businesses,</b> giving them the opportunity to create new programming that can support downtown belonging efforts (and their business!).</p> <p><i>Examples: Ballast Book Company (Bremerton)’s <u>book clubs</u>; <u>Community Resource Groups</u> in Eureka Springs, Arkansas</i></p>	<p>LOW</p>
<p><b>Develop a community event planning toolkit</b> with all of the information and resources needed for businesses and community members to throw a block party or other public events.</p> <p><i>Example: <u>City of Batavia’s (Illinois) Special Event Policy</u></i></p>	<p>HIGH</p>



CHELAN / PHOTO BY ELIJAH LARSON

# \* Conclusion

When we were introduced to the Belonging Barometer after years of searching for a method for measuring Main Street's social impact, it felt like a burst of clarity.

Here was this new tool for looking at community health with proven correlations to myriad factors we think about, from personal health to civic engagement. And it came with an invitation for others to join in.

This was, of course, a pilot project. We started with a small sample size—just four Main Street Communities in Washington State—and our statistical findings are neither conclusive nor overly generalizable to other Main Street Communities.

Still, we feel affirmed in our research, which suggests that our research hypotheses—that those engaged with their local Main Street organizations feel a stronger sense of belonging and that current belonging initiatives may not equitably serve all demographic groups, indicating opportunities for more inclusive strategies—are correct.



The confirmation, to the extent a pilot can grant us, that Main Street organizations can be a hub for community belonging inspires us to continue exploring the positive social impacts of this work.

The evidence that we have more work to do came with ideas on why not everyone feels like they belong, pointing us toward initiatives that can help and avenues for more exploration.

Our key findings, detailed at the beginning of this report (see p. 8), outline these ideas:

\* Conclusion

## Key Findings

**Main Street organizations cultivate** a sense of belonging.

**Main Street community events nurture** understanding of local collective identity and sense of belonging.

**Main Street organizations are laboratories** for innovative and creative solutions.

**Strategic communication is key** to unlocking Main Street's full potential.

**Anti-racism and anti-discrimination are foundational** to building belonging in our communities.

**Intergenerational belonging is a community need** that requires intentional design.

## \* Conclusion

### Where Do We Go From Here?

As a first-of-its-kind snapshot of belonging in Main Street, this report is both a benchmark and a call to action: for us at the Washington State Main Street Program and for Washingtonians statewide who care deeply about their downtowns and their communities. We embarked on this research with a few long-term goals in mind: to expand our metrics of success to include social impact, to enhance equity in belonging initiatives, and to align community outreach efforts with our intended outcomes. In other words, to understand how we can measure belonging in our Main Streets in order to better cultivate it in the long term and enhance community and social health.

In adding to the growing body of literature on place-based belonging, we also hope that it can have ripple effects, serving as a model for how state programs and local organizations can measure belonging, particularly in the world of Main Street. Just as the Belonging Barometer invited us into this line of research, so we extend that invitation to you.

Now, it's time to look toward the future, to what we do now that this pilot has concluded and this report published. We've been asking ourselves this question for months now, mulling over where to go, as are many of our peers at organizations who have embarked on similar projects—and we've found ourselves with so many potential avenues to explore, including:

- Expanding our work and surveying all Main Street Communities and Affiliates
- Homing in on a small sample size to better understand how targeted belonging interventions and initiatives can strengthen belonging
- Adding belonging-based questions to our Main Street Communities' annual statistics reporting
- Offering cohort-style opportunities for Communities to deploy the Barometer locally
- Incorporating the survey into our ongoing services and site visits
- Developing resources and toolkits for Main Streets focused on belonging

As we aim to build on the momentum of this pilot, we're still identifying exactly what will come next, and we hope you'll share your thoughts with us:

Where do we go from here? What recommendations do you have for cultivating belonging in our historic downtowns? Why does belonging matter to you?

This pilot project reaffirmed what we already knew: belonging is a social imperative and a shared responsibility.

As we accept this call to action, Main Street stakeholders across Washington can embrace "Main Streets are for everyone" not just as a slogan but as an action.

**Together, we can work toward building communities where everyone belongs.**



# \* Appendices

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## Key Concepts

The following key concepts are referenced regularly throughout “Belonging in the Evergreen State.” Looking to experts, we’ve provided the definitions we used in crafting our own research and this report.

### Main Street

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In this report, “Main Street” refers to organizations (and the districts they serve) using the Main Street Approach®, a “unique, preservation-based economic development tool that enables communities to revitalize downtown and neighborhood business districts by leveraging local assets—from historic, cultural, and architectural resources to local enterprises and community pride.”—Washington State Main Street Program<sup>32</sup>

### Belonging

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“Belonging is measurably multifaceted. Belonging is about the quality of ‘fit’ between oneself and a setting. When someone belongs, they feel emotionally connected, welcomed, included, and satisfied in their relationships. They know that they are valued for who they are, as well as for their contributions. They can bring their whole and authentic self to the table, and they are comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions regardless of whether they diverge from dominant perspectives. In addition, they understand how things work within a given setting, feel treated equally, and know that they are able to influence decisions.”—Over Zero and the American Immigration Council<sup>33</sup>

### Unbelonging

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“To ‘unbelong’ is to have what was thought to be certain or taken for granted removed, disconnecting us from others...In such cases, membership belonging has been revoked, removed or challenged in some way...unbelonging becomes positioned as a place of exile and danger, of homelessness and rootlessness for those who once belonged, but are now abandoned as outsiders.”—Mary Healy<sup>34</sup>

### Othering

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“Othering...is treating people from another group as essentially different from and generally inferior to the group you belong to.”—Susie Wise<sup>35</sup>

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## Diversity

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“Diversity is the range of human differences and means that each individual is equally worthwhile. Not merely acknowledging the existence of differences, it celebrates these differences and recognizes the essential value of diversity in a system. Dimensions of diversity generally cover but are not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic class, physical or cognitive disability, religious or ethical values system, national origin, citizenship, political beliefs, and other ideologies.”—Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design<sup>36</sup>

## Equity

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“Equity is the equal distribution of a system’s benefits and burdens regardless of its members’ differences. In other words, equity would be a reality in which an individual or groups are no more or less likely to experience a system’s benefits or burdens just because of their differences, creating an environment where everyone can succeed and thrive. In our not-yet-perfect world, a commitment to equity requires the will and action of a system to redistribute opportunities and power.”—Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design<sup>37</sup>

## Inclusion

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Inclusion is involvement and empowerment, where the inherent worth and dignity of all people are recognized. An inclusive system promotes and sustains a sense of belonging. It values and practices respect for the talents, beliefs, backgrounds, and ways of living of its members. An inclusive system also recognizes that agreement might not always be the end result, but that dialogue and understanding are part of the larger process that allows for inclusivity to be achieved.”—Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design<sup>38</sup>

## Collective Identity

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“Collective identity is a shared sense of belonging, values, and characteristics that define a group of individuals and wider communities within a place or context. Collective identity is an ongoing process of meaning-making rather than a stagnant property of social actors.”—Liz Arias, derived from Snow & Corrigan-Brown<sup>39</sup>

## Agency

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Personal agency is the sense that an individual is the main cause of their own actions and life circumstances. It’s about feeling empowered and autonomous and having a belief in one’s ability to influence events. It’s a core aspect of personal well-being, happiness, and success.”—Liz Arias, derived from Pearson<sup>40</sup>

## Intersectional

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Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is the “interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.”—Oxford English Dictionary<sup>41</sup>

## Cultural and Structural Awareness

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“Cultural and structural awareness is understanding diverse cultures and systems while examining our own biases. It means valuing all communities, recognizing how historical and systemic barriers (like unequal access to housing or health care) create lasting harm and empowering others through respectful listening, empathy, and inclusive actions.”—Liz Arias

## Power Dynamics

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“Power dynamics refer to the relationships and interactions between individuals or groups with differing levels of power. These dynamics can be observed in various contexts, including personal relationships, workplaces, communities, and larger societal structures. Power dynamics influence how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how conflicts are resolved.”—McKee and Bransford<sup>42</sup>

## Racism

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“Racism is the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race. Racism is more than just prejudice in thought or action. It occurs when this prejudice—whether individual or institutional—is accompanied by the power to discriminate against, oppress, or limit the rights of others.”—Australian Human Rights Commission via UCLA<sup>43</sup>

## Anti-Racism

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Anti-racism is “a system in which we create policies, practices, and procedures to promote racial equity. Anti-racism generates anti-racist thoughts and ideas to justify the racial equity it creates by uplifting the innate humanity and individuality of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.”—National League of Cities<sup>44</sup>

## Ten Principles of Belonging

The following 10 principles, referenced in the “Exploring Belonging” section of the report, were developed by the Othering and Belonging Institute. Our descriptions of each are below, but we encourage you to visit their [Belonging Design Principles guide](#) to learn more.

### Othering as the root of non-belonging

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The denial of a person's or group's humanity through means of structural barriers, social exclusion, or extremist violence leads to experiences of non-belonging for marginalized groups.

### Everyone belongs

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Belonging is a human right; everyone deserves to belong. Belonging is not—and cannot be—contingent on any specific qualities or characteristics. Attempts to categorize human beings through belonging and non-belonging groups can create ripple effects that may increase marginalization and politicization of identities.

### Prioritize structural change

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Our work as an institution is to support structural change for communities facing inadequate access to resources and opportunities offered by local Main Street organizations.

### Prioritize and value relationships

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We build strong communities by prioritizing relationship building. In order to transform our local districts into places of belonging and inclusion, we must be willing to trust each other through periods of uncertainty and conflict.

### Recognize identities are multifaceted

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Our community members cannot be reduced to single identities. Many people carry complex histories and experiences that influence their worldview. In a belonging framework, we must remain curious and respectful of all people who live, work, or play in our downtowns.

## Power of interconnection

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The problems we face and the solutions we create are always based in relationships between members of a community. We are not alone. The principle of interconnection provides us with a universal understanding that we can rely on our relationships to enhance community change. The U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 [Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community](#) reported that "higher levels of social connectedness suggest better community outcomes" in health and well-being.

## Agency and inclusivity in co-creation

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Our recommendations for belonging initiatives are rooted in the goal of creating spaces for empowered people to address their needs and become active agents in enhancing their downtown districts' economic, historic, and cultural assets.

## Embrace mutual responsibility

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We recognize that designing belonging initiatives requires self-awareness of our behaviors and contributions to ensure they are centered in dignity and respect. Each of us holds responsibility for learning and growing together.

## Celebrate and value diversity

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Belonging celebrates and values diversity as a critical point of strength for our community's social atmosphere and economy. Existing research shows how diversity leads to greater problem solving and expands creativity. At Main Street, we see how diverse teams develop creative solutions for our downtown districts' diverse and contemporary needs.

## Address power dynamics

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In order to provide equitable services to community members, the Washington State Main Street Program seeks to address the distribution of work and decision-making for projects that impact the community as a whole. This includes, but is not limited to, practices of public engagement, collective governance, and repairing historic harms with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, LGBTQIA+ communities, and disabled community members.

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## Additional Reading

The following publications were also referenced in the development of this research and report. For those looking for further resources and toolkits focused on belonging, we recommend the following as a starting point.

### On Belonging

- [The Belonging Barometer](#) from Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council
- [The Othering and Belonging Institute](#) at the University of California, Berkeley (see also: their [resource library](#))
- [Right-Sized Belonging: Six Practices for Organizers](#) by Sammie Ablaza Wills

### Resources for Community-Based Organizing and Community Health

- [Community Commons' Resource Library](#)
- [The Commons: Social Change Library](#)
- [Community Toolbox](#) from the Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas

### On Equitable Economic Development

- [A Playbook for Equitable Economic Development](#) from the International Economic Development Council
- [Community-Centered Economic Inclusion: A Strategic Action Playbook](#) from Brookings
- [Interactive Toolkit](#) from the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network
- [Cities and Businesses of Color: A Guide to Economic Growth](#) from Living Cities

### For Main Streets

- [Anti-Racism Resources](#) from Main Street America
- [Building Inclusive Communities on Main Street](#) by Norma Ramirez de Miess and Hannah White



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