

Voices of Multicultural Youth: Impact of Urban Neighbourhood on Health and Well-Being

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This is the first of a series of policy briefs that analyzes youth-related policy implications from the St. James Town Initiative's Voices of Multicultural Youth report and sets out recommendations and options for action.

POLICY BRIEFING

The *St. James Town Initiative* is the Wellesley Institute's largest research and community capacity building initiative. The initiative works with the community to better understand how neighbourhoods affect newcomers' health and well-being. The initiative highlights community issues and identifies what changes are required in St. James Town to make the neighbourhood as healthy as possible.

The *Voices of Multicultural Youth* study complements the initiative's 2008 adult [Photovoice report](#). Photovoice is an arts- and community-based participatory research method that captures and shares voices through photography. In this study, 21 youths from St. James Town took photographs of their neighbourhood over a two week period. Each participant chose their three favourite photos and wrote a one-page story on each explaining what the photo said about their neighbourhood. Photographs and stories highlight key aspects of lived experiences and uncover crucial issues. This brief identifies potential policy actions arising from the photos and stories prepared by St. James Town youth.

PARKS, GREEN SPACES, AND RECREATIONAL SERVICES

The youth participants in this study highlighted the importance of well-maintained and accessible parks and recreational services, including pools, gyms and weight rooms. These facilities provided a place to meet and socialize, were perceived as a safe alternative to being

on the streets, promoted healthy activity, and were aesthetically pleasing.

However, the parks in St. James Town suffer from a lack of maintenance. Parks have broken or damaged equipment, are vandalized, and often have overflowing garbage cans. Youth also felt that parks were unsafe at night.

- *Action:* The Parks, Forestry and Recreation branch of the City of Toronto should undertake a specific project to monitor parks in St. James Town to ensure that facilities are clean and well maintained. The City could also work with the St. James Town community to undertake community clean-ups.
- *Action:* A community-led partnership with the City of Toronto and private building owners could be established to oversee the maintenance and repair of shared community spaces.

Youth in St. James Town commented on the lack of plants and flowers in their neighbourhood. There was a feeling that there was a lack of community-owned green spaces where residents could feel physically connected with their neighbourhood.

- *Action:* Participants suggested that a community planning exercise could be undertaken — either by the City or directly by residents — to assess potential green spaces in the neighbourhood. Following this, the City or land owners could work with residents to plant

flowers and gardens. Depending on available space community food gardens could also be planted.

- *Action:* Currently in St. James Town, Green Thumbs Growing Kids works to encourage balcony gardening. A program of this type could be extended and promoted to educate and assist a broader range of residents to cultivate balcony gardens.

Youth participants in St. James Town noted that community recreational services are well-used, but as a result facilities are overcrowded. The Wellesley Community Centre serves the 25,000 people living in St. James Town plus other individuals from nearby neighbourhoods like Cabbagetown. As a Priority Centre, recreational services are offered for free for St. James Town residents at the Community Centre, but addresses are not checked at the time of registration. Consequently, services are not always available for St. James Town residents.

- *Action:* Extending opening hours for community recreational services would help reduce overcrowding. This would also address the needs of residents who work outside of regular business hours.
- *Action:* The City of Toronto could check addresses at the time of registration for services in Priority Centres like the Wellesley Community Centre to ensure that free services are being delivered to targeted populations.
- *Action:* In its 2011 Budget the City of Toronto included a revenue change option to introduce user-fees to adult programs within Priority Centres, including the Wellesley Community Centre. If the City proceeds with this option it is imperative that the specific needs of underserved residents are considered and that programs and facilities remain accessible.

SECURITY

Security was a major issue raised by St. James Town youth, which mirrors the findings of the 2008 adult Photovoice project. Youth participants raised a number of specific concerns including violence, gangs, drunkenness, drug dealing, and bike theft, in addition to general feelings of insecurity at night and in specific locations such as the entrance to the tunnel leading to the Sherbourne subway station. Females in St. James Town were more likely than males to highlight feelings of insecurity at night, while males were more likely to

discuss concerns about violence, gangs, and general street crime.

- *Action:* Increasing police patrols in St. James Town, especially after dark, may help to reduce the overall crime rate and to increase feelings of safety amongst community members. However, this strategy should be implemented alongside partnerships between the Toronto Police Service and the St. James Town community that empower residents to take an active role in making their neighbourhood a safe space.
- *Action:* Improved lighting and the addition of security cameras to problem areas in the neighbourhood may lead to improved community safety.

GARBAGE

The prevalence of garbage in St. James Town was noted by youth participants. This was of concern as garbage affects quality of life through the spread of disease, the attraction of animals, the creation of unpleasant aromas, and the overall aesthetics of the neighbourhood. The cause of the garbage problem in St. James Town was threefold: a lack of facilities, a lack of maintenance, and a lack of education.

- *Action:* Installing more garbage and recycling facilities in public spaces would encourage greater use and discourage littering. The initial cost of installing additional facilities would likely be recovered through reduced need for remedial clean-ups.
- *Action:* The Investigation Services of the Municipal Licensing and Standards branch of the City of Toronto should work with building owners to ensure compliance with Bylaw 629, which requires that building owners store and remove garbage in particular ways. This bylaw includes the requirement that garbage be stored in an enclosed garage or covered receptacle and be screened from view. Additionally, the storage area must be clean and odour-free.
- *Action:* St. James Town youth identified a lack of knowledge and information about recycling as a cause of excessive garbage in the neighbourhood. This issue could be addressed through community- or city-led education sessions, building-specific recycling campaigns, or volunteer recycling ambassador programs such as the City of Toronto's [3Rs Program](#).

BUILDING MAINTENANCE

Building maintenance was important to St. James Town youth, specifically the tendency of elevators to break down for extended periods of time. This caused long waits and overcrowding in the remaining elevators. Moreover, youth felt that stairways in St. James Town buildings were unsafe – some described drug deals and violence in these locations.

- *Action:* The Property Standards Bylaw 629 specifies that elevators be maintained in a clean condition and in good working order, although no specific requirements are placed on how quickly repairs should be completed. As 14 of the 18 buildings in St. James Town are privately owned, the City should work with building owners to ensure that they are aware of their obligations to comply with rental codes and property bylaws.

HOMELESSNESS

Youth in St. James Town raised homelessness as a significant challenge facing the neighbourhood. Participants expressed surprise that a city as wealthy as Toronto has a homelessness problem — a finding that was shared with the adult Photovoice project. Youth viewed homelessness as a safety concern, but also expressed feelings about the unfairness of being without a home.

- *Action:* Inclusionary zoning should be considered in any new residential property developments in the St. James Town area.
- *Action:* Implement the Wellesley Institute's *[Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto](#)*, which calls for the Governments of Canada, Ontario, and Toronto to:
 - Immediately move up to half the sheltered homeless into homes through an enhanced rent supplement program; and,
 - Fund almost 200,000 new and renovated homes in healthy, mixed-income neighbourhoods over the next ten years.

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