



Strong Neighbourhoods – Supporting the *Call to Action*

“Strong neighbourhoods mean safer streets, engaged, active residents, and ultimately, a more prosperous economy.” – Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force, 2005

The Challenge

The Toronto region must strengthen distressed neighbourhoods so that they are safe and healthy places for families to live and raise their children, and so that they connect their inhabitants to the opportunities and prosperity of the region.

Current Situation

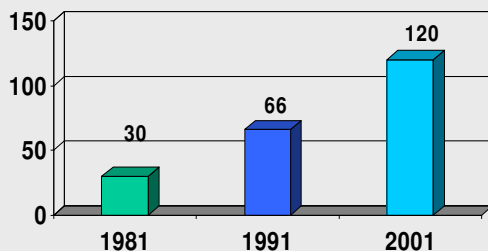
Income disparity between the region’s rich and poor families is widening, and incomes at the low end of the scale have stagnated or fallen. Housing costs continue to rise and gentrification is displacing lower income households from formerly inclusive neighbourhoods with established services and infrastructure to serve low-income families.

Low-income families are moving to areas where housing is least expensive, resulting in overcrowding and a growing concentration of neighbourhood poverty. In 2001, 43% of the low-income families in the City of Toronto lived in areas of concentrated poverty, compared to 18% twenty years earlier. These areas are now home to large numbers of newcomers and families led by women.

Many of these neighbourhoods are also caught in deepening cycles of decline, marked by increased crime, homeowner flight, and changed commercial activity, including growth in fringe lending businesses. Guided by the work of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force and the City’s Community Safety Plan, the City of Toronto and United Way of Greater Toronto have made neighbourhoods a priority. The Ontario government has also made important investments, but greater participation of senior levels of government is necessary.

The growth in neighbourhood disadvantage is primarily taking place in the inner suburban neighbourhoods that lie between the old City of Toronto and the surrounding GTA communities. The “disadvantage gap” between the have and have-not neighbourhoods is large, evidenced by lower school attainment, more unemployment, greater health problems, aging housing stock, and less social infrastructure.

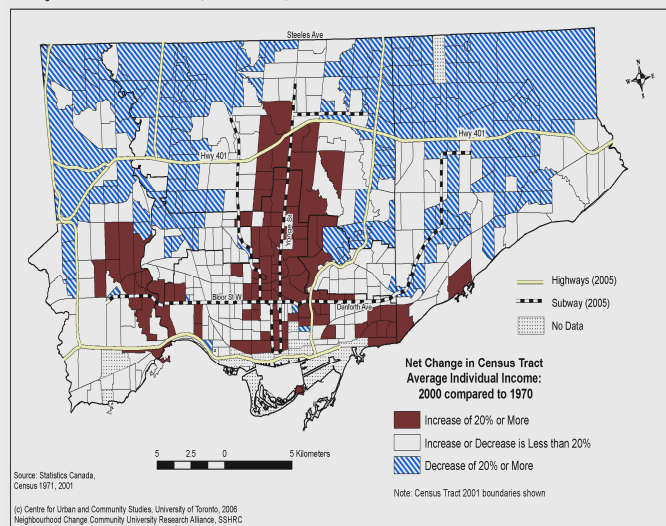
Increase in High Poverty Neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto 1981 - 2001



Source: TBC

Change in Average Individual Income, 1970 to 2000
City of Toronto

Average individual income from all sources, 15 Years and Over, Census Tracts



Source: Statistics Canada, Census 1971, 2001

(c) Centre for Community and Urban Studies, University of Toronto



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Promising Recent Developments

Neighbourhoods have, among their residents and within local organizations, rich assets and capacities that can be strengthened and supported to lead community change.

- A framework for community change has been laid out by the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force – an initiative of TCSCA – in its 2005 report, *Strong Neighbourhoods – A Call to Action*. Both the City of Toronto and United Way of Greater Toronto have launched comprehensive and complementary neighbourhood strategies within the last year, relying on this framework as a point of reference.
- The City of Toronto has established Action Teams, comprising staff from diverse divisions, for each of the 13 priority neighbourhoods. These teams are coordinating the development of Neighbourhood Action Partnerships, expanding childcare and continuing implementation of the Community Safety Initiative. Specific city initiatives include expansion of partnerships for youth employment, elimination of recreation user fees for young people, and the establishment of a youth entrepreneurship program to allow youth to run their own businesses.
- United Way of Greater Toronto has launched the Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative, aimed at building resident structures to lead change in each of the 13 neighbourhoods. It is also seeding the development of community hubs in priority neighbourhoods where none currently exist. 75% of United Way's new funding each year will be targeted to high-need inner suburban neighbourhoods. It will also bring agencies serving the inner suburbs into United Way's membership and give priority to grant applicants serving the inner suburbs.
- The Province of Ontario has joined the effort to strengthen disadvantaged neighbourhoods by targeting its Community Health Care expansion to priority neighbourhoods, launching the Youth Challenge Fund, and funding 40 new youth outreach workers and the Youth Summer Employment program in priority neighbourhoods.

Chief Barriers to Progress

- **Shifting settlement patterns and changing neighbourhood fortunes** have always been a part of Toronto's history; widespread decline of neighbourhoods has not. The factors driving it, and the threats they pose to the prosperity of the region, are not fully recognized.
- **Rebuilding communities is complex and takes a long time.** It requires vision, commitment to change, and willingness to work collaboratively across departmental and jurisdictional boundaries. To date, senior governments have favoured pilot projects and operated in a siloed way, not taking the holistic approaches that are working in Western Canadian cities such as Winnipeg and Vancouver.
- **Downloading of responsibility for social programs to municipal governments,** without adequate fiscal resources to deliver them.
- **Lack of support for local leadership.** Winning back neighbourhoods requires local leadership, with strengthened networks and connections to decision makers, but there has been little support for creating this capacity.
- **Moving the problem, but not solving it.** Too often, neighbourhood renewal in Toronto has simply resulted in displacement of the "poor." The problem of decline must be solved, not simply moved elsewhere.

International Snapshot

The UK's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is a comprehensive and ambitious plan to revitalize declining neighbourhoods. Launched in 2001, its goal is to ensure that, within 10-20 years, no one is disadvantaged by where they live. It has set targets to narrow the gap between have and have not neighbourhoods in relation to employment, education, crime, health, housing, and the environment. Results after four years showed progress on most fronts.

More sobering is what happens when the concentration of neighbourhood poverty and decline goes unattended. The experience in Chicago shows that once neighbourhoods reach a "tipping point," it is almost impossible to turn the cycle of decline and disinvestment around. What's worse, it tends to spread.



Strong Neighbourhoods – Supporting the *Call to Action*

Opportunities for Action

- Senior governments can make neighbourhoods a priority by entering into formal partnerships with municipal counterparts and, strengthening the region's most disadvantaged communities. They can work with the City to mobilize a broad-based advocacy effort in support of new fiscal arrangements that will enable the City to strengthen disadvantaged neighbourhoods and curtail the growth in concentrated neighbourhood poverty.
- Governments at all levels and civil society, including non-profits and the private sector, can work with local community leadership and to align their plans and resources to address the needs of disadvantaged communities.
- Public housing programs and policies can be re-examined to create solutions that counter the trends of poverty concentration and displacement.
- We can examine the link between existing housing policies and neighbourhood decline, and explore the potential for new policies to revitalize communities and maintain the viability of aging housing stock.

Questions for Discussion

- ✓ **How can we achieve long-term commitment at the political level for a problem that is complex and multi-faceted and that may take years to turn around?**
- ✓ **How can we achieve transformational change in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, beyond service improvements for which funding may only be short term?**
- ✓ **How do we build awareness and garner support without further stigmatizing affected neighbourhoods?**
- ✓ **How can we bring governments together with non-profits and the private sector to develop innovative and sustainable solutions?**