

# NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE RESEARCH

## Of what practical use is it to neighbourhood organizations and social agencies?

### **Neighbourhood research makes it possible to link local issues to their broader contexts, causes, and potential solutions.**

No neighbourhood is an island. Research raises awareness of and public sensitivity to the broader forces affecting neighbourhoods, which in turn can affect the work of neighbourhood centres and social agencies in lower-income communities. For example, it may help explain how and why the client base of a neighbourhood agency is changing over time, or help the organization develop responses to changes in the community.

### **Neighbourhood research helps to identify the root causes of problems.**

The neighbourhood is the place in which policies (such as those relating to income security, labour markets, affordable housing, discrimination, etc.) affect individual lives. Many of the problems that community and social agencies deal with are the result of growing inequality, failed policies and poorly designed or underfunded programs. Neighbourhood research helps communities better recognize and understand the consequences of policy problems and help make the case for improved public policies.

### **Neighbourhood research can help elected representatives understand local problems and gain support for the public policies needed to solve those problems.**

Research can help local organizations make an effective, evidence-based case for particular policies to elected officials who represent the neighbourhood at the municipal, provincial, and national levels.

### **Neighbourhood research brings together people from different disciplines, different roles, and different backgrounds.**

Looking at the neighbourhood as a whole helps bridge not only academic divides (between, say, geography and sociology), but also government divides (between, say, Transportation and Parks & Recreation departments in a municipality). Many problems are caused by a lack of understanding or coordination between different groups, so these bridges can help lead to effective problem-solving. Neighbourhood research also helps mobilize diverse stakeholders in advancing the ideas emerging from the research, offers opportunities to connect across classes and cultures, and can reduce NIMBYism.

**Neighbourhood research helps people move from individual to collective solutions to some of the problems they face.** It helps organizations identify the limits of individual interventions and provides a rationale for neighbourhood centres and community leaders to work on policy change in partnership with other social movements, organizations and actors.

**Neighbourhood research gives the neighbourhood centres a powerful fact base from which to argue for increased community investment.** A better understanding of issues and trends provides support for making a case for investment to take place in ways that are intended to redress community inequities.

**Neighbourhood research can provide feedback to neighbourhood centres and social agencies on their work.** It can, for example, identify the extent to which a neighbourhood contains a mix of incomes, or the extent to which it is declining relative to other neighbourhoods in the same city, or identify trends in health, employment, housing quality, food security, and other variables, which can explain some of the difficulties in providing services and help lead to a refocusing of a centre's or agency's operations.

**Neighbourhood research can allow for effective presentation, visualization, and communication of trends and issues.** Maps

and graphics are an accessible way to convey information about what is happening in and among neighbourhoods to policy makers and also to the communities being served. Researchers can help community leaders present information in an accessible form to multiple audiences.

**Neighbourhood research can make the invisible visible.** City-wide analysis of neighbourhood-level trends can identify previously unrecognized changes, helping focus attention on certain neighbourhoods and emerging issues that were previously not recognized. The significance of these neighbourhoods, the issues they are facing, and their importance for the city as a whole can be effectively demonstrated and can more easily become city-wide priority concerns (including in municipal elections, within municipal departments and among funders).

**Participation in neighbourhood research helps improve the quality and relevance of the research effort and helps train the next generation of researchers and community leaders.** When community members and agency staff are directly involved in assisting in defining research needs, supporting research initiatives, critically assessing results, and defining policy implications, the research effort is more likely to be relevant to community needs. The effort and experience helps build additional leadership capacity in communities and academic institutions to further address neighbourhood issues and advocate for policy change.

*-- Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership, September 2014.*