

# Green Paths to Mental Health Walk Lab Report

By Nadha Hassen

Wellesley Institute works in research and policy to improve health and health equity in the Greater Toronto Area through action on the social determinants of health.

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**About the Wellesley Junior Fellowship**

The Wellesley Junior Fellowship is building the next generation of social policy researchers who will work to advance population health and reduce health inequities in the Greater Toronto Area.

**About This Report**

This paper is a product of the Wellesley Junior Fellowship. It is part three in a three part series of papers within this fellowship project to understand how green spaces influence mental health and well-being. The series includes 1) a theoretical framework, based on a scoping review of reviews, 2) a discussion on how neighbourhood income moderates green space effects on mental health, based on quantitative analysis of existing data; and 3) a community consultations paper, based on a Walk Lab.

**About Wellesley Institute Labs**

Wellesley Institute Labs bring together groups of stakeholders, experts and community to push, stretch, and test research ideas that impact the social determinants of health and health equity. Wellesley Institute works in the GTA and beyond to ask how we can improve health and health equity for all. Wellesley Institute Labs use a combination of group facilitation methods, systems thinking, and creative thinking tools to bring out the complementary expertise in the room to generate new thinking and build new collaborations.

Building Roads Together (BRT) is a community-based peer walking/rolling program designed to promote inclusion and reduce mental health inequities. The program has run in Regent Park prior to this Walk Lab.

Jane's Walk is focused on citizen-led walking tours that work towards community-based city building.

Copies of this report can be downloaded from [www.wellesleyinstitute.com](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com).

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## Introduction

Wellesley Institute, in collaboration with Building Roads Together and in partnership with Jane’s Walk, held a Walk Lab in Regent Park with community organizations, stakeholders and residents. The aim was to include these groups in assessing green space quality and discuss the links to mental health and well-being. The Walk Lab was designed to walk through this engagement process and record the process and discussion. This report is the result of that process and discussion. It is part of a Wellesley Junior Fellowship project on green space and mental health and well-being, providing a community perspective on green space in neighbourhoods.

## Background

There are many ways in which we measure and assess aspects our city. The City of Toronto has 140 neighbourhoods that range in demographics, size, infrastructure and health (Centre for Research in Inner City Health (CRICH), 2014). The Neighbourhood Equity Score is a “single number designed to capture the total weight of unnecessary, unfair and unjust differences faced by neighbourhood residents in five key areas: economic opportunities, social development, healthy lives, participation and decision-making and physical surroundings” (City of Toronto, 2014, p.1). To assess urban equity, Toronto Urban Health Equity and Assessment Reporting Tool (Urban HEART) uses five policy domains, one of which is Physical Environment & Infrastructure and includes a measure of green space in the city by neighbourhood. Quantity of green space is measured using the average amount of green space in a square kilometer (CRICH, 2014). For the purpose of this work, this collective information was used to select a Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) in the City of Toronto through the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy (City of Toronto, n.d.). Regent Park is one of these NIAs.

Regent Park has lower than average amounts of green space and percentage of self-reported very good or excellent mental health (CRICH, 2014).

|  | Regent Park | Toronto Rate |
|--|-------------|--------------|
| <b>Green Space</b><br>The average amount of green space per km <sup>2</sup> in a 1 km circular buffer from each residential block in the neighbourhood | 34.4        | 45.5         |
| <b>Mental Health</b><br>Percentage of those 20+ reporting very good or excellent mental health   | 61.3        | 73.4         |

Quality of green spaces is the most important aspect of green space to consider with respect to mental health and well-being, before quantity of and access to green space (Hassen, 2016a). However, in the City of Toronto, there currently is not a way to assess quality of green spaces across neighbourhoods. Planning mental health-promoting green spaces in Toronto could be facilitated by a holistic assessment of our green spaces that includes quality measures of green space.

Adapting green spaces for diverse population groups could better meet and satisfy community needs

(Hassen, 2016b). To assess the quality of urban green spaces, a process for identifying the range of diverse needs of the community and residents for consideration when designing green spaces is key. This paper describes a pilot process for assessing quality of green spaces for mental health promotion through including community.

Regent Park is currently in phase three of a five phase revitalization that is taking place over 15 years (City of Toronto, 2013). Therefore the physical and social environment in Regent Park is constantly changing, which can impact people’s mental health and well-being. Through this Walk Lab, we wanted to learn more about the green space and how it links to mental health and well-being amidst this change.

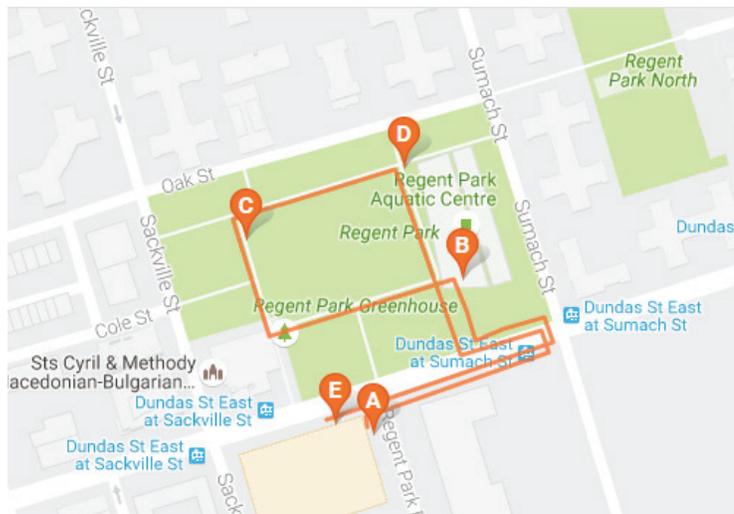
## The Walk Lab

The Walk Lab took place in Regent Park, the park, which is the green space bordered on the west by Sackville Street, to the north by Oak Street, to the east by Sumach Street and to the south by Dundas Street East.

The walk route as described and advertised on the Jane’s Walk website<sup>1</sup> is pictured below in Fig. 1

**Fig. 1**

### A. Daniel’s Spectrum



We will meet outside Daniel’s Spectrum (585 Dundas St. East) on the east side of the building. Look for the orange Jane’s Walk flag!

### B. Regent Park Aquatic Centre

Here we will talk about what makes a green space accessible.

### C. Bake Oven

Here we will talk about facilities and parts of the park that allow residents to use the space

<sup>1</sup> <http://janeswalk.org/canada/toronto/healthy-green-space-city/>

for their own needs.

#### **D. Children’s Playground**

Here we will have a discussion about mental health and how users feel in the park.

#### **E. Daniel’s Spectrum**

We will come back to Daniel’s Spectrum where we will engage in an activity to map different features of the park and how they relate to mental health. (Indoors)

Including the walk lab team, there were 12 participants. Prior to the walk, participants were handed a clipboard, pen and question sheet to fill out as we walked through the space (see Appendix B). The answers on this question sheet helped participants in the mapping exercise.

The interactive mapping exercise resulted in a visual map of the green space features that participants felt either promoted or took away from mental health and well-being.



### **Discussion Highlights**

Three different themes were identified through the scoping review of reviews: access to green space, facilities: availability and condition, and social interaction (Hassen, 2016a). These themes were the focus of the lab discussion though residents also brought their own thoughts, concerns and comments to the walk lab. Participants were engaged and built off each other’s comments.

#### **Access and Accessibility in the Green Space**

The traffic light at Sackville Street to cross Dundas Street East is new and prior to that it used to be a very dangerous crosswalk. However, people still jay-walk across Dundas Street East. This can be risky especially for people participating in a group activity but people do it for ease of getting to the other side. The group identified this as a concern.

Accessibility was brought up by participants regarding strollers and wheelchairs. The Dundas Street streetcars are old and have steps and no ramps, making the park inaccessible by public transit for those with mobility issues. Once those in wheelchairs or with strollers are in the park, not all ramps provide access to services. Ramps located only at either end of the park make for longer distances to access services, like the Aquatic Centre. At the Park’s entrance plaza, one participant explained how the accessibility ramp only

lets you off at two of the several levels, meaning that when they have events, if they are to be accessible, they can only have their event on the upper or lower levels. The participant emphasized that this makes people feel excluded and angry about the limits to accessibility.

Participants shared concerns that transit and traffic planning were not in line the increasing density of the neighbourhood. Participants also highlighted that the streetcar is becoming even more inefficient now with the increased density, and that the new Bike Share stands are being heavily used as residents are choosing to bike to work rather than navigate public transit. The bike racks around the park look empty now, but participants feel that as the neighbourhood's population increases further, then the bike racks will be fully used.

There was a discussion about whether Regent Park residents are actually able to access facilities and use spaces in Regent Park (e.g. Aquatic Centre and Athletic Field) due to a number of barriers. For example, the cost of programs has increased, the need for permits, and the need to register for programs online is a barrier because many residents are not computer literate and do not have access to their own computer or internet connection. As a result, community residents have to line up in person at the facilities to register, but are being turned away because spots have been filled by people who registered online, many of whom do not live in or even near the community according to walk lab participants. Participants mentioned the large number of people driving in from Etobicoke and Scarborough "in fancy cars." The parking lots are always full they said and one participant mentioned that "[they] know the cars of the people who live here."

"The revitalization brought these new, beautiful facilities to Regent Park such as the Aquatic Centre, but the community can't access them due to financial and technological barriers, and don't have the resources to go elsewhere, meanwhile those that are accessing these facilities are not from the community," said another participant.

### **Facilities: Availability and Condition**

The group discussed the bake oven and a community leader from Friends of Regent Park spoke to the group about the events that take place. It is part of advocacy program to address food insecurity. Seven community members have been trained on the bake oven since May 2016 and they sell items at Taste of Regent Park.

A participant brought up a point about the raised planters. These planters are too high for children or people using mobility devices. This is "ironic" because they were originally supposed to be for people with back issues so that they wouldn't have to crouch down for gardening activities, but now multiple other demographics can't use them. This led to a discussion about how easy it would have been to avoid this issue and avoid excluding people, by simply talking to community members. This further marginalizes people when consultation is not meaningful and ends up being tokenistic, said participants.

While walking through the green space, a comment was made about a new dog park separated by fence. This makes many residents who are uncomfortable around dogs feel safer, however, it is a gravel park which hurts dogs' feet, and many owners avoid using the park for that reason.

Residents had requested a public washroom in the park during the initial consultation process, but the comments were missing. The consultation process began again when the condo residents moved in which resulted in many longtime community members being frustrated and not wanting to be involved in these processes anymore, said participants. One participant mentioned that those who are developing the

parks are taking the suggestions of those who are higher-income and not those of residents who are low-income. There is a perception that new higher income residents are listened to more. This is important to note who feels they have a voice in the quality of their green space and with respect to what they want. The question was asked: which communities get design issues addressed, and which don't?

### **Social Interaction**

Bake oven animators do the work of getting people outside, people are often “intrigued” by the smell of what is in the oven. In this way, the bake oven is part of bringing together the community.

Participants brought up that the garden plots and planters were a community response to the fact that residents were “guerilla gardening,” but that the Regent Park Revitalization has actually reduced a lot of green space that previously existed in the neighbourhood and that a lot of these spaces have been lost.

There was a comment that the playground is designed linearly so that the very young children's structures are at the very end, but residents have stated that it would be better if that was in the middle for ease of watching children belonging to different age groups. Parents are anxious about being able to watch all their children within the park. Facilitating this will help perceptions of safety, which can influence mental health and well-being. Parents also interact and talk to each other while watching their children and if their children are different ages this is more challenging. This is a barrier to social interaction which facilitates mental health and well-being. However, it is good that there are benches and seating options around the playgrounds.

A participant who grew up in Regent Park before the revitalization and recently came back expressed happiness to see the green space as it is now and the fact that it is actually green, and “at first glance loved it,” especially the Aquatic Centre and the artwork. The participant explained that previously South Regent Park (i.e. south of Dundas Street East) used to be open space, but it was all concrete and there was no greenery at all. North Regent Park was just blocks and nobody stopped there, they would just walk through it to get to their destination. There was just one baseball field. The participant said that “this park gives people a reason to hang out in North Regent Park.” However, participants agreed that despite that, there used to be a “big sense of community.” Another participant mentioned that there used to be a lot of trees and benches on Oak Street. These were torn down during the revitalization and one participant said she cried when the trees were torn down behind her building. There also used to be trees where the grocery store is now.

### **Interactive Mapping Activity**

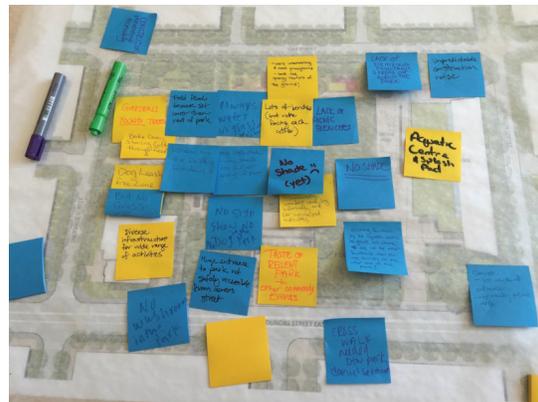
Participants worked on two separate maps in small groups. The blue post it notes represent features of the space that were, in their view, detrimental to mental health and the yellow post it notes represent feature that, in their view, promoted mental health.

### Elements that were detrimental to mental health and well-being are:

- Lack of drinking fountains
- Lot of construction noise (“so much noise made me anxious ☹️”)
- No washroom
- The fact that the field floods when it rains (“there is always water in the grass”)
- No shade because there are “young trees”
- The entrance to the park is not safely accessible
- Safety: unsafe crosswalk, jaywalking
- Greenhouse problems - not winterized
- Too much concrete
- No picnic area

### Elements that promoted mental health and well-being are:

- Garden
- Dogs off leash area
- Taste of Regent Park and other community events
- Aquatic Centre, community space for informal community interactions, splash pad
- Bake Oven (“sharing culture through food”)
- There are “young trees”
- Diverse infrastructure for a wide range of activities
- Playground “very interesting and cool playground, love the texture of the ground!”
- Lots of benches



### Next Steps

This Walk Lab piloted a process for including a community in assessing the quality of their green space for mental health and well-being.

Toronto is a diverse city and for green spaces to have a positive impact on everyone’s mental health, we need to understand the varying needs of our different communities, including the preferences of low-income communities of colour. To do this, Floyd et al. (2009) recommends including the perceptions of this

population in developing measurement tools. This process ensures that green spaces meet the requirements of the community with respect to activity preferences, preferred types of green spaces and other factors. These factors are further highlighted in the theoretical framework in part one of this series (Hassen, 2016b). Capturing these nuanced, subjective experiences is a part of understanding how communities perceive urban public spaces and how they want to use these spaces. These processes need to be recorded and community needs, thoughts and concerns meaningfully incorporated into decision-making around green spaces. Not doing so undermines the process and is tokenistic towards the community. This is a step in ensuring that everyone can reap the mental health and well-being benefits from green spaces.

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