

# St. James Town Research into Action: Impacts of the Physical Environment on Health and Wellbeing

Produced by **Stephanie R. Montesanti**<sup>1</sup> | July 2010  
Supervised by **Bob Gardner**<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Associate, Wellesley Institute; PhD Candidate, Health Policy, McMaster University

<sup>2</sup>Director, Healthcare Reform and Policy, Wellesley Institute

This series of briefs analyzes the findings from a qualitative study on neighbourhood and health in St. James Town and sets out recommendations and policy options for action. The St. James Town qualitative study demonstrates that the physical environment in which people live impact their health and wellbeing. Participants reported in individual interviews and focus groups a number of issues related to their physical environment that they believe affected their health and wellbeing adversely.

### The Problem:

- The overarching problem is one of poor quality housing, crowded high-rise buildings, safety concerns, and limited recreational space in low-income neighbourhoods such as St. James Town (SJT). Key features of the problem include:
  - Residential buildings are not adequately maintained. SJT residents who participated in the study expressed concerns about poor maintenance and decay of residential high-rise buildings in the neighbourhood.
  - Residents explained that landlords neglect building repairs.
  - Safety was an important concern according to residents. Research associated safety and stability in one's living situation with increased ability to work, be productive, and become part of the community<sup>1 23</sup> and with an increased sense of security.
  - Privacy was also an important characteristic of the living environment. Residents of SJT complained about the neighbourhood and the residential buildings being crowded.
  - Affordable housing is a barrier for many newcomers to Canada who may face job discrimination, loss of previous earned qualifications or credentials that aren't recognized. Many newcomers are employed in low-paying jobs with inadequate benefits.
  - Research has shown that the absence of recreational space in the neighbourhoods can have impacts on mental and psychological wellbeing.

*"There are no good parks for kids in the area where they can play."*

*"It's too crowded here [SJT]. While you are walking in a crowded area you might not know what will happen. Someone might steal something from you."*

<sup>1</sup> Browne, G and Courtney, M. Housing, social support and people with schizophrenia: A grounded theory study. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*. 2005; 26(3), 311-326

<sup>2</sup> Geller, G. And Kowalchuk, J. Supportive housing needs of women with mental health issues in Regina. *Prairie Forum*, 2002; 27(1), 83-100

<sup>3</sup> Herb, M, Miller, E and O'Hara, A. A housing toolkit: Information to help the public mental health community meet the housing needs of people with mental illness. Arlington, VA: National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. 2003

## What has been done to address the problem?

- A number of community-based organizations have developed to help newcomer immigrants to integrate into their new environment in Canada, assist them with settlement issues, and to ensure a “healthy” living environment. Some examples of organizations assisting newcomers include:
  - **Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services** is a community health centre (CHC), whose main work is with refugees and newcomers to Canada. Access Alliance works within the anti-oppressive and social determinants of health perspectives (<http://www.accessalliance.ca>).
  - The **TRIEC** (Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council) is a mentoring program for newcomers in different occupations. The council works with employers, many of whom are in the technology sector, to assist newcomers become accustomed to the Canadian work culture and build networks (<http://www.triec.ca/about>).
  - **Women’s counselling referral and education centre** is a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression community-based mental health agency. They offer a number of services such as counselling and referrals, and ensure that women feel safe in their neighbourhoods, homes and communities.
  - **South Asians Women’s Centre** is voluntary non-profit organization to increase self awareness of South Asian Women and to empower women to develop their social and cultural potential.
- Neighbourhood-level initiatives
  - **Community Matters Toronto (CMT)**, a group of St. James Town neighbours who work together to contribute to a strong neighbourhood culture by helping to build networks of relationships, to link people to others with common interest and foster exchanges of knowledge and skills. They assist families dealing with issues of housing, finances, social issues, employment, citizenship, language, and parenting.
  - The **SJT Action Group**, consist of voluntary immigrant residents from SJT. The group has initiated several small-scale recycling programs, and has implemented bicycle racks in the neighbourhood.
  - **St. James Town Safety Committee**, a community organization working to improve the safety of residents in St. James Town.

*“With my income I could not afford to support my family with three kids and my wife in another area. St. James Town suits my income.”*

## What needs to be done to address the problem?

- Municipalities should engage landlords and property managers, and create collaborative mechanisms and initiatives that bring government, property owners and residents together to benefit the quality of housing and their community.
- Secure and adequate funding and programs at the federal, provincial and municipal level to deliver new affordable homes.
  - With the increase in the number of newcomers entering St. James Town, crowded residential buildings become a problem. More affordable places to live could alleviate the crowded living environment in SJT.
- Implement one promising policy direction quickly: inclusive planning and zoning tools to effectively use local powers to create mixed-income and liveable neighbourhoods (neighbourhood redevelopment)
  - Support connecting to social networks is important. Social networks can reduce loneliness, help newcomers integrate into the neighbourhood, and lead to a healthy community.
  - Past research funded by the Wellesley Institute shows that healthy and inclusive neighbourhoods reduce health disparities and improve safety in the area.<sup>4</sup>
  - Housing must be located in safe neighbourhoods with access to public transit and amenities such as grocery stores and banks.
- All levels of government need to ensure sustainable funding for health and social programs
  - Neighbourhood multi-service agencies and non-profit organizations working with immigrant communities to influence healthy living spaces face a number of challenges with government funding for their programs and services. This ultimately threatens the sustainability of these organizations and networks, and limits their flexibility to provide a range of services to a diverse community. Funding needs to be secured at all level of government to ensure that all newcomers can access and benefit from community programs and services.

*“You have to pay attention to your own safety. I have been living here [SJT] for three years. At the beginning, I was really worried about safety issues. I avoid going out at night.”*

### Who needs to be involved in sustaining healthy communities?

- Collaboration among stakeholders – community health centres, neighbourhood-level organizations, property owners and SJT residents need to work together to develop public awareness programs about the impact of the physical environment on their health and wellbeing, and mobilize support for change to create a healthy environment to live in.

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<sup>4</sup> Kirch, B, Gewurtz, R., Bakewell, r., Singer, B., Badsha, M., Giles, N. Critical Characteristics of Supported Housing. Wellesley Institute. August 2009.

- Inter-governmental collaboration should be strengthened so that municipal governments are engaged in decision-making over the organization, delivery and management of social and health services at the local level.