

EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND NEWCOMER IMMIGRANT HEALTH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Executive Summary

This qualitative research study was conducted in St. James Town (SJT), an urban multicultural neighbourhood located in the northeast corner of Toronto's downtown core. This study examined both the "place-based" characteristics of SJT and individual-level factors, including newcomer immigrants' perceptions of the neighbourhood, their social relations, and their access to health and social services in the neighbourhood. This study was based on focus groups and individual interviews with three ethno-racial immigrant populations: Tamil, Filipino, and Chinese (Mandarin speaking). It compared their experiences with those of Canadian-born residents in the neighbourhood. The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To explore how newcomer immigrants in SJT define health;
2. To increase our understanding of how place influences newcomer-immigrant health;
3. To explore what neighbourhood factors (e.g., housing quality, social networks and supports, safety, and access to services and recreational space) newcomer immigrants in SJT identify as influencing their own health and health risks; and
4. To examine how neighbourhood factors are conceptualized and experienced across and within different groups.

This descriptive study employed a qualitative research design to allow for an in-depth understanding of newcomer immigrants' perceptions on the ways in which the neighbourhood context influences their health. Data collection involved focus groups and individual interviews with residents of SJT, as well as interviews with health and social service providers in SJT and the surrounding area. The discussion guidelines were translated into Tamil and Chinese (Mandarin) by fluently bilingual speakers and checked for semantic equivalence by back translation. The translated guidelines were also reviewed by the community advisory group for cultural appropriateness.

The main findings from the study are summarized according to the following categories:

1. Perceptions of Health and Wellbeing

Participants demonstrated an understanding of the impacts of factors such as their work environment, the quality of their housing, and available social networks on their health and wellbeing. Health and wellbeing were understood to be the absence of disease in the body, the ability to participate in society and the workforce, individual satisfaction, psychological balance, family harmony, and the availability of 'good' medical services.

2. The Impact of Migration and Settlement on Newcomers

The themes that emerged from participant responses on the impacts of migration on their health and wellbeing include employment barriers, language barriers when seeking employment and accessing health and social services, the challenge of adapting to a new physical environment, and the loss of social support upon immigration. In addition, the limited availability of health and social services upon immigration was a concern expressed by participants.

3. Place-Based Characteristics of St. James Town

Participants raised concerns about aspects of the SJT neighbourhood that they felt impacted their health and wellbeing. A major concern is the quality of housing. Residential high-rise buildings are poorly maintained, and landlords fail to address the concerns of residents. Newcomer immigrants stated that the cheap rent in the neighbourhood makes it difficult for them to move elsewhere. Participants mentioned that the crowdedness of the neighbourhood could result in health problems with sanitation and the spread of illness. Safety in SJT is another concern for residents who have experienced crime and been exposed to drug use in the neighbourhood. However, participants spoke positively about the convenient location of SJT to their place of work, its local grocery and ethnic food stores, as well as the presence in SJT of people of similar ethnic origin to their own.

4. Availability and Quality of Health and Social Services

Participants expressed concerns about the availability and quality of health and social services in SJT. Several participants felt that there were not enough quality services available in the neighbourhood and surrounding area that met their needs. Some participants described their difficulties with finding a family physician upon arrival in the area. Also, there was limited information available to newcomer immigrants on how to navigate the healthcare system and community health and social services.

5. Service Provider Interviews

Service providers described the challenges of providing services to different ethnic groups with different needs. Service providers were also very aware of the barriers and inequalities that newcomer immigrants experience, such as, employment barriers, language barriers, and issues with discrimination of ethnic groups.

Conclusions

The results indicate that SJT newcomer immigrant residents experience a range of manifestations relating to physical, mental, and social health and wellbeing. Therefore, health outcomes and wellbeing are the result of a complex web of causation where risks are related to individual behaviour, neighbourhood, access to social and health services, and social support. Responses and experiences were similar across the ethnic groups and non-immigrant residents in SJT. Participants described both positive and negative aspects of living in SJT. Residents felt that access to public transportation, the vicinity to grocery stores that sell their culture's food, and the presence of other residents of similar ethnic origin were important and positive aspects of SJT. Participants also described the negative aspects of SJT that they believed impacted their health and wellbeing. Crowdedness, poorly maintained residential buildings, a lack of sufficient recreational space, and the presence of crime were all factors that contributed to residents' dislike of the neighbourhood. However, economic circumstances constrained their ability to move to other residential neighbourhoods that did not possess these negative factors.

The service providers interviewed described the challenges and barriers to providing services and care to newcomer immigrants who have diverse needs. They also indicated that funding constraints limit their ability to design and administer services and programs that accommodate the particular needs of the different ethnic groups.