# UNDERSTANDING THIRD SPACES IN NORTH TEXAS TODAY

A 2026 REPORT

LET'S BE LEGENDARY

the YMCA

THE CAMPAIGN FOR LASTING CHANGE



Since its inception, the YMCA has been a hub for community connections. Our spaces and programming are intentionally designed to improve people's spirit, mind, and body, and each YMCA branch or program site tailors its offerings to suit its unique community.

Today, as our region grows in population and footprint, we are at an important inflection point for North Texas. Do we have the places and services to ensure our residents thrive? Or is our community growth outpacing the ability to build and support our residents?

The YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas believes community leaders must assess the presence of third spaces today, understand the value they provide, and address any gaps for our communities. This can help North Texas create the places and programs to achieve physical, mental, and social well-being.

Our commitment to our vision, values, and communities has led the Dallas Y to commission a first-of-its-kind, multiphase research report on third spaces. We've commissioned custom local research, including contributions from Parkland Center for Clinical Innovation, a mission-driven research organization with industry-leading expertise in health. Our goal is to understand how third spaces are being used and how the YMCA and peer organizations can work to accommodate these benefits amid unprecedented growth.

Do we have enough third spaces in our region? The right mix? Which valuable spaces are missing? This research report helps establish a baseline against which we can evaluate future infrastructure, programming, and services, and it opens the door to a dialogue that can help all North Texans thrive.

**Curt Hazelbaker**
President & Chief Executive Officer
YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas

# STUDY BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

## OUR REGION IS EXPANDING, BUT IS IT THRIVING?

The North Texas region is experiencing rapid expansion; Dallas' population grew from roughly 7.6 million people in 2020 to **8.48 million as of 2025.** Dallas-Fort Worth is:

- Outpacing every other top five U.S. metro
- The No. 1 U.S. metro for corporate headquarters relocations
- Leading the nation in new residential construction (2024)

While our region is expanding, it's important to study and analyze if it's truly thriving. As a 141-year-old community hub and partner, the Dallas YMCA felt it was critical to understand if the growing population has access to the infrastructure and places that can help support its social, physical, and mental well-being.

In addition to accessibility concerns, other macro factors may have further affected third spaces' availability and use. The economic impact of the pandemic shuttered a number of businesses and places that may have acted as third spaces for communities. And the rise of social media has been shown to contribute to higher levels of isolation, weaker social connections, and less frequent gathering.

## UNDERSTANDING THIRD SPACES IN NORTH TEXAS TODAY

The topic of third spaces is timely and important, but the research on it to date has been limited, observational, and not specific to North Texas.

The first of its kind, this report is an analysis of local syndicated data and consumer insights. Specifically, this study was designed to quantify:

- The value and usage of third spaces in North Texas today
- The unique needs fulfilled by different types of third spaces
- The presence and types of third spaces today vs. five years ago
- The YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas' identity and value as a third space

Initial findings will serve as a benchmark; the goal is to prompt additional research, cross-analysis, and further discussion among North Texas leaders. Ideally, this research forms the foundation for the topic of what our communities need — and potentially lack — when it comes to spaces to connect and grow.

### THE HISTORY OF THIRD SPACES

Third spaces, a concept coined by Ray Oldenburg in 1989, are the places outside of home or work/school where people gather to socialize and build a sense of community. The connections fostered in third spaces are loosely tied to social and economic vitality in American cities. Oldenburg shared his perspective on third spaces in his book, "The Great Good Place," and also voiced his concern about their diminishing presence in the 1980s and 1990s.

> **"Much to the detriment of our lives, these places are vanishing from the urban American landscape."**

### A TIMELY, TRENDING TOPIC TODAY

Nearly 40 years later, third spaces are garnering real, sustained interest in mainstream culture. Online analytics show that the search term "third space" has increased over **100-fold** in 2026 vs. 2019. Oldenburg's book has been republished three times based on demand, and over **7.4 million posts** about third spaces were posted on TikTok in 2026. Cultural analysts believe the renewed interest in third spaces is a response to social isolation and the desire to build in-person networks and communities.



## METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report were compiled by analyzing a variety of sources, including:

- A custom dataset on Dallas neighborhood analysis by The Parkland Center for Clinical Innovation
- A custom North Texas Community Health Survey among 1,005 Dallas-area residents
- The YMCA Member Feedback Survey among 506 members of the YMCA of Dallas

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## DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

### THIRD SPACE:

For this study, using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), third spaces were classified and plotted as follows:

- Dine-in restaurants (full-service eateries)
- Faith-based spaces (churches, religious centers, etc.)
- Accessible public spaces (parks, museums, libraries, etc.)
- Retail spaces designed for gathering/socializing (local cafes, neighborhood salons, bookstores, etc.)
- Hobby-based spaces (bowling alleys, gaming spaces, etc.)
- Fitness and recreation spaces (gyms, recreation centers, fitness centers, etc.)
- Civic and non-sports member-based places (nonprofit centers, member-based clubs)
- Online member-based communities



# TABLE OF CONTENTS


A Letter From the CEO ..... 1

Study Background and Objectives ..... 2

Methodology, Definitions, and Explanations ..... 3

Five Key Takeaways ..... 5-8

The Value of the YMCA as a Third Space ..... 9-10

Where Do We Go From Here? ..... 11




## 1 THIRD SPACES IN NORTH TEXAS ARE NOT KEEPING PACE WITH THE REGION'S INFRASTRUCTURE GROWTH.

> **"Without a fitness center, my stress level would be much higher, and it would negatively impact my mental health."**
>
> — North Texas adult, third-space visitor

**IMPLICATION:** There is an immediate need to further analyze and address the third-space gaps in our growing region and the specific needs of emerging communities.

Despite being highly visited and in high demand in North Texas, **third spaces have a diminished presence compared with five years ago.**

In 2021, they comprised **36%** of total businesses, but they comprise just **18%** of North Texas businesses today.

| Dine-In Restaurants | Faith-Based Centers | Accessible Public Spaces |
|---|---|---|
| **-62.7%** | **-50%** | **-49.9%** |
| From 9.16% in 2021 to 3.42% in 2026 | From 6.11% in 2021 to 3.05% in 2026 | From 2.06% in 2021 to 1.03% in 2026 |

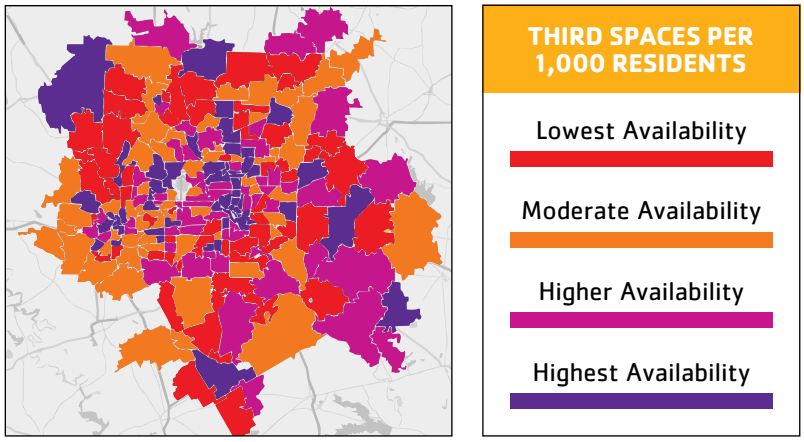
The three types of third spaces listed above have shown the greatest relative decline, despite being rated as some of the **most valued and most visited third spaces.**

## 2 THE DISTRIBUTION OF THIRD SPACES IS UNEVEN IN NORTH TEXAS, AND THE MIX VARIES BY MICRO-COMMUNITY.

> **"Limited public transport or traffic makes getting to these centers inconvenient.**
>
> **"Physical challenges because of age and the distance from the church. It is a 50-minute drive for me."**
>
> — North Texas adult, third-space visitor

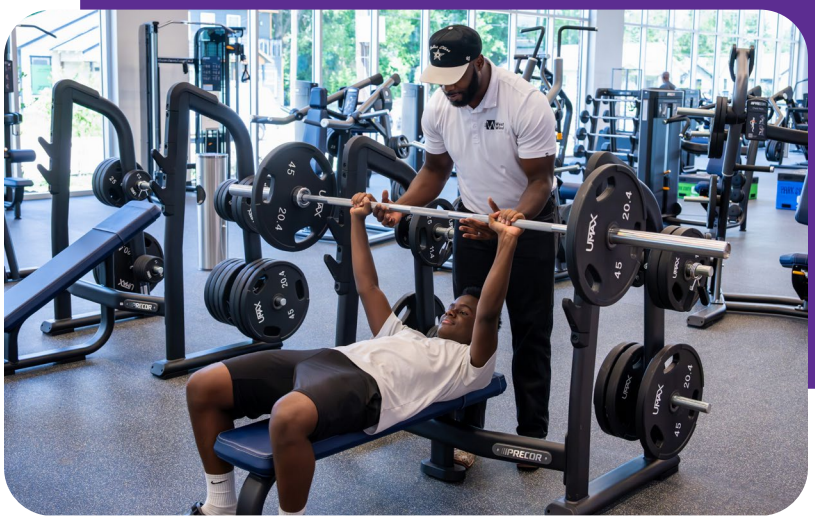
**IMPLICATION:** Even established communities face challenges in providing adequate spaces that improve health and well-being. Each county/community should assess its presence and mix of third spaces and ensure its residents have the third spaces they deem valuable or access to similar services offered.

Both the types of third spaces and total availability of third spaces vary widely across the metroplex. In exurban areas, restaurants tend to represent a smaller share of third spaces while fitness centers represent a larger share. In less affluent areas of the urban core, fitness and hobby-based spaces make up a smaller share of the third-space mix.




Rockwall County has one of the **lowest ratios of faith-based centers per resident** despite the high ratings for "value" and visitation intent, suggesting more faith-based infrastructure or experiences are wanted/needed in that community. Ellis and Kaufman counties have the **fewest fitness centers per 1,000 residents,** and Dallas County has the **fewest hobby-based spaces per 1,000 residents.**

Access to third spaces for all community residents is key: This research found that regular users of any third space were more likely to report better health overall compared with those who attended less frequently.



**"Without a fitness center, my stress level would be much higher, and it would negatively impact my mental health."**

— North Texas adult, third-space visitor

## 3 THE DIMINISHING PRESENCE OF THIRD SPACES MAY HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON OUR COMMUNITIES' MENTAL HEALTH AND ECONOMIC STANDING.

> **"Losing my faith center — it would take away one important place that makes me feel a part of the community.**
>
> **"I wouldn't be able to gather with my peers."**
>
> — North Texas adult, third-space visitor

**IMPLICATION:** Third space benefits are not just health-related; we are getting a better understanding of the subsequent financial benefits that they can provide — and the costs they can reduce. Community leaders should work to understand how to preserve the benefits, especially in the face of diminishing third spaces — with a focus on mental well-being — even if offered in smaller/other spaces.

The top two benefits of third spaces, as ranked by North Texans, are both mental health benefits: Third spaces are credited with **reducing stress** and **creating a sense of renewed motivation/energy.**

Third spaces are also valued for promoting higher-order emotional benefits:

**86%** of North Texans say they feel welcomed and accepted

**86%** say they feel comfortable being themselves

**79%** say they feel a sense of belonging

This suggests that people are using third spaces and the social connections they foster as a means to improve their mental well-being, especially post-pandemic, when social isolation and loneliness peaked.

While the health and medical communities are still assessing the impact of pandemic social isolation, past research shows that a **lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and longevity.** This effect on mental health is ultimately costly:

- Social isolation among older adults accounts for an estimated **$6.7 billion** in excess Medicare spending annually
- For students, loneliness is associated with **poorer academic achievement,** and among adults, it leads to **worse performance at work**
- In the U.S., stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated **$154 billion annually****

**2023 Report — Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

## 4 THE MOST VALUABLE THIRD SPACES HAVE CORE TENETS: THEY OFFER STRUCTURED EXPERIENCES IN WELCOMING, GROUP-CENTRIC ENVIRONMENTS.

> **"I get a feeling of family and belonging to a group who supports each other through daily trials. I also get direction in my life, and I have a 24/7 support system if I need it.**
>
> **"Without a fitness center, I would not have a structured place for physical fitness. I appreciate the structure and motivation these facilities bring.**
>
> **"Hobby centers are a place to meet people with the same interests as you and connect over a shared passion."**
>
> — North Texas adult, third-space visitor

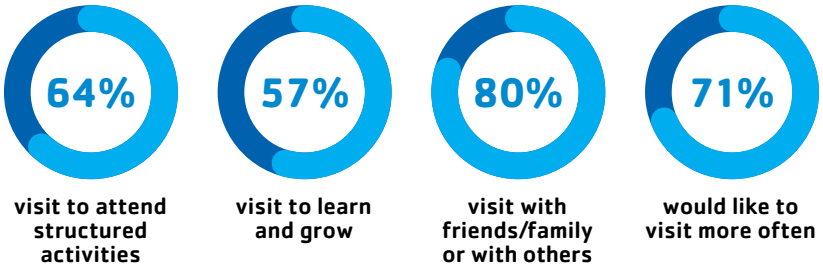
**IMPLICATION:** While all third spaces are generally valuable, some aspects can maximize their value: structured group programming and spaces where like-minded individuals can meet and feel a sense of belonging. Community leaders and the YMCA should consider this when planning and implementing new programming and facilities.



In evaluating the different benefits and values of third spaces, two types emerged as the most valuable for supporting overall health: faith-based and fitness centers.

### FAITH-BASED CENTERS

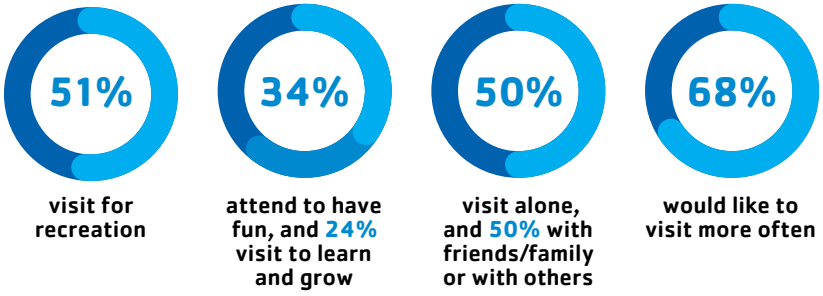
Structured, Social, Learning Spaces




Faith-based loyalists (people who value this third space above others) rate their **mental health** and **quality of life** higher than loyalists of all other third spaces. Faith-based spaces are described as helping residents across nearly all dimensions of well-being, particularly in terms of feeling motivated, supported, and reducing stress.

### FITNESS CENTERS

Solo Fun Spaces for Learning and Progress




Fitness-center loyalists (people who value this third space above others) rate their **mental and physical health** as well as their **social satisfaction** significantly higher than other third-space loyalists (people who value/visit other third spaces more). Fitness/recreation spaces are also helpful for reducing stress, improving motivation, and learning new skills or pursuing personal interests.

While loyalists of hobby-based spaces do not overindex for being healthier than others, these spaces, as well as fitness and faith-based centers, are significantly more likely to help people feel a sense of belonging and connection.

**"I like building my strength and agility. I also like having the mind-body connection and making new friends."**

— North Texas adult, third-space visitor



## 5 CREATING THIRD SPACES THAT ARE MULTIFUNCTIONAL AND PROVIDE TAILORED OFFERINGS CAN WORK OVER TIME TO HELP FILL COMMUNITY GAPS.

**IMPLICATION:** While these spaces have unique benefits, understanding the components and dynamics that drive their strengths will allow multipurpose spaces to optimize their offerings. Understanding the location/environment, accessibility, staffing, and attendees can help refine programming and offerings to provide multiple benefits.

While space and costs for infrastructure can be limited, **maximizing the offerings within a third space** can ensure communities get the environment, programming, and corresponding benefits under one roof.

This is likely what is driving the highest "valuable" and "helpfulness" scores among faith-based, fitness/recreation centers, and hobby-based spaces. Understanding the strengths and offerings of the various third spaces can help city and community leaders design spaces and programming most valuable to their residents.

**Fitness, faith-based, and hobby-based centers all significantly outperform other third spaces for almost every benefit.** Civic spaces are good for providing resources and support, local retailers offer community connections, and virtual spaces are noted for helping people learn new skills.

| | Faith-Based Centers | Fitness Centers | Hobby-Based Centers | Accessible Public Spaces | Civic Spaces | Local Retail Spaces | Dine-In Restaurants | Virtual Community |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reduces stress | **91%** | **93%** | **89%** | 81% | 86% | 82% | 78% | 71% |
| Helps me feel motivated | **93%** | **91%** | **87%** | 72% | 68% | 73% | 56% | 72% |
| Helps me build relationships | **86%** | **70%** | **73%** | 48% | 71% | **78%** | 58% | 63% |
| Connects me to the community | **90%** | **74%** | **63%** | 58% | 80% | **85%** | 49% | 69% |
| Provides helpful resources | **88%** | **74%** | **79%** | 55% | **79%** | **78%** | 38% | 74% |
| Helps with progress toward goals | **88%** | **85%** | **76%** | 62% | 72% | 71% | 35% | 74% |
| Supports me during challenges | **91%** | **77%** | **63%** | 50% | **79%** | 73% | 37% | 63% |
| Helps me learn new skills/interests | **66%** | **84%** | **85%** | 49% | **84%** | 71% | 38% | **90%** |

# THE VALUE OF THE YMCA AS A THIRD SPACE

While many third spaces serve one specific purpose, YMCA branches are unique in that they offer a variety of spaces, programs, activities, and benefits — all under one roof and at the heart of their respective communities. Across the region, members rank their local YMCA branch among their most valued third spaces.



## A SPACE THAT OFFERS VALUABLE SERVICES WITHIN REACH

The YMCA intentionally makes its locations and costs accessible, allowing all members of the community to join and access its robust benefits:

**79%** of members said their local North Texas YMCA branch is either their most important third space or one of several important places — this was even higher for people who attended the Y frequently (at least once a week)

**89%** of respondents agreed that the YMCA is important to their community

**"The Y is a great part of our community in so many ways — helping people be healthy, serving the community, connecting people."**

— Dallas YMCA member



**"I love the feeling of family in our classes. Everyone cares about each other. Going and exercising with a great instructor and friends makes it a fun way to exercise."**

— Dallas YMCA member

## A SPACE THAT FOSTERS COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

Members credit the YMCA for creating the social experiences and connections they value and want in their community.

For those who identified the YMCA as one of their most important third spaces:

**94%** reported feeling welcomed and accepted

**82%** reported a sense of belonging

**79%** reported feeling connected to others who spend time there

These ratings exceeded those reported by community residents when describing their own most valued third spaces.



## A SPACE THAT NURTURES THE SPIRIT, MIND, AND BODY

The combination of a variety of activities for family members in a welcoming environment is proving to help members experience better overall health.

### HEALTHIER SPIRITS

**77%** agree they feel supported and encouraged by Y staff

**83%** of respondents agree that the Y helps them make progress toward their personal goals

### HEALTHIER MINDS

**89%** of respondents agree that the Y helps them feel motivated or energized

**97%** of respondents said the Y helped them manage or reduce stress at least moderately well

### HEALTHIER BODIES

**98%** of people whose goals include getting or staying fit say that the Y helps at least moderately well

**90%** of people managing a chronic condition say the Y helps at least moderately well

**"The camaraderie that I have with the Y staff and members. I feel like I belong here."**

— Dallas YMCA member




**"Having a safe place to meet my fitness goals and see neighborhood friends and family that go there too."**

— Dallas YMCA member




## ROOM TO GROW

While the Dallas YMCA is proving to be a cornerstone of its communities, there are some additional offerings and benefits to keep in mind as programming and services expand or community partnerships are explored.

### MORE ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND GUIDANCE

**40%** of respondents said they felt "supported when facing challenges" at the Y

**43%** said the Y helped them access helpful information or resources

These results suggest that while the YMCA is succeeding in creating places where people gather, connect, and build relationships, it has not yet fully realized its potential as a source of practical support and community resource navigation. Strengthening these aspects of the member experience represents an important opportunity for the YMCA to deepen its role as a community anchor.



# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

**The value of third spaces is irrefutable.** As North Texas continues to shift and grow, municipalities and community leaders should assess if their geographies have the right number and mix of third spaces present to help their communities thrive. This report and its findings suggest there is still much more to do on the topic of third spaces, including:

- Studying micro-communities
- Convening more partners
- Planning for new branches and programming developments

The YMCA has intrinsically felt the need to support its communities with physical, mental, and social well-being and has a concrete growth plan to serve current and future communities. These findings, along with partnerships with community leaders, can ensure the right investments, buildings, and programs are in place to help all North Texans thrive.