

The Importance of Accessible Community Recreation Services: Findings from the St. James Town Multicultural Youth Photovoice Project

POLICY BRIEF | Prepared by Steve Barnes, Policy Analyst, Wellesley Institute
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This is the second in a series of policy briefs that analyze youth-related policy implications from the St. James Town Initiative's Voices of Multicultural Youth report and sets out recommendations and options for action.

In July 2011, The Wellesley Institute's St. James Town Initiative released a report on how multicultural youth in the St. James Town neighbourhood of downtown Toronto view and engage with their neighbourhood. The report described St. James Town youths' perspectives of their community through Photovoice, an arts and community-based participatory research method that captures and shares voices through photography. A number of policy issues arose out of the Youth Photovoice report, including maintenance of parks and green spaces, security, garbage and homelessness (Haque & Sun, 2011). This policy briefing focuses on one key area identified by St. James Town youth: access to community recreation services.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY RECREATION SERVICES

Critical to preventing conditions like obesity, diabetes and heart disease is healthy eating and physical exercise. Income levels are directly related to participation in physical exercise; individuals with greater economic resources have higher rates of participation. Research by Human Resources Development Canada found that 60 percent of children from very poor homes never participate in supervised sports and recreation activities, as compared to 27 percent of children in well-off homes, highlighting the role that unemployment, low income, over-crowded housing and high population

density play in determining health outcomes (Human Resource Development Canada, 2001). The impact poverty has on recreation participation rates is particularly salient for St. James Town, given that 50 percent of its private households fall below Statistics Canada's low income cut-off, as compared with 18 percent in all of Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2006). There are also well-documented links between the physical environment, peer-group socialization, and positive mental health, especially in deprived households (Cattell et al, 2008; Wickrama and Bryant, 2003).

COMMUNITY RECREATION SERVICES IN ST. JAMES TOWN

The primary recreation facility in St. James Town is the Wellesley Community Centre, although there is also an outdoor basketball court and two swimming pools – one of which has been out of service for some time. These facilities were highlighted by St. James Town youth as important pieces of community infrastructure.

Although this community centre may have been build for many reasons, in my opinion I think was build to allow the residents of St. James Town to have resource they deserve and to have a second home.

In addition to helping to keep the community healthy and active, community recreation facilities also provided a safe place for youth to meet and socialize – a scarce commodity in a neighbourhood as densely populated as St. James Town.

Now parents don't have to worry about their children's whereabouts and youth in the neighbourhood have a place to "chill" and at the same time be safe.

As St. James Town is disproportionately populated by individuals and families with low incomes who are at the greatest risk of not being able to participate in sports and recreational activities, easily-accessible and inclusive community recreation services are essential. Youth in St. James Town voiced their appreciation for the existing services and that they are able to access facilities without having to pay for a membership or usage fee. This equitable access makes these facilities safe spaces that provide a healthy and enjoyable alternative to being on the street:

The weight room is open every day for people to use, different times for different genders. The gym which is open every day has a variety of different activities to suit everyone with open gym a majority of the time. The gym shelters people from the streets, giving them a place to play under the supervision of staff members. If a fight is ever sparked it is easily broken. If a dispute ever arises it is easily put down. The programs the Wellesley Community Center provides allows people to stay in shape or have a place to exercise. The best thing about the center is that it is absolutely free.

USER FEES, THE WELCOME POLICY, AND COMMUNITY RECREATION SERVICES IN ST. JAMES TOWN

As a Priority Centre, recreational services at the Wellesley Community Centre have been provided at no cost to users since 1999. The Wellesley Community Centre also provides programs targeted to specific populations, such as hockey, basketball, and soccer for youth.

Additionally, St. James Town residents have had access to free arts programs at the Wellesley Community Centre that allow neighbours to get to know one another, foster strong social networks, and build community cohesion. Programs include general arts and crafts, hip hop classes, and music courses.

However, in February 2011, Toronto City Council approved the introduction of user fees for adult, registered programs at Priority Centres, like swimming lessons and fitness classes, beginning in the Fall Session of 2011. Adult drop-in programs – along with programs for children, youth, and older adults – will continue to be offered free of charge.

While it is positive that registered programs for youth will continue to be provided without fees, the ability of youth to participate in adult programs will be com-

promised. Many programs that are considered ‘adult’ are used by youth, such as dance classes and instructional basketball. Reducing access to these programs will limit the ability of youth to participate in structured activities and will result in increased demand for free services like weight rooms, further exacerbating overcrowding in facilities like the Wellesley Community Centre. Moreover, the need for accessible community recreation facilities does not change just because a youth turns 18, but the introduction of user fees will mean that access will become inequitable.

The Welcome Policy has been identified as an alternative mechanism to enable lower-income Torontonians access to community recreation services. The Welcome Policy is a fee subsidy program that provides access to free, City-operated recreation programs for individuals and families living below the Low Income Cut-Off. The Welcome Policy differs from free, universal access at Priority Centres in that it requires application and registration (including income verification) and only allows access to a prescribed number of recreational programs each year. Moreover, barriers to registration such as difficulty proving income, income fluctuations over the year, or language difficulties mean that some people are not able to access this program despite being eligible. At any rate, applications for the Welcome Policy are currently frozen owing to inadequate funding.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

If municipal community recreation supports are reduced or eliminated, the overall prevalence of obesity (a precursor of diabetes and other chronic conditions) in children and youth is likely to increase over time. These negative health effects will be unequally distributed across the city. Poorer and more marginalized communities like St. James Town will be disproportionately affected as they are home to populations most at risk of chronic health conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Even small increases in user fees can keep those who need community recreation services the most — including St. James Town youth — from accessing vital activity and health-promoting programs. This does not just affect individual health, but creates significant pressures on Toronto’s health services and an added burden on the economy in the future.

The Wellesley Institute recommends that:

- Council direct city staff to undertake a Health Equity Impact Assessment to determine whether eliminating access to free adult, registered programs at Priority Centres has an inequitable and

negative health impact on vulnerable populations — including youth — in the neighbourhoods that they serve and identify how to mitigate those risks.

A Health Equity Impact Assessment carried out by the City of Toronto should identify the populations that may be affected and map out the specific social determinants of health that are relevant. The Youth Photovoice Project identified that youth in St. James Town are affected by a variety of social determinants, including income, housing quality, and physical environments.

The Wellesley Institute has a range of [tools](#) and research — including the [St. James Town Initiative](#), which provides immigrant health research — that can assist policy makers in understanding how to factor health equity into policy decisions.

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