

RESEARCH NOTE

A BRIEF REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON NEIGHBOURHOODS IN CANADA

Canada's urban landscape has been changing rapidly over the past few decades. Over 80% of the population now lives in urban centres of at least 10 000 people, urban centres which consist of an ever-shifting network of spatial, cultural and social neighbourhoods. As the complexity and diversity of the contemporary Canadian city continues to grow, the appropriate level of social and political analysis is shrinking. Especially in Canada's CMA's, it is becoming increasingly important to acknowledge not just the city itself, but its component parts. Thus, the neighbourhood is emerging as a salient concept in analysis of the urban form as policy makers, urban planners, and the private sector attempt to uncover the variables that contribute to healthy and vibrant cities and communities.

The objective of this research note is to conduct a preliminary review of research on neighbourhoods. The focus of the review is to identify the main thematic areas of research on neighbourhoods in Canada, as well as to examine how the concept of neighbourhood is defined in the literature.

Definition of Neighbourhood

The definition of neighbourhoods used in the text Urban Geography: A Global Perspective, by Michael Pacione¹, describes neighbourhoods as the smallest unit of analysis in an urban environment. This definition incorporates spatial, social and political dimensions:

The neighbourhood is the area immediately around one's home; it usually displays some homogeneity in terms of housing type, ethnicity or socio-cultural values. Neighbourhoods may offer a locus for the formation of shared interests and development of community solidarity.

The Statistics Canada definition of neighbourhood uses the census tract (CT) concept, whereby neighbourhoods are defined as small, relatively stable geographic areas that usually have a population of between 2500 to 8000 inhabitants. The CT's are defined so as to be as socio-economically homogenous as possible, as well as being as geographically compact as possible. In this definition, neighbourhoods are delineated along spatial and economic lines, which do not take into account other economic, cultural, or social factors that may influence residents' definition of neighbourhood.

In the literature, neighbourhood and community tend to be used interchangeably. When a distinction is made between neighbourhood and community, the term neighbourhood may be used to refer to spatial and political boundaries while community refers more to

¹ Michael Pacione Urban Geography: A Global Perspective (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

social and cultural boundaries. What is unambiguous is that neighbourhood refers to a place; the spatial fix may or may not involve some notion of community.²

From a research perspective, the fluidity of the concept of neighbourhood means that its definition must vary according to the nature of the questions being addressed. The formal boundaries of neighbourhoods defined by their physical proximity to a certain institution or a common name do not necessarily correspond with the more amorphous concept of neighbourhoods defined by sets of social relations and networks. It is therefore important, when working with the concept of neighbourhoods, to specify which set, or sets, of boundaries are in use.

Key Findings

A preliminary review of the research on Canadian neighbourhoods revealed a number of thematic areas, including poverty, immigration, neighbourhood decline and revitalization. The attached table (Table 1) outlines in more detail the research being undertaken in these areas. Some of the key findings of the preliminary review include:

- The research tends to consider neighbourhoods as variables affecting and being affected by urban decline and regeneration. This places neighbourhoods at the centre of urban regeneration strategies, and research related to urban decline.
- Poverty is becoming increasingly concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods, which can have a significant impact on a community's social capital. This trend is most pronounced in Canada's nine largest urban centres, and has been attributed in part to decreases in social spending and transfers by all levels of government. These neighbourhoods tend to be defined by a high proportion of single parent families, low levels of full-time school attendance, high levels of dependence on government transfer payments, and increased incidence of chronic, environmental, and mental illness. All of these factors contribute to a decrease in social capital, which research has shown decreases individuals' and communities' ability to access needed information, resources and supports.
- There has been an expansion of visible minority neighbourhoods in Canada's three largest metropolitan areas from 1981 to 2001. Research in the area suggests that ethnic minorities congregate in enclaves for reasons that include family ties and community bonds. New immigrants could also be restricted to poor neighbourhoods with affordable housing since they are generally at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in their new community.
- The Canada Research Chair on Urban Change and Adaptation is currently involved in a 7 year research project to develop a better understanding of the processes of urban decline, to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives introduced to arrest decline, and to inform the policy process and suggest more effective policy and program tools to restore vitality and improve the quality of life in declining neighbourhoods.

² Ray Forrest "Who Cares About Neighbourhoods?" Centre for Neighbourhood Research Paper 26, (Nov, 2004).

- An example of neighbourhood revitalization in action is the work done by Artscape, a non-profit arts promotion organization based in Toronto. Their positive experiences buying real estate in distressed Toronto neighbourhoods and developing it for use as arts studios and galleries demonstrates that investments in arts and culture infrastructure in neighbourhoods can lead to subsequent economic revitalization and positive social outcomes.

Relevance for Infrastructure Canada

As a focal point for social investigation, neighbourhoods provide a useful lens through which to examine wider social and political processes. Understanding neighbourhoods-how they function, their composition and their role in larger urban systems- is vital for urban policy and decision making. As the proportion of Canadians living in urban areas continues to increase, the urban form takes on an increasingly important role in the formulation of broader social, economic, and environmental policies.

Additionally, inner city neighbourhoods are emerging as the only spaces where alternative conceptions of identity and community can be negotiated and expressed. These enclaves, such as gay villages and ethnic districts, function as important sites of social network formation, cultural (re)invention and political action. They are also often the loci of social integration and acclimatization for new immigrants and their families and as such provide essential social support for an increasingly large number of Canadians. As Clutterbuck and Novick suggest, building a community's inclusiveness for increasingly diverse populations requires expanding our traditional conceptions of infrastructure to include both social infrastructure and the social implications of physical infrastructure.³ This, in turn, requires an in-depth knowledge of the specific place in question, knowledge that can often only be gained at the "street" or neighbourhood level. Additionally, this implies that neighbourhoods are the logical nexus for citizen engagement regarding urban policy development and decision-making.

Neil Bradford, in "Place Matters and Multi-level Governance: Perspectives on a New Urban Policy Paradigm", argues that although cities most open to diverse ideas and people have the greatest potential to become the creative hubs of the global economy, the growing spatial concentration of major social problems within Canadian cities acts as a major constraint on progress and growth.⁴ The concentration of homelessness, pollution, crime, etc. within specific neighbourhoods inhibits diversity and further marginalizes the poor and "different". Bradford argues that the complexity of these problems demand solutions that are place sensitive and holistic: "strategies built from the ground or street-up, on the basis of local knowledge, and delivered through networked relations crossing program silos, even jurisdictional turfs".⁵

Given their potentially significant social impacts, policies related to the allocation of infrastructure resources within municipalities likewise need to be considered within their social-spatial context. And given the diversity that exists within Canadian cities, effective

³ Peter Clutterbuck and Marvyn Novick "Building Inclusive Communities: Cross Canada Perspectives and Strategies" prepared for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Laidlaw Foundation, April, 2003.

⁴ Neil Bradford "Place Matters and Multi-level Governance: Perspectives on a New Urban Policy Paradigm" *Policy Options* 25.2 (Feb, 2004).

⁵ Ibid

place-based policy must be rooted in a profound understanding of the dynamics within and between the individual neighbourhoods impacted by the policy.

Table 1– Overview of Research on Neighbourhoods in Canada

Areas of Research	Issues Examined	Key Concepts	Proponents
Poverty and Health	Social implications of the spatial concentration of poverty	Increasing concentration of poverty in poor neighbourhoods in Canada	John Myles and Garnett Picot PRI “Neighbourhood Inequality in Canadian Cities”
		How neighbourhoods nurture identity; how exposure to the social implications of poverty (ie. poor healthcare, breakdown of social institutions, poor educational facilities, high incidence of teen pregnancy, domestic violence etc) effect young people’s outlook, identity; long term impacts	Abdie Kazemipur Dept. of Sociology, University of Lethbridge
		Health, functionality of neighbourhoods as indicator of overall civic success; conversely, neighbourhood/geographic concentration of poverty can have negative effects on entire regions	United Way of Greater Toronto “Poverty by Postal Code: The Geography of Poverty 1981-2001”
	Relationship between poverty and health;	Increased incidence of teen pregnancies in low income neighbourhoods; lower birth weight rates; higher incidence of heart disease	NCPS “The Determinants of Health and Children: Social and Economic Environment Determinants of Health”
	Role of neighbourhoods on children’s behavioural outcome	Children living in neighbourhoods with higher incidence of social problems (eg crime, disorder) are more likely to be characterized as aggressive Children’s perception of threat or danger in their neighbourhood contributes to levels of mental distress	HRSDC; Jones, Albanese, Asbridge, Sorenson, Tepperman Department of Sociology, University of Toronto
		Neighbourhoods may also mitigate effects of poverty, ie. Neighbourhoods with more “social capital” (levels of reciprocity, trust, associational membership, social cohesion, norms values, civic participation, etc.) may modify negative impacts of childhood poverty	HRSDC - Poverty, social capital, parenting and child outcomes in Canada 2002

Areas of Research	Issues Examined	Key Concepts	Proponents
Culture	Ethnically segregated neighbourhoods	New forms of residential segregation are not expression of exclusion but rather of choice. Provide informal social safety nets, especially for new immigrants, sense of identity, add to the vibrancy and diversity of cities.	Mohammad A. Qadeer School of Urban and Regional Planning, Queens University
	Immigration and ethnic neighbourhoods	Patterns of immigrant settlement in urban centres to a certain degree reflect earlier patterns of ethnic concentration. In Canada's 3 largest cities, most of the newly formed immigrant neighbourhoods experienced partial population exchange between visible minorities residents and non-visible minorities. However this does not lead to exclusive occupancy by one visible minority group – co-residency of different groups is common in visible minority neighbourhoods.	Feng Hou Analytical Studies Branch, Statistics Canada 'Greg Suttor Policy Development Officer 'City of Toronto "Immigration in Urban Canada" Tricountry Conference 2004.
	Role of culture in building social networks/cohesion	Communities are built through social networks, and culture plays important role in maintaining strong social fabric of communities and cities. Cities are also locus of cultural diversity and civic engagement, new ideas and social arrangements. Culture must figure prominently on cities and communities policy agendas.	Canadian Journal of Communication Vol. 27, No. 2 "Making Connections: Culture and Social Cohesion in the New Millennium"

Areas of Research	Issues Examined	Key Concepts	Proponents
Neighbourhood Revitalization	Factors that contribute to neighbourhood revitalization (economic, social, etc)	Neighbourhood's quality of life is intrinsically linked to cultural strengths; need to figure out how to develop and capitalize on them. The development of cultural/arts infrastructure can lead to economic and social revitalization	Artscape "Beyond Anecdotal Evidence: The Spillover Effects of Investments in Cultural Facilities" Ryerson University's Centre for the Study of Commercial Activity Dr. Ken Jones, Director
	Negative impacts of gentrification	Gentrification of former poor neighbourhoods often has the effect of displacing previous residents, and/or further contributing to the poverty of these residents. This indicates that when significant displacement occurs, gentrification is not locally driven and does not address the root causes of poverty.	Atkinson, Rowland; Chester Hartman
	Importance of poverty reduction for creating supportive and socially sustainable neighbourhoods	Need for comprehensive solutions to neighbourhood poverty that acknowledges the complexity and inter dependence of many different factors eg. Recognizing the impact of broader social policies on poverty; need to harmonize government policies	Anne Marie Seguin and Gerard Divay "Urban Poverty : Fostering Supportive and Sustainable Communities" 2002.