

Exercising Good Policy: Increasing Access to Recreation in Toronto's 2013 Budget



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The Wellesley Institute engages in research, policy and community mobilization to advance population health

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Executive Summary

Toronto's 2013 budget can build up our city, or tear it down. City councillors have opportunities, right now, to improve the health of Torontonians that don't require massive investments or complicated agreements with other levels of government. One of these opportunities is quite simple: increase access to recreational services for Torontonians.

Recreational services that reach into every neighbourhood are good for people's health and therefore good for the health of the city. Access to these programs can be improved.

Exercising Good Policy: Increasing Access to Recreation in Toronto's 2013 Budget will support conversations about concrete steps we can take in the Toronto 2013 municipal budget to improve health. Rather than responding to cuts after they happen, we are offering evidence on how access to recreation can improve our health. And, how barriers to access in Toronto's communities prevent many of us from enjoying not only the recreation services themselves, but the many health benefits that come with them. These health benefits are the result of not only physical activity, but also social cohesion and connection. When people feel better, they do better. In all ways.

This report offers three policy options that could be included in this year's budget. First, expand the number of recreation centres that provide all programming for free (to include more low-income neighbourhoods) and reinstate free adult programming at these centres. Research tells us that physical activity and recreation foster community relationships and strengthen neighbourhood connections.

Second, increase access to recreation through the Welcome Policy, a policy to support the use of recreation programs and services for low-income people across the city. With fewer barriers to access, more community members enjoy recreational services and the positive health benefits derived from them.

And third, stabilize funding to youth outreach workers programs. Community engagement programs associated with recreation centres have been linked with positive health outcomes for youth. In addition, a growing body of work on youth recreation programs notes their value in addressing violence and crime prevention.

A budget that improves the health of Torontonians just makes sense. The evidence that links recreation programs to improved health is clear. We can start now by making small investments and policy changes in the 2013 budget.

Introduction

The City of Toronto will be developing the 2013 Budget this fall. City councillors have an opportunity to make it one that builds our city and improves the health of Torontonians, a budget that reduces health disparities. There are opportunities to do so in this year's budget that do not require massive investments, or support from other levels of government. One of these is enhancing residents' access to recreational services. These are health enhancing services that can reach into every neighbourhood in the city.

The aim of this report is to support and inform conversations about the 2013 budget. We review the evidence on access to recreation, how it can support health through physical activity, and what barriers to access exist in Toronto communities. This paper presents three policy options to enhance access to recreation for Torontonians. These options could be the next steps toward recreation policies that provide equitable access to health-enhancing recreation programs for all Torontonians. Incremental policies that could be implemented in the 2013 budget are:

- Reinststate free adult programming at priority centres, and expand the number of priority community centres;
- Increase and stabilize funding for the Welcome policy;
- Stabilize the youth outreach workers (YOWs) program.

Physical activity, recreation and health: the evidence

Physical inactivity poses a substantial threat to the health of Torontonians. Nearly half of the Canadian population aged 12 and older are physically inactive ¹, while 85 percent of the entire population are not meeting recommended physical activity guidelines ². Community-based opportunities for recreation can work to promote positive health behaviours and enhance opportunities for increased social connection and cohesion. Conversely, neighbourhoods and communities struggling to support local sports and recreation services may find themselves worrying about how program cuts may reduce health and well-being in their communities, especially among vulnerable populations ³.

Access to recreation programs and services plays a central role in promoting and providing access to physical activity for Canadians. Taking part in community based recreation programs has been linked with neighbourhood level social cohesion, as well as increased physical activity ⁴. For some groups, the lack of opportunities or resources means they are less likely to be physically active. This is especially true of marginalized groups including ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people with low incomes ⁵. New Canadians also face low physical activity rates, compared to established immigrants and non-immigrant groups ⁶.

In addition to the well-established health and social benefits attributable to physical activity and recreation, evidence also indicates savings in health care and social costs ⁷. Health Canada estimates that each \$1 invested in physical activity yields long term saving of \$11 in health care costs ⁸.

Health Benefits

Physical Health

There is strong international and Canadian evidence for the relationship between physical inactivity and many adverse health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, obesity, type 2 diabetes, breast and colon cancer, hypertension, bone and joint diseases, mental illness, and shorter life expectancy ^{6,9-15}.

On the other hand, the many health benefits of physical activity are also well documented. The evidence points to a direct relationship between physical activity and health, which means higher levels of physical activity are associated with greater health benefits ^{1, 2, 9-11, 16}. Physical activity can prevent illness, and reduces the ill effects of chronic illnesses. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of developing chronic conditions. In addition to disease prevention, physical activity has also been found to improve the health of people who have chronic conditions, such as diabetes, and reduces the likelihood of premature death ¹⁰. Moreover, physical activity plays

a crucial role in preventing obesity¹⁷.

In Canada, recent research suggests that if everyone became physically active, approximately 19% of coronary heart disease, 24% of stroke, 13.8% of hypertension, 18% of colon cancer, 14% of breast cancer, 21% of type 2 diabetes, and 24% of osteoporosis would be prevented¹¹.

Mental Health

Participating in physical activities and community based recreation programs also enhances mental health. Physical activity plays an important role in promoting mental health in adults by reducing symptoms related to stress, anxiety and poor self-esteem¹⁸. For persons living with mental illnesses such as clinical depression, it has been shown to have a therapeutic effect¹⁹. Children and youth also experience mental health benefits from physical activity¹⁸. Participation in physical activity is associated with reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and improvements in self-esteem as well as an improved cognitive and academic performance²⁰. Similarly, evidence indicates improved cognitive functioning among physically-fit older adults²¹.

Social Benefits

The benefits of participating in physical activity and recreation reach beyond health. Benefits include improved social and interpersonal development, positive civic outcomes, and reduced risky behaviour, isolation and delinquency for youth groups⁷. Recreation also contributes to skill development and reducing anti-social behaviour. More broadly, it has also been shown to enhance social inclusion for youth and children⁸.

Evidence suggests that participation in sport and recreation plays a crucial role in the development of strong and cohesive communities²². In particular, the importance of sport participation in building social capital and social cohesion is strongly highlighted in the literature²². Sports and recreation services provide youth with opportunities to broaden their social network, and enhance their sense of connection to their communities²³. Canadian research shows that sports participation helps youth feel better about themselves and develop new friends, while it also helped them become more active in their families and communities^{24 25}.

The social benefits of physical activity and recreation are especially evident for marginalized or vulnerable groups. For example, participating in sport contributed to a sense of belonging for young European Muslim women from immigrant backgrounds, through social support, offering a place of refuge, and contributing to identity and self-image development²⁶. Research from Australia highlights the positive role of sport in the social identity formation of young refugee women from ethnic minority backgrounds²⁷.

Community engagement programs associated with recreation centres have been linked with positive health outcomes for youth, including less risk-taking behaviours related to alcohol, drug use and sexual behaviours²⁸. In addition, a growing body of work on youth recreation programs notes their value in addressing violence and crime prevention^{29 30}. An evaluation of the YOW program suggests that there are important bridges that can be created between locally based recreation programs and services addressing broader social determinants of health for youth, including employment and housing. This echoes research looking at youth motivations for participating in recreation, noting a range of community development and skills building opportunities³¹.

Barriers to physical activity and recreation access

Participation in physical activity and recreation is lowest among marginalized populations residing in poor neighbourhoods²². The recent Access to Recreation for Low-Income Families in Ontario project identified numerous barriers to affordable access to recreation in Ontario³². These barriers include user fees; transportation issues; lack of infrastructure for formal and informal recreation programs; and limited program capacity. Other barriers that surfaced include issues regarding cultural sensitivity, parental mistrust, and limited awareness of available programs as well as the value of recreation.

Recreation programs and policy options

The evidence is clear that increased access to recreation will enhance Torontonians' health. While the development of longer-term, accessible recreation policies for Toronto will take time, actions can be taken in this budget. The options outlined below can be implemented as a first step in the 2013 budget, providing Torontonians with

immediate increases in access to recreation, and to opportunities for better health.

Priority Centres

Priority centres were established to serve high-needs Toronto neighbourhoods by providing universal access to free recreation programming³³. The policy arose from an attempt to harmonize access to recreation centres after amalgamation. While the old City of Toronto provided free access, other municipalities charged user fees³⁴. Priority centres are located in neighbourhoods where 30 percent of the population was below the Low Income Cut-off (LICO) in 1999. There are 22 priority centres in Toronto. While there was an intention to increase the number of priority centres when they were introduced, the first new priority centre Antibes, was only designated this year³⁵.

In fall 2011, free adult programming (including yoga, instructional dance etc.) at priority centres was eliminated. The City estimated a 20 percent drop in registrations due to the introduction of fees³³. In fact, adult registration at priority centres decreased by 61 percent from fall 2010 to fall 2011³⁶. This provides us with an indication of the importance of user fees as a barrier to access.

The City projected that the new fee policy would generate \$200,000 of revenue in 2011 and a further \$200,000 in 2012. Given that the percentage drop in registrations was three times as high as estimated, it is likely that revenues were under \$70,000. This policy change also required that priority centres be equipped with cash-handling facilities. The additional costs associated with cash handling and staff time, along with the reduced revenues from user fees, raises the question of whether the introduction of these fees cost the city more than it brought in.

The threats to access through increased user fees at priority centres continue. The 2012 Staff Recommended Operating Budget included a proposal to eliminate free registered programs for children, youth and seniors in all priority centres³⁷. That was supported by the budget committee and the executive committee and the no fee policy was only saved by two votes at the final City Council budget vote^{38 39}.

The introduction of user fees in priority centres may further isolate low and middle income families who are unable to access recreation programs, whether due to ineligibility for, or inadequate access to subsidy programs.

Currently only nine of the 13 priority neighbourhoods have priority centres. Increasing inequality, growing numbers of low-income families, and a greater concentration of poverty in the inner suburbs has increased the need for priority centres. However, only one priority centre has been added since 1999. An additional 18 community centres would qualify as priority centres³³.

Policy option 1: Increase the number of priority centres and reinstate free adult programming

An additional 18 community centres, located in neighbourhoods where 30 percent of the population have incomes below LICO, should become priority centres. Further, funding should be sufficient to ensure that these centres provide a broad range of programming. Research shows that physical activity and recreation are particularly important for relationship-building and social cohesion within communities²². Priority centres can function as critical anchors within communities; where recreation services and programs help to strengthen connections within neighbourhoods and more effectively distribute local resources.

The objective of priority centres is universal access to recreation in low-income communities. The introduction of fees for adult programming detracts from this objective. By narrowing the focus of free recreation programs to those for children, youth and seniors, the city has created a cost barrier to the health-enhancing impacts of recreation. A reversal of the policy on charging fees would combat the decline in adult registrations and promote

good health across all age groups.

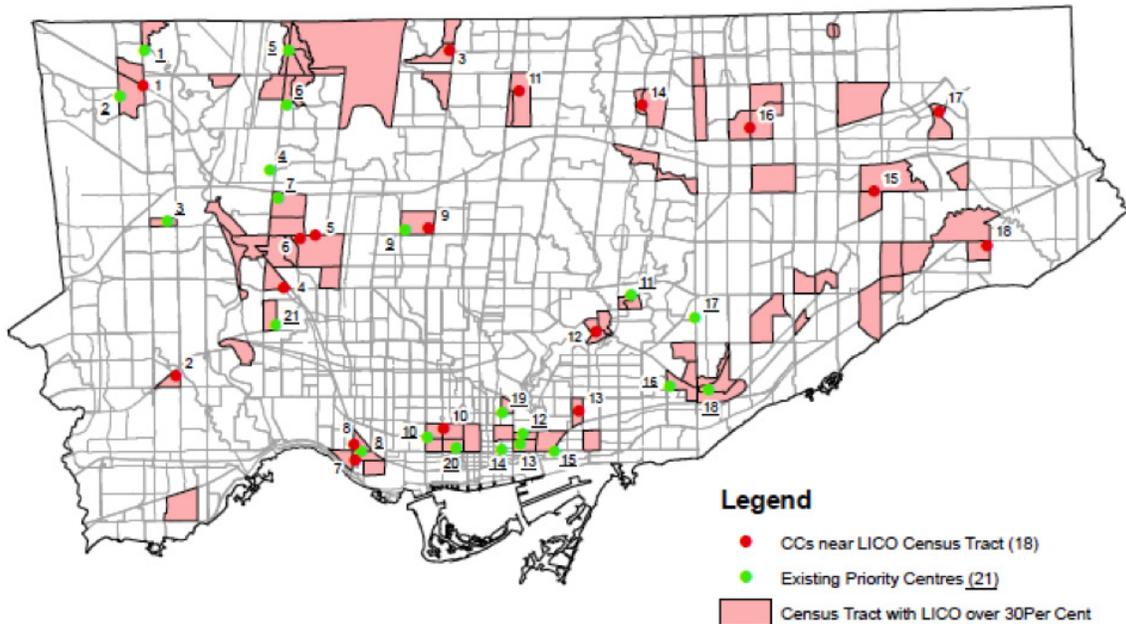


Figure 1. Distribution of priority centres in 2011 ³³

The Welcome Policy

Another major city policy to enhance access to recreation is the Welcome Policy. Introduced in 1999, the policy’s objective was to “ensure all residents year round accessibility to high quality recreation and leisure programs regardless of their ability to pay fees” ³³. A number of policy changes have reduced access to recreation through this program. City council needs to re-establish an entitlement approach to the program, and a less cumbersome application process.

The application process has been identified as a barrier to access ^{40 41}. Applicants are required to prove residency and low-income status through an application form and supporting documentation. If the eligibility criteria are met, the applicant is issued a subsidy that is valid for one year. To maintain access from one year to the next, there is a requirement to re-apply for the subsidy 4-8 weeks before the renewal date ⁴². Prior to May 2009, city staff stationed in community centres completed the Welcome Policy registration paperwork on behalf of applicants. That registration process was more likely to use the “extenuating circumstance” consideration if applicants could not provide proof of income (in cases of refugees or domestic violence victims) ⁴³.

Since 2011, there has been a freeze on access to the Welcome Policy for the first time in its history. Sometimes registrants are offered a very limited window to enroll in programs, as little as two days ⁴⁴. These freezes in the program have severely restricted access.

In 2012, access to the Welcome Policy moved from a program-based allocation to a dollar-based allocation. Until this fall, children and youth under 25, who met the eligibility requirements and were able to enrol had access to 12 programs a year, three per season. Adults had access to one program per season. This allocation has now shifted to a dollar amount of \$455 per year for those under 25 and \$212 for those over 25. City staff have acknowledged that this will reduce access to recreation for those who currently use the program ⁴⁵. An attempt to increase the

number of people who have access to recreation should not reduce access for current users.

Policy option 2: Increase access to recreation through the Welcome Policy

The Welcome Policy was designed to provide access to recreation for those with financial difficulties. In the face of increased inequality and low income, this policy is important for the health of Torontonians. Doubling funding to the Welcome Policy and returning to a program based allocation will enhance access to recreation for low-income Torontonians.

The Youth Outreach Worker (YOW) program

With communities demanding solutions to recent tragedies resulting from youth violence, it is incumbent on the City of Toronto to support the YOW program that promotes youth leadership, healthy living and personal development. The 2012 Ontario Youth Action Plan acknowledges that recreation (especially summer recreational activities) is a major contributor to youth development⁴⁶. The provincial government's commitment to expand and preserve recreational opportunities for youth needs to be echoed by the City of Toronto.

After a surge in youth violence in the summer of 2005 and the publication of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood task force's report urging investment in priority areas, the YOW program was implemented in November 2005⁴⁷. In 2006, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Social Services' Youth Opportunities Strategy, supporting cities like Toronto, Hamilton, Windsor, London, Ottawa and Thunder Bay, invested \$2.6 million to support program delivery, as well as \$4 million in 2007 to employ 62 YOWs province-wide⁴⁸.

YOWs anticipate and respond to the needs of newcomer and disabled youth as well as those from vulnerable communities, in an effort to encourage healthy development and sustain community networks⁴⁹. YOWs connect young people with education, health, employment and recreation programs, and provide mentorship. There have been 29 YOWs assigned to Toronto's priority neighbourhoods and other communities with priority centres to engage youth and local agencies dealing with youth issues. This program was founded on the "for youth by youth" philosophy, which empowers young people to act as partners in the creation, operation and management of programs. An evaluation of the YOW program has found increased attendance and participation of youth in recreation programs, particularly through awareness and subsequent use of the Welcome Policy²⁸. There is evidence to suggest that other population groups, like newcomers would also benefit from targeted outreach workers linked with recreation centres⁵⁰.

In the 2012 budget, 17 of the 29 YOW positions were eliminated. However, after the recent incidents of youth violence in Toronto city council reconsidered the elimination of these positions. Acknowledging the importance of the YOW program, these positions were reinstated. City Council has committed to sustaining the program for the near future by considering funding for the 29 YOWs in the 2013 operating budget⁵¹.

Policy option 3: Stabilize the youth outreach workers (YOWs) program

Recurring bouts of youth violence indicate the need for proactive youth engagement strategies. Research supports this by linking recreation to social and interpersonal development, positive civic outcomes, and reduced risky behaviour, isolation and delinquency for youth groups⁷. YOWs provide mentorship and empowerment opportunities to youth who might otherwise be isolated from their peers and physically inactive. Funding for the YOW program should be stabilized. Long-term funding will ensure that YOWs play a consistent role in community development and capacity building.

Costing of these proposals

The table below shows the costs of these proposals. If City Council implemented all three, it would increase expenditures by \$16.95 million. This would increase the tax-supported budget by less than one half of one percentage point.

Policy Options	Incremental costs in \$Millions
Extending priority status & reinstating free adult programs at priority centres ¹	5.4
Double funding for the Welcome Policy ²	10.2
Stabilizing the YOW program ³	1.35
Total	16.95

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The evidence is clear that access to recreation is health enhancing. Recent changes in policy have reduced access to programs, thereby jeopardizing Torontonians' health. City councillors can take action in this budget to enhance access to recreation by: 1) expanding the number of priority community centres and reinstating free adult programming at *priority centres*, 2) Increasing and stabilizing funding for the *Welcome Policy*, and 3) Stabilizing the *Youth Outreach Workers* (YOW) program.

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