



Making Friends, Making Homes: How Cosmopolitan Associations Connect Diverse Immigrants

Sean Lauer

Research brief prepared by Capri Kong



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Key Ideas

- **Newcomers who join cosmopolitan associations—groups that bring together people from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds—are more likely to make friends with people who do not share their own ethnic background.** In fact, 57% of newcomers in these groups had friends from different ethnic backgrounds, compared to only 38% of those who did not join any group.
- **Newcomers who join sorting associations—groups made up mostly of people from the same ethnic or cultural background—are the least likely to make friends from other backgrounds.** Only 15% of newcomers in these groups formed cross-ethnic friendships.
- **The type of association a newcomer joins can affect their friendships and how well they adapt to living in a diverse society.** People in cosmopolitan associations are more likely to develop a diverse friendship circle (48%) than those in sorting associations (20%).

Recommendations

- **Governments should invest in cosmopolitan organizations** by funding social and cultural programs and spaces that bring together people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.
- **Cosmopolitan organizations should promote routine, collaborative activities.** These activities create a common space to make relationships more personal, allowing for more cross-ethnic friendships.

Cosmopolitan associations create spaces where newcomers can connect across cultures, fostering friendships that bridge ethnic divides and help them become part of the Canadian community.

Joining groups is a way for people to meet others and build connections in their local community. These connections can provide valuable resources, including emotional support, job referrals, and everyday advice. For new immigrants, making friendships within the local community can be important. Newcomers often have limited knowledge about their new country and fewer local networks, so building friendships through organizations can help them adapt to life in Canada and find a sense of belonging. However, not all types of group participation provide the same benefits.

Dr. Sean Lauer, a Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia and a CMS affiliate, studies how newcomers to Canada make friends by joining different types of community groups. He used the Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS), a nationally representative survey conducted by Statistics Canada, to examine newcomers' friendships depending on their participation in cosmopolitan associations, sorting associations, or their lack of participation in community associations. Dr. Lauer found that these associations offer a space for newcomers to adjust to a new country. Cosmopolitan associations bring together people across diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds, while sorting associations are made up mostly of people from the same cultural or ethnic background. Dr. Lauer's research shows that the kinds of groups newcomers join can shape how they make friends and integrate into their new country.

Key Findings

Cosmopolitan Spaces and Connected Lives

What does it mean to be cosmopolitan? For Professor Lauer, being cosmopolitan means embracing diversity and building connections across cultural boundaries. Cosmopolitan associations create spaces and activities that attract a wide range of people. These organizations promote openness, civility, and interactions that make diversity feel ordinary and accepted.² Think, for instance, of mother-child drop-in groups or public library support programs.

Cosmopolitan associations give newcomers the chance to build friendships with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Dr. Lauer looked at the friend groups of newcomers in these associations and found that 57% had mostly cross-ethnic friends. In comparison, only 38% of those who did not join any group said the same. Cosmopolitan spaces promote learning, respect, and open conversations, helping newcomers feel comfortable with diversity in everyday life.³ Thus, these spaces encourage people to connect across cultural boundaries and make it easier to form cross-ethnic friendships. These cross-ethnic friendships are important because they help newcomers feel like they are members of Canada’s multicultural society.⁴ Therefore, building friendships across cultures can make it easier for newcomers to feel accepted and at home in their new country.

Sorting Networks and Community Support

Sorting associations differ from cosmopolitan groups by focusing specifically on creating spaces where co-ethnic members can connect and support one another. They help newcomers adjust to life in a new country with cultural familiarity, emotional support and practical resources.⁵ For example, co-ethnic associations may connect newcomers with work opportunities by providing guidance in their native language and linking them to useful networks. Such associations include Ghanaian immigrant associations in Toronto and Taiwanese social organizations across Canada.

That said, sorting associations can also limit newcomers’ chances to build friendships across different ethnic groups. Dr. Lauer found that newcomers in these groups are less likely to have cross-ethnic friendships, even when you take into account factors like age, education, or where they live. Only 15% of respondents who attended sorting associations reported having a cross-ethnic friendship circle, even lower than those who did not join any association (38%). This is because sorting associations mostly connect people from the same background, leaving fewer chances to meet others from different cultures. These groups also provide social and practical help, which can make members less motivated to reach out beyond their own community. Therefore, while sorting associations help strengthen co-ethnic friendships, they may unintentionally make it harder for newcomers to build wider social connections to the broader multicultural communities in Canada.

Association Choice Matters

Why does it matter which types of associations newcomers join? Dr. Lauer’s research reveals that the association newcomers join can influence their friendship choices and, as a result, how well they adjust to diversity and integrate into Canadian society. By comparing the ethnic makeup of respondents’ friendship groups at age 15 and up with their current circles, Dr. Lauer found that an individual who joins a cosmopolitan association has a 48% chance of having a cross-ethnic friendship circle today. For those who participate in sorting associations, that chance drops to just 20%.

According to Dr. Lauer, these results show that cosmopolitan associations are essential for newcomers to meet other members of Canadian society and develop a sense of belonging. These associations not only help newcomers create new friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds but also provide the environment to strengthen these bonds over time. This process builds the necessary trust and confidence for newcomers to thrive in their new home.

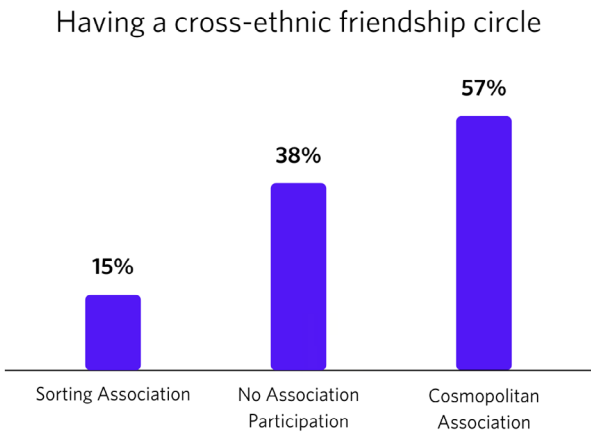


Figure 1. Percentage of participants who have a cross-ethnic friendship circle by association type (Source: Lauer 2024)

Methods

This article examines data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey, originally conducted by Statistics Canada. Sampling only foreign-born respondents, Dr. Lauer uses survey questions including participants’ ethnic background, participation in associations, and friendships. Responses were analysed using statistical models that accounted for factors like age, education, and place of residence. The research also used longitudinal data, which tracks the same person over time, to explore how the ethnic makeup of friendships changes among participants in different associations.

Conclusion

Friendships are crucial for immigrants to socially integrate. Participating in cosmopolitan associations helps newcomers expand their local networks, build cross-ethnic friendships, and embrace diversity in their daily lives. These diverse friendships can foster openness and trust through the formation of cross-cultural bonds, contributing to a sense of belonging and membership in Canada's multicultural society. Co-ethnic friendships are also important for emotional support, cultural familiarity, and finding resources to navigate settlement challenges. In sum, cosmopolitan associations foster connections with broader Canadian society, and their cumulative benefits should not be overlooked.

Governments should invest in cosmopolitan associations by funding the social and cultural programs and spaces that bring together people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Diversity alone isn't enough. Shared activities and spaces are necessary to create a common purpose, foster cross-ethnic friendships, and ultimately facilitate integration for newcomers to Canada. Cosmopolitan associations should therefore focus on promoting routine, collaborative activities and programs.

References

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Sean Lauer is a Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia. His research uses institutional and network approaches to study immigration, friendship, marriage, and community organizations. He has published widely, including the books *Getting Married: The Public Nature of Private Relationships* with Carrie Yodanis and *Neighbourhood Houses: Building Community in Vancouver* with Miu Chung Yan. His current research explores how community spaces and programs help people build social connections. He is studying how friendships, particularly between people of different ethnic backgrounds, develop through involvement in local organizations. He earned his PhD at the University of New Hampshire.

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