

St. James Town (SJT) is a neighbourhood in downtown Toronto. 64% of SJT residents are recent immigrants. With 64,636 people/km², SJT is one of the most culturally diverse and densely populated neighbourhoods in North America. Immigrants tend to live in neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty, and SJT is no different. SJT's average household income of \$32,539 falls below half that of Toronto's average of \$69,194 despite having the same levels of education.

During the summer of 2009, Wellesley Institute worked with St. James Town youth (aged 15-19) to document their perspectives on how their neighbourhood influences their health. The youth placed great value on open and green spaces for their beauty and ability to promote an active lifestyle and build relationships among diverse community members. They expressed a need for more and better quality free spaces such as parks in poor neighbourhoods in order to help young immigrants in Canada lead healthier lives.

"Quality investment in youth development yields greater economic growth and social well-being for generations to come. Missed investments in young people's intellectual and human potential are costly to reverse, both for youth and for society. In order to achieve positive outcomes in the areas of education, employment, health and citizenship, a holistic approach to youth development is needed, focusing not only on young people themselves, but on those factors that help shape their behaviours, such as families, communities, schools, the media, the legal system and social norms."

Joint Statement by Heads of UN Entities for the Launch of the International Year of Youth

"Our health cannot be negotiated. It is a precondition of our personal development and happiness ... We need and deserve a fundamental human right to a clean and healthy environment."

Budapest Youth Declaration, 2004

MULTICULTURAL YOUTH VOICES: URBAN PARKS & OPEN SPACES

A Case Study from St. James Town, Toronto

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A Signature Project of Wellesley Institute

Are we protecting the well-being of urban multicultural youth?

Immigration accounts for two thirds of Canada's population growth. By 2030, immigration is projected to be the only source of growth for our entire population. Of the over 200,000 annual newcomers from all over the world, one third are youth. We can expect a dramatic increase in the proportion of multicultural youth within the next decade as more immigrants arrive and settle in urban neighbourhoods in Canada.

Social Integration

Open green and public spaces in urban multicultural neighbourhoods are important to the successful integration of immigrant youth in Canada. They are effective at fostering inter-ethnic relationships and reducing negative stereotypes among culturally diverse youth. They have enormous potential for developing a sense of attachment from their users and this attachment aids in social cohesion and community development.

"Everyone in this area such as kids or adults is going to that park to play sports, and walking around to have fun. We may not have a lot of money, but we have each other. Park and public spaces contribute to social wealth."

"it brings children from the community together, it is a great place for people to make friends, bond, and create summer memories."

Mental Well-being

Green spaces enrich youth psychological wellbeing. Everyday public spaces facilitate mental health of youth not only because they are visually pleasing, but they also provide relief from daily stresses, enhance social networking and bonding, and improve mood.

"[A] park is where people can go sit together, talk, enjoy, laugh, and share the differences they have."

"Every morning I pass through this shop and get fresh air and stay for awhile to watch the beauty of the flowers and then go to school. Flowers give humans a chance of breathing fresh air. By seeing flowers our mind get energized. The smile comes to our cheeks and we cheer up by seeing it."

Environmental Pollution

Public spaces in low income neighbourhoods are often poorly maintained and this can lead to excessive garbage buildup. Our youth remark at the hazardous and uncleanly conditions of their parks. Garbage and poor maintenance act as access barriers to parks and create an impression of danger. These are frequently cited as deterrents to youth activity.

"This park relates to our health in a bad way due to the fact that it is dirty and there has been things such as needles found on the floor of the playground which is unsafe for both kids and everyone else."

"All some of us see in this picture is just an overflowing garbage...so what? I mean who really cares about our health?"

Physical Activity

The number of overweight and obese children in Canada has nearly tripled in the last 25 years. Physical inactivity contributes to the increasing rates of obesity, and the availability of accessible open spaces in neighbourhoods plays a positive role in youth physical activity and fitness. Unfortunately, immigrant youth tend to live in urban underserved neighbourhoods, which have fewer safe and well maintained open spaces.

"The Nike court is the only full outdoor basketball court in St. James Town. The Nike court is also right between two buildings. Objects tend to get thrown from the buildings onto the court."

Fear & Safety

Among youth living in high rise buildings and lower income families, unsafe parks and public spaces can have particularly detrimental impacts on physical activity in urban areas. St. James Town youth are fearful of walking through neighbourhood parks in the dark, and this fear constricts their choices and autonomy. Given the potential for open spaces to facilitate the health and wellbeing of multicultural youth, efforts must be made to keep them safe.

"Most children aren't allowed to play in the park due to the fact that there has been drug deals going on and there have been many homeless people begging for money. It is dirty and there has been things such as needles on the playground."

"During night time this area is not really safe, because in a neighbourhood where a lot of gang plays, bad crime and other bad things happened."

"It means that the community is lacking security. And a lack of security means people don't feel safe in an area and may cause them to move out or not even go outside. Ways to solve this problem could be installing more security cameras, or even having security 24/7."

"As we expand our efforts, we must do even more to reach out, to listen and to learn from young people."

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General
United Nation

