

Toronto's 'Neighbourhoods in Decline': Institutionalizing a Wake-up Call

In Canada, we live in a liberal market democracy that presupposes that there will be both rich and poor. If we set minimum wages that are below the poverty line for many families, there is an expectation that some people will work for minimum wages and live in poverty. When we set welfare rates that are well below any poverty standard, there is an expectation that there will be some people who will live on those amounts.

If the poor are among us, it follows that they have to live somewhere and it is reasonable to assume that they will live in the communities where they can most afford to live. In Toronto, this has meant that the poor have moved from the more expensive downtown areas to cheaper areas in the suburbs.

A Decade of Decline and Poverty by Postal Code

Over three years ago in April 2004, the United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) and the Canadian Council Social Development's (CCSD) published its memorable report, Poverty by Postal Code that followed their 2002 report, A Decade of Decline. These reports told us that poverty had moved to the suburbs and was concentrated in smaller enclaves that were best denominated by postal codes as opposed to communities in general. Its message was that these highly concentrated areas of poverty were not located close to the services that low income people require – child care, home care, multi-service agencies, counseling, recreational facilities, boys and girls clubs, community centres and other services

Over the intervening years, the United Way focused its organizational energies on both strengthening the city's neighbourhoods through their own direct investment, and in raising awareness about how important strong neighbourhoods are in creating a healthy city.

This started at the beginning of the decade with the C-5 Mayors group, which included the Mayors of Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto and Montreal. It also included Ann Golden and people like Jane Jacobs. This was all about the new deal for cities, and the group's collective call for improved financial tools to make our cities competitive with cities around the world.

In Toronto, that led to the Toronto City Summit Alliance, and its report Enough Talk. The UWGT was able to get the TCSA to include "strong neighbourhoods" as an important pillar of a healthy, prosperous city, along with the other, more traditional sectors including transportation, tourism, physical infrastructure, and the education system. That was the first document where Toronto began to focus attention on the challenges in many of the city's neighbourhoods - challenges which member agencies had been talking about for some time.

Around the same time as the C-5 Mayors talks were taking place the UWGT conducted consultations with member agencies, focusing on health-related services. The UWGT heard repeatedly that agency clients were experiencing greater and greater financial and housing insecurity despite the fact that Toronto had entered a period of significant economic recovery. For example, CNIB staff talked about the incredible stress of some of their clients who were afraid of losing their housing (because they could no longer afford the rent).

The United Way made the decision to purchase tax filer data in order to understand and document the extent of the problem that member agencies were seeing and reporting to us. The report *Decade of Decline* was the result. The "decline" in the title was about declining incomes (not neighbourhoods). The findings did verify what agencies had been saying - median incomes had declined in the 1990s, despite the robust recovery at the end of the decade, and the depth of "poverty" had worsened. That report also provided an indication that there was a growing neighbourhood dimension to the growing income gap in the city, which had also just been documented by Statistics Canada.

Highly concentrated neighbourhood poverty is a very serious phenomenon. There is 40 years of academic research and writing on neighbourhood change that studied the pathways and cycles that neighbourhoods take over time. Some neighbourhoods remain desirable with homeowners and business continually reinvesting in them. Others can age, become down at the heels for a time, then become popular again, and benefit from renewed homeowner and business investment.

But in neighbourhoods where poverty and joblessness become highly concentrated, other changes can be triggered that set in motion a cycle of decline and disinvestment. Research evidence shows that once neighbourhoods reach a certain point, it is almost impossible to reverse the cycle of decline and disinvestment.

We are very fortunate in Toronto, that we have never had advanced neighbourhood decline and disinvestment. Winnipeg certainly has, in its North End; so has Vancouver in its Downtown Eastside, and in smaller places like Thunder Bay, and certainly in many US and UK cities.

Therefore, the point of *Poverty of Postal Code* was to document the extent to which poverty was becoming concentrated in certain neighbourhoods in Toronto and to warn decision-makers of the consequences of letting this trend continue unattended.

The United Way documented slow and steady change. The Social Planning Council had raised a similar warning 20 years ago, with its report *Suburbs in Transition*. But little was done about it. *Poverty by Postal Code* picked up that story and tracked the change in the suburbs over the subsequent 20 years.

It was clear to all that Governments and agencies could no longer turn a blind eye to this trend especially since there was growing evidence of neighbourhood stress in many parts of the inner suburbs - of gun and gang violence, of commercial decline in some neighbourhoods, and homeowner flight in many. The latter is something that our member agency staffs have been observing for a number of years.

What happened next was the establishment of the Strong Neighbourhood Task Force, which was a broad coalition of community leaders co-chaired by UWGT and the City of Toronto which set out to develop a framework for strengthening high-need, inner suburban neighbourhoods. The Task Force identified priority neighbourhoods to begin this work, based on a wide range of socio-economic indicators and the need for a broad range of social services and infrastructure. They mapped out 11 different service areas within a 1 kilometer radius of the population in each neighbourhood area.

Since the release of the report, both UWGT and the City have adopted strategies to strengthen the priority neighbourhoods. For UWGT's part, its neighbourhood strategy will do the following:

1. Seed the creation of community hubs in 8 inner suburban neighbourhoods where none currently exist;
2. Fund Action for Neighbourhood Change in all 13 priority neighbourhoods. ANC will help to organize local residents around a common agenda for strengthening their neighbourhoods, building on the existing assets and capacities within the neighbourhoods;
3. Allocate most of the new UWGT funding each year to the underserved inner suburban neighbourhoods; and
4. Provide new community development funding to agencies servicing inner suburban neighbourhoods (outside the 13 priority neighbourhoods) to enable them to play a stronger community building role.

The Conundrum of Declining Neighbourhoods

But Poverty by Postal Code went further than documenting the movement of poor people and to propose solutions. It also associated the movement of poor people with neighbourhood decline. The following passage is taken from the UWGT's news 2004 release:

TORONTO - Poverty in Toronto neighbourhoods has dramatically intensified, particularly in the inner suburbs, says a new report issued by United Way of Greater Toronto.

In 1981, higher neighbourhood poverty was primarily concentrated in the old City of Toronto. Today, it has spread widely across Toronto's inner suburbs, particularly in the former cities of North York and Scarborough.

"The increase in poor neighbourhoods is alarming," says Frances Lankin, President and CEO, United Way of Greater Toronto. "We know that the consequences of living in a poor neighbourhood are significant - and long-term - for children and youth, for newcomers to our country, for the entire community.

Poor neighbourhoods can spiral into further poverty, increased crime, and abandonment by both residents and businesses. And shockingly, Toronto is losing ground faster than almost all other urban centres in Canada."

In 2002, A Decade of Decline provided hard evidence of growing poverty and income disparity that accompanied robust economic growth, especially outside the downtown core.

"Neighbourhood decline is not inevitable, and investments in communities do make an enormous difference," says Lankin.

At the Toronto Summit in February 2007 that took place at the Convention Centre, an afternoon roundtable discussion was conducted on the issue of declining neighbourhoods concerning those neighbourhoods within the city that are underserved and have higher rates of poverty. As nominated spokespersons from a number of tables got up to report on their deliberations, each spoke to the importance of reframing the discussion of neighbourhood decline from a negative frame to a positive frame – that is, we should talk about the strengths of neighbourhoods and not their weaknesses.

Each and every table spokesperson – a remarkable event for the Toronto Summit – concluded as the United Way hoped they would, that one of the largest problems concerning the issue of underserved neighbourhoods was the conceptualization of the issue. Frances Lankin, the session chair noted this concern in her remarks.

The purpose of this short essay is to say “Let’s take reframing seriously”. Let’s start to audit our city’s human services on the basis of their presence or absence. Let’s not be forced to provide services by judging our communities’ needs according a map that subdivides us on the basis of our incomes. Let’s reward the good behaviour that allows low income people to live in our communities rather than penalizing them for it with the label of ‘decline’. Let’s stop hitting inclusive communities over the head and blaming them for falling.

“We live in a neighbourhood in decline”

In April 2004, I learned for the first time that the community in which I live in northern Scarborough (close to a so-called priority neighbourhood) was a neighbourhood in decline. It was a shock.

My spouse and I moved out of a basement apartment in the Beaches in 1977 to move into a spanking new fully detached house for which we paid the sum of \$70,000 (with five appliances thrown in). By 1989 at the height of the eighties housing boom, an identical property on our street sold for \$283,000.

Fast forward eighteen years. Inflation from 1989 to February 2007 has increased, according to Statistics Canada, by 47.4%. As I look down our street, there are two ‘For Sale’ signs on the lawns of houses that are almost identical to ours. The asking price is \$299,000, an increase of 5.6% since 1989 and an inflation adjusted loss of 39.4% over the same period. The signs have been there for some time. There is little interest in these homes. The price will soon be lowered.

We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

There is nothing wrong with these homes. They are beautifully maintained on a lovely street where there has been virtually no crime in the last three years. The gangs have been gone for a long time now. We have a beautiful 400 acre park that hosts baseball, basketball and cricket one block away. People walk the streets without a worry. School kids walk home on their own. There are lots of places to park. A new GO station with increased train service was installed two years ago resolving many commuter issues. Our neighbourhood community association is going strong with the annual picnic planned. However....

We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

Two new subdivisions consisting entirely of single detached and semi-detached homes are being built. We have a new LCBO outlet in our mall along with a much larger Shopper’s Drug Mart. There are several new churches and the TTC has just increased our bus service again. A new rental apartment building is being built nearby. The schools are increasingly involving the local community in their activity. However, we live in an area that has more poor people living in it since 1981 both in real and percentage terms. So.....

We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

Some of the local apartment complexes have rent geared to income units in them. Poor people are living in those apartments. They are part of our community but we don't know who they are. They blend in just like they do downtown. They work in the local malls. However, we know from Poverty by Postal Code that

“...neighbourhood poverty ...has spread widely across Toronto's inner suburbs, particularly in ... Scarborough”

We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

Downtown communities like Parkdale that are being gentrified and where property values have increased rapidly worry about what will happen with the poor who can no longer afford to live there. They know that displaced poor people move to where they can get cheaper accommodation. Parkdale is not designated as a neighbourhood in decline. Perhaps with higher property values and more affluent people moving in, Parkdale is in ascendancy. The poor in northern Scarborough are not moving out. Therefore....

We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

Our Scarborough streets are not congested. We never wait more than one light to drive through an intersection. Scarborough Grace Hospital is easily accessed. We live 400 yards from the rich City of Markham. It does not have 'high rises' and is zoned for single family dwellings. Home values are rising fast. They have fewer poor people because of the zoning laws as public housing is less likely to be built there. Markham appears to have neighbourhoods close by that are in ascendancy because they do not allow poor people to live in them. However...

We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

We worry because Poverty by Postal Code says:

“Poor neighbourhoods can spiral into further poverty, increased crime, and abandonment by both residents and businesses.”

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We worry because Poverty by Postal Code has said: We live in a neighbourhood in decline.

Getting it Right

I am fond of telling a story that relates an experience I had as Community Undertaking Social Policy fellow at St Christopher House in early 2003.

I had long been puzzled by funding applications to the city and the province that constantly told depressing stories about families just barely making it, vulnerable people on their last legs eking out a meager existence in Parkdale. Isolated seniors, young families without resources, welfare payments that did not make ends meet. St Christopher House could not do it all but they could, with funding, make a real difference. It is a story they feel they must tell in order to secure government funding. Governments were asked to do more to help and work with St. Christopher House to improve things.

You can imagine my shock on attending a function for private donors. Instead of being vulnerable, the community was strong. People were resilient. The isolated seniors were meeting and gathering together. Welfare recipients were making plans to get their lives together. Youth were making great strides. Government funding was just part of the answer. Private donors could make a real difference.

The difference in approach was the difference between night and day. I asked why.

The answer is that agencies fear that government will reduce or cut funding unless the needs and vulnerabilities of communities are accentuated. The idea that the communities are strong, resilient and growing is a concept reserved for the private donor community and is again a story that St. Christopher House feels that it must tell. Unlike governments that are apparently addicted to funding fixes to vulnerability and decline, the private donors only open their wallets when they think they can make a difference – and funding projects to fix the floodgates of decline does not cut it for them.

So which frame is the best frame: vulnerability or strength?

The United Way of Greater Toronto is in a position to show that the work stemming from its two reports have been responsible for positive change. There is a much greater awareness of where poverty exists across the GTA and underserved enclaves of poverty have been provided with needed services. Focused planning has resulted in positive plans for these communities and communities with the greatest need are now being serviced first with the Priority Neighbourhood plans.

But at what cost? Recall that this is not a project to eliminate poverty. Accordingly, poor people have to live somewhere. Are we saying because they live in the thirteen priority neighbourhoods, that priority for services must be destined for these communities for the foreseeable future? Is this not a plan to entrench “serviced poverty” in the thirteen neighbourhoods?

The United Way has done a lot of thinking about this question. They clearly do not find comfort in a model that is built on vulnerability and need as opposed to resilience and strength. That is why they set up the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force in 2004 following the Toronto City Summit Alliance Task Force report: [Enough Talk!](#)

The Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force gets it right. It uses inclusive non-government language that calls for all Communities to participate in solutions while discarding the language of crisis and vulnerability.

But despite the sea change in approach, Poverty by Postal Code has since spawned its own bureaucracy. Rather than opting for the choice of Strong Neighbourhoods, the presence of three levels of government, often more comfortable with the vulnerability model, has become an institution.

The problem now is that what was intended as a wake-up call has now become a government business that plays into the hands of the perception that governments only fund vulnerability and weakness. That perception may or may not be real but it does not much matter because the damage is already done. If you tell a community that it is in decline long enough, the people living there start to believe it. The housing market believes it. Just as Poverty by Postal Code predicts, the residents and businesses start to abandon the neighbourhood.

Beware the old adage: “Be careful what you wish for – you just may get it”

The idea that having more poor people in your neighbourhood means that you live in a neighbourhood in decline is just as bad as the idea that having rich people move in means that you are in ascendancy. For the communities that are labeled as being in decline in part because more poor people live there, this is extremely damaging.

The labeling of a poorer community as a community in decline inadvertently identifies that poor people are the cause of decline. It uses the ‘disease analogue’ of ‘spreading poverty’ that inadvertently portrays poor people as diseased people. Poverty by Postal Code uses analogues that feed stigma and associate wealth with goodness and poverty with decline. It is not the intent but it is inexorably the result.

‘Strong Neighbourhoods’ is a better choice

Thanks to the United Way’s careful framing of the questions put to Toronto Summit participants, the roundtables that reported in February *unanimously* fought the framing of community poverty as neighbourhood decline and vulnerability and replaced it with the idea of strong growing communities where low income people happen to live. They talked about building on strengths, vibrancy, resiliency, and community asset building. They talked about people being able to build their communities when they feel good about them.

The roundtables unanimously rejected the depressing scare-mongering, disease-based vulnerability and isolation model of poorer communities so conveniently suited to the conversations of people who don’t live in them. They rejected the core concept that these communities were in decline.

The also rejected the faulty reward system that penalizes a community as being in decline when it acts as an inclusive community by accepting zoning that allows more low income people in.

There is no possible good that come out of framing poorer communities as communities in decline as long as we live in a society that is unalterably based on communities of rich and poor people. If we accept that poor people will live among us, we cannot limit ourselves to solutions that ultimately entrench services in a set number of so-called priority neighbourhoods simply because that's where the poor have been forced to move and to live.

We must follow through on the thinking behind Strong Neighbourhoods and enjoin all Greater Toronto Neighbourhoods to do their share. In this way, all our communities can participate in the solutions to poverty as opposed to being rewarded for keeping poor people out.

In the final analysis, only bad can come of thinking you live in a declining neighbourhood. All you can ever think about if you live there is moving out. No good can come from newspaper articles that identify maps with legends that indicate poor neighbourhoods in need of services unless they similarly hold more prosperous communities responsible for not doing more.

Postscript

But we're not moving out – we're staying. And guess what? I've got a secret. Come up really close because I want just you to know it.

I have been rehearsing it now for months and I finally think I have it straight. Here goes:

"We don't live in a neighbourhood in decline."

There I feel better already.

John Stapleton
August 27, 2007