Promoting Health and Well-Being through Social Inclusion in Toronto

July 2019

Wellesley
Institute
advancing urban health

PROJECT GOALS

In 2019, Toronto Public Health and the Wellesley Institute completed an exploratory project to determine:

- The state of social inclusion in Toronto and differences across sub-populations
- Initiatives that have successfully promoted social inclusion
- How to further promote social inclusion in Toronto

An inclusive society allows people to participate in social, economic, cultural and political life. People feel valued, their differences and rights are respected and their basic needs are met so they can live with dignity and have their voices heard.

Social inclusion plays a key role in promoting health and well-being particularly among those experiencing greater isolation or marginalization.

Across Canada and internationally, governments are highlighting social inclusion in their health, economic and poverty-reduction strategies to address social and health inequities. The most recent Ontario Public Health Standards also identify social inclusion as a key determinant of health, and mandate that local public health agencies promote inclusion through various strategies, such as applying anti-oppressive and culturally safe approaches to public health practice.

This is a synopsis of the report "Promoting Health and Well-Being Through Social Inclusion in Toronto: Synthesis of International and Local Evidence and Implications for Future Action" released by Toronto Public Health and the Wellesley Institute in April 2019. Read the full report here:
toronto.ca/health/reports

DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

There are many different dimensions of social inclusion. The dimensions chosen for this project are widely seen as important drivers for promoting healthy and socially inclusive cities, paving pathways to economic inclusion and reducing inequities. These are:
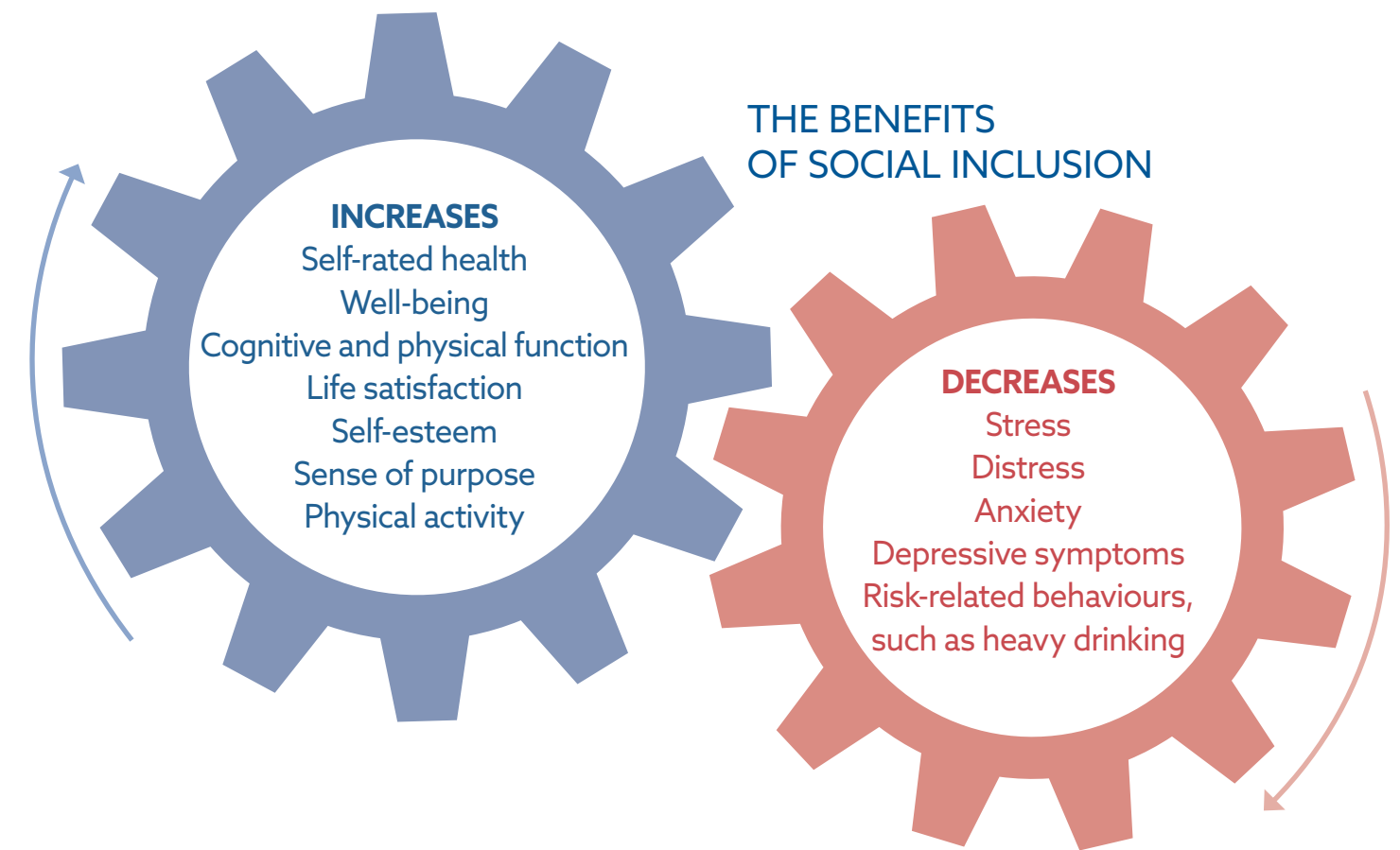
Social Connectedness

- Connections to family, friends, community groups, clubs and organizations
- Informal relationships with people, such as neighbours and co-workers
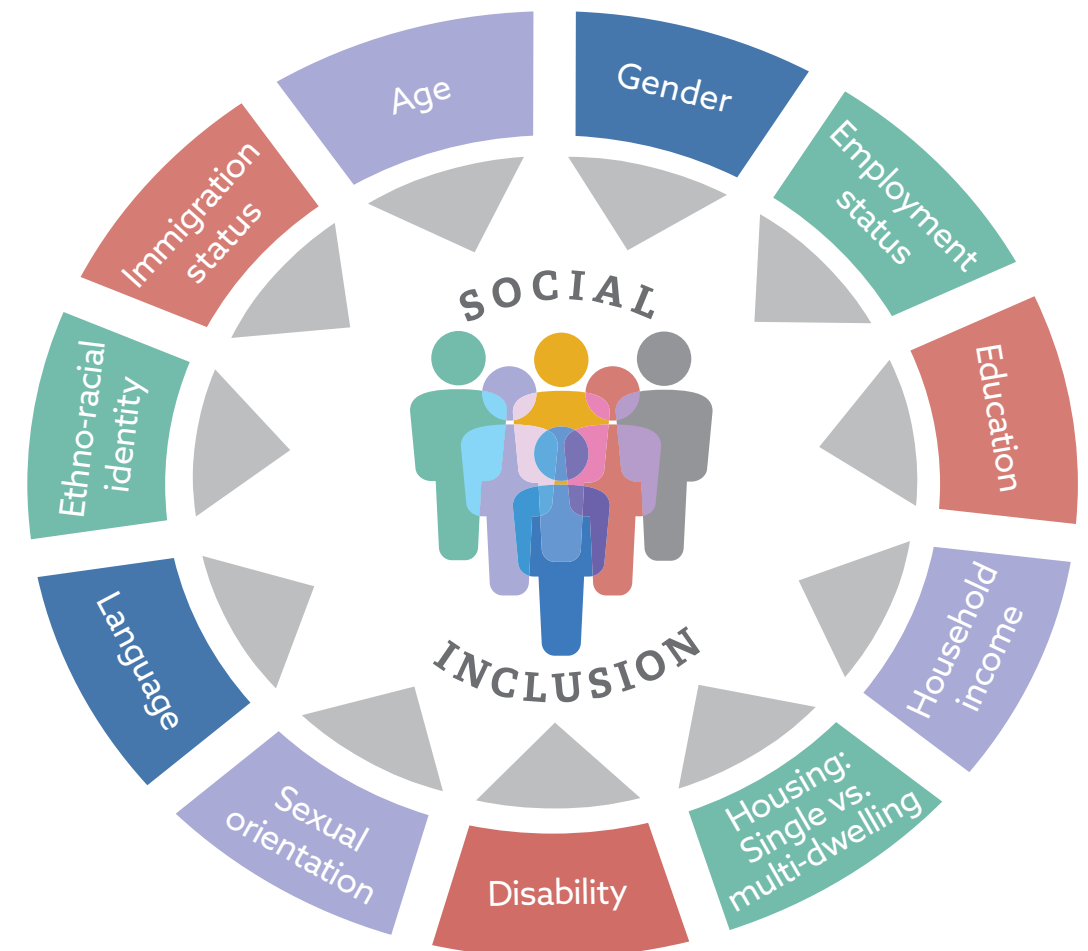
Social Capital

- Opportunities and resources available through networks and relationships, such as financial assistance, emotional support, information or a sense of mutual trust

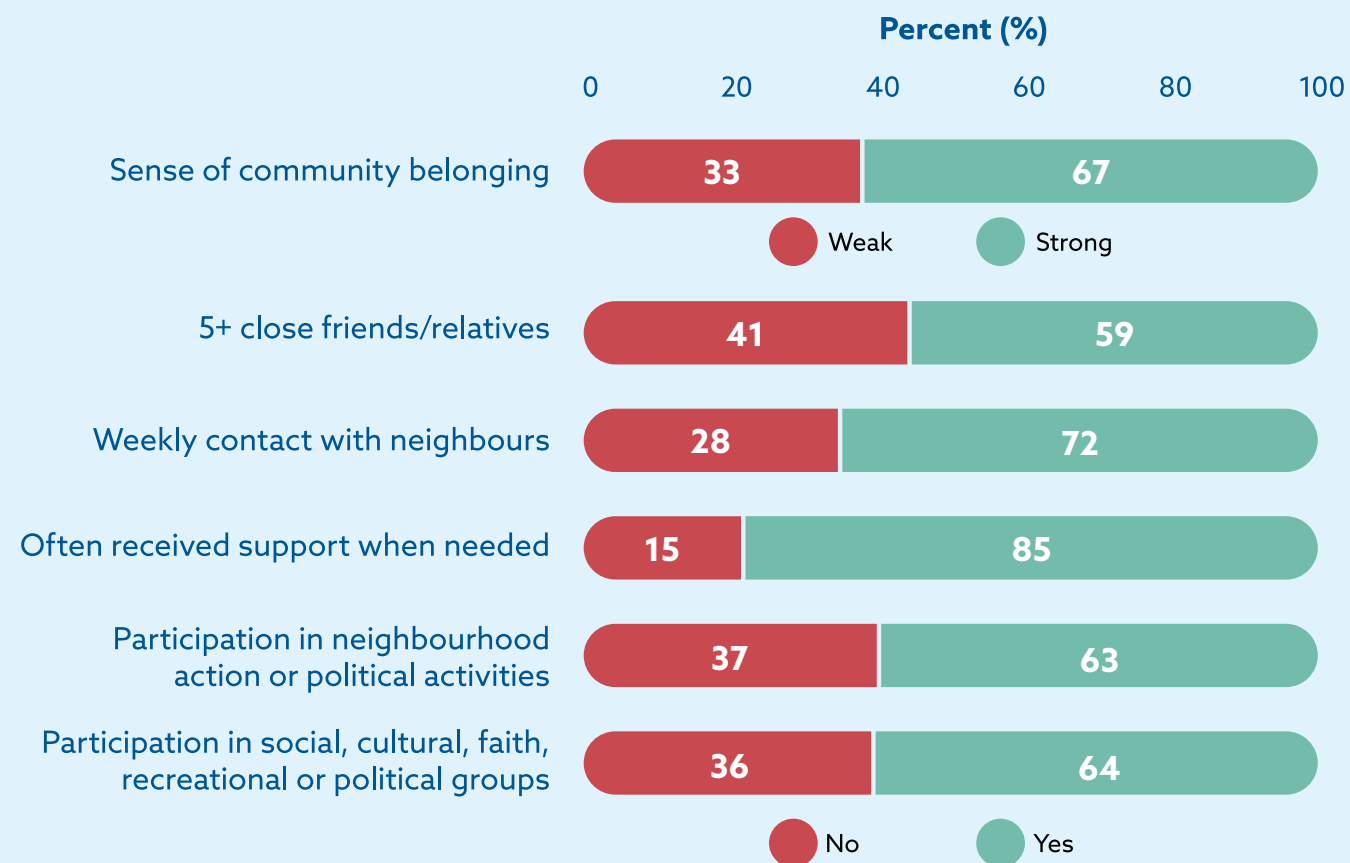### Civic Engagement & Social Participation

- Volunteering
- Getting involved to address issues facing a community or advocating for change
- Taking part in organized social, cultural, faith-based or recreational opportunities or associations

THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

INCREASES
Self-rated health
Well-being
Cognitive and physical function
Life satisfaction
Self-esteem
Sense of purpose
Physical activity

DECREASES
Stress
Distress
Anxiety
Depressive symptoms
Risk-related behaviours, such as heavy drinking

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN TORONTO

Age
Gender
Immigration status
Employment status
Ethno-racial identity
Education
Language
Household income
Sexual orientation
Housing: Single vs. multi-dwelling
Disability

SOCIAL INCLUSION

SNAPSHOT OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN TORONTO

Percent (%)

Sense of community belonging	Weak **33** / Strong **67**
5+ close friends/relatives	**41** / **59**
Weekly contact with neighbours	**28** / **72**
Often received support when needed	**15** / **85**
Participation in neighbourhood action or political activities	No **37** / Yes **63**
Participation in social, cultural, faith, recreational or political groups	**36** / **64**

Scale: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100

Legend: ● Weak ● Strong ● No ● Yes

The majority of Torontonians experience moderately high levels of social inclusion. The majority of residents report having a strong sense of community belonging, high levels of social connections with family and friends and having participated in civic life.

One in three Torontonians reported a weak sense of belonging to their local community and roughly one-third reported not participating in any neighbourhood action or political activities or any organized groups.

Various factors shape people's experiences of social inclusion, such as disability status, income, sexual orientation, and ethno-racial identity.

Gaps exist in our understanding of social inclusion in Toronto that require further understanding.

For instance, there is limited data that can be used to examine trends over time in Torontonians' experiences of social inclusion. There also are gaps in information regarding the experiences of specific population subgroups such as Indigenous individuals, LGBTQ groups or specific ethno-racial groups.

Research that examines how broader social, economic and political factors shape experiences of social inclusion can shed light on differences across groups.

INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE SOCIAL INCLUSION

There is a wide range of initiatives and programs successfully promoting social inclusion across diverse populations and settings here in Toronto and around the world. These initiatives and programs can be grouped into seven categories:

- Community- or peer-led (mentoring, peer education, community capacity building)
- Arts-based (creating art or enjoying art collectively)
- Social media/technology (online platforms to connect members of a particular community)
- Intergenerational (connecting youth with older adults for recreation and skill exchange)
- Psychosocial (group-based activities focussed on mental health and well-being)
- Volunteering/civic engagement (building social contacts through helping others or leadership activities)
- Built environment (bringing people together to make changes to public spaces)

Studies of initiatives and programs around the globe suggest they can positively impact different elements of social inclusion such as sense of belonging, social ties, social support, social networks and collective empowerment. Studies also report positive effects on a range of health and well-being outcomes as illustrated in The Benefits of Social Inclusion.

While the evidence is not in a state where it points conclusively to specific programs or initiatives that could work as broad-based solutions for Toronto, there is already a wealth of promising initiatives underway to learn from.

In Toronto, some of the ways in which initiatives promote social inclusion are through opportunities for skill development, recreation, leadership training, employment readiness, community development, and neighbourhood improvements. A review of these initiatives provided insight into their design, how they were started, what has helped them flourish, and the key challenges they face to sustain their work.

Conversations with local stakeholders reinforced the notion that social inclusion is a current concern for community organizations, funders and the municipal sector alike. They emphasized that, in addition to community-based initiatives for promoting social inclusion, there is a need for continued action to address systemic issues that create barriers to inclusion, such as economic inequality and lack of affordable housing. Stakeholders also helped identify emerging opportunities to advance social inclusion.

This project identified many community initiatives already successfully promoting social inclusion in Toronto.

PRIORITY ACTION AREAS

This project identified many community initiatives already successfully promoting social inclusion in Toronto. However, economic inequities, such as growing disparities in income, are a consistent barrier to social inclusion for many.

These inequities hinder full participation in civic life and negatively impact health and well-being.

This research helped identify **three priority areas** and **10 actions** to mobilize a wide range of stakeholders to build upon the important work underway, strengthen our social infrastructure and create change at a broader systemic level.

Leadership and action to address these areas are needed from all levels of government, funding bodies, community groups and organizations, researchers and the private sector.

- Develop ways to ensure access to services for the most marginalized
- Increase diversity and inclusion in governance and civic engagement
- Promote equitable access to inclusive spaces

MOVING FORWARD

We encourage others to join us in continuing to explore how to create a more inclusive city. Several recent reports have echoed the importance of building social connectedness, social capital, and civic engagement, creating a unified call to promote health and well-being through social inclusion.

Develop best practices for promoting social inclusion at the program level

- Generate local evidence through evaluation
- Promote community-defined, participatory, peer-led, asset-based approaches
- Promote innovative funding models to sustain and invest in new community approaches
- Build connections, networks and partnerships across social inclusion work
- Build understanding across diverse groups

Promote social inclusion city-wide through programs, services, and policies

Improve understanding of social inclusion in Toronto

- Promote awareness of the non-material dimensions of social inclusion and their link to health and well-being
- Advocate for regular collection of local population data

- Connected Communities: Healthier Together
  The 2017 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario www.health.gov.on.ca

- Toronto Social Capital Study by Environics Institute and the Toronto Foundation www.environicsinstitute.org

- Life in the GTA: A Window on Well-Being by the YMCA of Greater Toronto and the Wellesley Institute https://ymcagta.org

Our full report is available online: toronto.ca/health/reports

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