Sparking Change: Catalyzing the Social Impacts of Parks in Underserved Neighbourhoods
Literature Review
Park People, February 2017

This literature review was developed to inform Park People's *Sparking Change* report, which can be downloaded from www.parkpeople.ca/sparkingchange. The report explores the social impacts of park engagement—people taking an active, on-going role in improving and animating parks in underserved neighbourhoods. Park People is an independent charity that builds strong communities by animating and improving parks.

This literature review poses, and answers, a set of questions that helped form the basis of the assumptions in the report related to how parks and engagement in parks relate to concepts such as social capital, social cohesion, and creation of social networks and neighbourhood ties. In particular, the literature review focused on research related to underserved neighbourhoods, which have historically seen less investment in amenities such as parks and park programming, and often have a higher proportion of newcomers, immigrants, visible minorities, and/or people living on lower incomes.

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What is the Toronto context?

The uniqueness of its neighbourhoods is one of Toronto's most defining and most celebrated assets. It is therefore troubling that many of these neighbourhoods are growing more and more alike in the challenges they face. Like many cities, Toronto is becoming increasingly divided: as of 2005, 53% of Toronto's neighbourhoods were low-income compared to only 19% in 1970, while the proportion of high-income neighbourhoods rose slightly in the same period.[1]

Toronto's lower income neighbourhoods are concentrated in the inner suburbs[2], in the norther, eastern, and western areas of the city. The inner suburbs are products of the city's postwar expansion, which is reflected in their distinct architectural style. Unlike the sprawling, single-family detached homes popular in American suburbs and in Toronto's newer suburbs, housing in these neighbourhoods exists as clusters of aging, inward-facing, high-rise apartment towers. These towers are often surrounded by swaths of unlandscaped green space and not much else, as their architects assumed that residents would be able to access shops and services via a convenient car ride to the nearest commercial strip.[3]

However, the current occupants of tower neighbourhoods are generally not the middle-class car-owners that their architects envisioned. Rather, residents of tower neighbourhoods are more likely to have low incomes, have children, be recent immigrants, be seniors or be visible minorities.[4] They are also less likely to own cars, making everyday life difficult as these neighbourhoods are often devoid of nearby amenities and poorly serviced by public transit.[5] Not only do tower neighbourhoods house different residents, but also more residents than intended: as of 2012, over one million people lived in Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods, many in overcrowded conditions.[6] This places great stress not only on local social infrastructure designed to support fewer and wealthier residents[7], but also on residents themselves, which is reflected in on average poorer health outcomes.[8]

Yet these issues have not gone unnoticed. In 2006, two years after United Way Toronto and Canadian Council on Social Development released *Poverty by Postal Code* which called for "putting neighbourhoods on the public policy agenda"[9], City Council adopted its first iteration of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy.[10] This initiative identified 13 Priority Neighbourhood Areas for Investment, selected based on a simple formula: where low socioeconomic levels coincided with poor access to social services.[11] This plan was revised in 2012 when City Council adopted the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy 2020, and the 13 Priority Neighbourhoods were replaced by 31 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas.[12] Neighbourhood Improvement Areas were selected based on new, equity-based criteria which captured a more comprehensive vision of community wellbeing, including indicators relating to not only income, but also municipal voting rates, mental health, walkability and access to green-space, to name a few.[13]

These initiatives have had important physical and social impacts for Toronto's apartment communities, yet if neighbourhood equity is the endgame, there is still progress to be made. These neighbourhoods possess a promising community-building resource that offers great potential: green space. Some reports and strategies have called attention to the opportunity green space presents as a tool to improve community wellbeing, yet they often mention green space only marginally or associate it with a limited set of benefits that fail to capture its full potential. For example, *TO Prosperity: Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy* lists "removing barriers to expand urban agriculture" as an action specifically targeted at improving food security, without mentioning the social benefits of community gardens and parks.[14]

How do we define community building, social cohesion, social capital, and social networks?

While our world has become smaller in the sense that we can communicate digitally with people all around the globe, our local neighbourhoods are still a critical place for fostering a sense of community and social identity.[15] Social cohesion is concerned with what one researcher called "getting by and getting on at the more mundane level of everyday life"[16]—it's about your interactions in your local neighbourhood. It brings a sense of belonging and comfort, a sense that you have some ownership over your local community and a sense of control over what happens there.[17]

One indicator of a neighbourhood that is socially cohesive is that there are local people organizing to promote or defend something in their community.[18] This process is what many refer to as "community development" where residents take action to "improve economic, social, cultural, or environmental conditions, as well as feeling part of and identifying with the community as a whole."[19]

Socially cohesive neighbourhoods are also likely to be rich in social capital, which can be defined as the "networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit."[20] More simply one researcher defined it as "the glue that holds society together", meaning the "connections between people: the trust, mutual understanding and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible."[21] Indicators of social capital include: trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, community cohesion, networks, friendliness, and support.[22] Higher levels of social capital in an individual may lead to them being more "involved politically, to volunteer in their communities, and to get together more frequently with friends and neighbours."[23]

The more extensive social ties that come with a community that is rich in social capital have also been tied to positive health and well-being benefits,[24] making social capital an "especially valuable asset" for the health of people living on lower incomes.[25] For example, social disconnection, associated with a "small social network, infrequent social interaction and lack of participation in social activities", can result in negative health outcomes, including depression—

risks that are higher for seniors.[26] Social capital can also affect physical and mental health by "facilitating access to health information and/or services, fostering a safe and supportive environment for physical activity and buffering stress."[27]

The creation and maintenance of neighbourhood social ties are an important component of social capital. It is these ties that help create a sense of community and belonging, often most easily created amongst people who share similar characteristics, like being parents or having comparable incomes.[28] These neighbourhood social ties are not simply about the people within the neighbourhood, but also about the physical environment of the neighbourhood and whether it facilitates the ability for people to interact and connect.[29]

How do parks relate to social cohesion, social capital, and community networks?

Places such as parks are important as sites of building social cohesion because attachment to place helps provide connections to people important to us and a sense of security and cultural identity.[30] Parks also provide a place for social gathering and interaction—if they are designed and programmed to accommodate such activities. As one researcher noted: "People's involvement, trust and relationships with others and their community are influenced by neighbourhood design and aesthetics, perceptions of local safety and opportunities to forge local support and social networks."[31] Parks are also sites that are linked to memory, history, culture, attachment and belonging[32], which is important to developing a sense of community.[33]

Neighbourhoods that are more walkable have been found to promote interactions amongst neighbours by allowing for unplanned, spontaneous interactions that can help build a sense of community.[34] Indeed, one study found that "societal cohesion builds from the bottom up via the social practise and relations within residential neighbourhoods."[35]

The casual interactions that happen between people in parks—a simple hello, nod, or wave of the hand—have been shown to be important in fostering a sense of community and feelings of inclusion.[36] These interactions, which are called "weak ties," have also been shown to lead to greater perceptions of safety, social support, and home—key components of social cohesion.[37] As one study argued, "the more opportunities to connect, the greater the chance of developing tangible, lasting, and caring connections."[38] These weak ties have also been shown to be "of particular importance for vulnerable and marginal groups."[39] Weak ties are particularly important for helping people grow their social network, which can help them access resources or opportunities that they may not have been able to access on their own.[40] These casual interactions can also help reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness.[41]

In addition, getting involved in parks and community gardens can catalyze people to become more civically engaged by providing the groundwork for forming networks and fostering leadership and organizing skills—all of which may result in increased engagement in the

political process.[42] Even small, modest success in park projects can lead to individuals or organizations taking on more difficult projects, because of the feeling of success and the positive feedback of making change happen.[43] This same study found that a strong network and the availability of resources and tools were necessary to take individuals/organizations to the next level regarding the projects that they're able to take on. Partnerships with other organizations are an important part of this success in community building and they "can be a way to engage community-based knowledge, as well as initial and ongoing support."[44]

It's important to involve a diversity of people from a community and different cultural groups in neighbourhood parks, because "if all community and cultural groups are included, then we are also empowering citizen-leaders and participants who will continue to contribute to the area and its growth and stability over time."[45]

All of this also has been shown to have real mental and physical health impacts and so there is a strong argument for improving and expanding the infrastructure that supports the creation or improvement of social capital, including parks and recreation facilities that act as places of social interaction and community building.[46]

While it's clear that social benefits are derived from involving community members directly in park improvement and animation projects, it's important to also understand where those benefits accrue: at the individual, organization, or community level.[47] For example, if a local park gets a new community garden, does it mainly benefit the individual gardeners, a group that is managing it, or the wider community, regardless of whether or not they are directly participating in the project?

What is the importance of parks/public spaces for people living in underserved neighbourhoods?

The social and community benefits of parks and open spaces are particularly important for people who are living on lower incomes, new immigrants, seniors and other vulnerable populations.[48] For example, one study found the risk of seniors dying was higher in communities that were "characterized by low levels of interaction in public spaces," leading to higher levels of social isolation.[49] Another study pointed out the extra importance of nearby open spaces for those that may be living in cramped or small conditions and have little outdoor space of their own.[50]

One study of immigrant women's experience in public space in Toronto noted that many of the women they spoke with "create[d] their own social spaces" in their community, arguing that "immigrants, low-income women of colour, refugees—all clearly have critical roles to play in creating more equitable and sustainable Canadian cities and in building the local social relationships and networks that make this possible."[51] The importance of self-organizing as a tool for community development was highlighted in another study because "people must organize themselves to make a space their place."[52]

Indeed, "discussions of community participation and empowerment have become increasingly important as cities have become more ethnically diverse and more demographically and racially divided," the authors of the book *Rethinking Urban Parks* note.[53] They point out that parks that may have been constructed to appeal to a white middle- or working-class demographic "must now provide recreation, educational and social programs, and relaxation for an increasingly multicultural and multiclass population."[54]

For many new immigrants, parks can help "both expand and strengthen their identity" by providing a site for interaction between people of different backgrounds, but also a space for local cultural expression. In particular, gardening allows new immigrants to grow certain fruits and vegetables that can act as symbols of their cultural identities and reminders of their home countries.[55]

One reason for this is that these populations are more dependent on local neighbourhood ties and the contacts they have within their immediate community.[56] Toronto's many tower neighbourhoods, which act as "arrival cities"[57] for many new immigrants coming to Canada also pose some specific challenges for social connection because the "architectural design of high-rise buildings can make it difficult for residents to form ties to neighbours"[58], thus making common spaces, such as nearby parks and green spaces, more important as venues for social interaction and connection. On the flip side, the deterioration of neighbourhood social ties can lead to less support for vulnerable individuals.[59]

One group of researchers found that outdoor common areas that featured more greenery led to more social activity and stronger feelings of belonging in low-income housing neighbourhoods, leading them to suggest that urban greening efforts should be a "focus for community organizing in inner-city neighbourhoods."[60] This conclusion agrees with other studies, which have found that improving the physical environment of public housing projects led to more interactions among neighbours and higher levels of trust[61]—two critical components of increased social capital.

In particular, community gardens have been called out as crucial places where new immigrants and people living on lower incomes can gather and bring their own cultural backgrounds to public space.[62] As one study pointed out, community gardens also allow people to participate in designing and managing a public open space, which may not be possible in other public spaces, helping people to gain experience and skills.[63]

Parks can also act as important places where people of different cultures can mix, acting as a catalyst for interactions between people of different backgrounds and reducing intolerance.[64] As one study noted, gatherings in parks "can be a platform for breaking up social segregation and therefore public spaces are indispensable for meeting and establishing contacts."[65]

What are the importance elements necessary in parks/public spaces to create a good venue for facilitating social capital and social inclusion?

The beneficial properties of a public space cannot be reduced simply to design, but design is nevertheless an important factor in helping to facilitate social interactions. Providing opportunities for casual, social encounters is key in allowing people to develop a sense of attachment, but this can be limited by a lack of infrastructure, amenities, or facilities.[66]

For example, one study notes that neighbourhood social ties "are promoted by environmental features that enhance the quantity and quality of informal social contact among neighbours."[67] Sometimes people don't even need to take part in the social encounter to drive a benefit from it—simply observing or being close to social interactions can bring improved happiness, mental restoration, and sense of community. One facility that can encourage inter-ethnic interactions is a market space.[68]

Creating these "opportunities for informal or casual meeting and for participation in groups and associations are both conducive to social capital formation," concluded one study.[69] Indeed, "participation and interaction do not just happen," wrote another pair of researchers, "but rather need places or common meeting grounds that facilitate these social relationships. People need places to build and maintain strong social ties and commitment.[70]

Two common ways that people interact in public spaces is through their children or through walking dogs, making dog parks and playgrounds important sites of social interaction.[71] Park quality is also important for encouraging visitation and interaction—not just park quantity or proximity. Parks need to be well-maintained and include facilities such as recreational amenities, playgrounds, and natural areas.[72] People need a reason to stay in a park in order to receive the social benefits of the park—walking through the space is not often enough to encourage social ties.[73]

This can also have important impacts for physical health. One study found that parks with higher levels of social capital generated higher levels of physical activity, leading them to conclude that "targeting park social environments may be an important avenue to consider for interventions to increase community levels of physical activity."[74] The facilities, amenities, and activities that are necessary to encourage social interaction and physical activity can be different for people of different ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds.[75]

Community gardens are a key amenity to foster social interaction. One study of community gardens in New York found that 90% of the gardens in the study were home to social activities, such as BBQs, weddings, and birthday parties. This study found that "gardeners and garden members view gardens more as social and cultural gathering places than as agricultural production sites."[76] Community gardens are "forums for incidental and organized social interaction."[77] Food itself is an important point of social connection: "Great food attracts people to public spaces; it welcomes groups into parks and can contribute to community

building."[78] One way to heighten this is to encourage a mix of diverse food options that cater to specific cultural communities, rather than seeking a homogenized food experience across parks.

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