

**A Community Growing Apart:
Income Gaps and Changing Needs
in the City of Toronto in the 1990s**

Appendix V:
Profiles of Four Low-income Communities

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Profiles of Four Low-income Communities

A statistical profile of Thorncliffe Park FSA M4H

This FSA has much higher-than-average low-income rates for children and for husband-wife families, but it is far closer to the City average for other family types. It has a high and quickly increasing proportion of children.

The community has experienced very large and continuing declines in both total incomes and average earnings from employment for families, despite the economic recovery. This likely reflects changes in the population composition of the area, even though we cannot tell this from the data.

Population

In 1999, 21.4% of the population in this community were children, up sharply from 14.1% in 1990, and well above the City average of 18.0%. The proportion of seniors was a bit below average and has been declining since 1995. The proportion of husband-wife families was well below the City average in 1990, but had caught up by 1999. The proportion of lone-parent families was well below average (8.8% compared to 11.1% in 1999) and up slightly from 1990.

Low-income Rates

Low income is defined as having an income less than half the median (or midpoint) of a family of the same size. The City-wide average for all family types was 25.1% in 1999, up from 23.8% in 1995.

The low-income rate for children in the City in 1999 was 32.3%; in this FSA, the rate rose from 40.7% to 49.7% between 1995 and 1999.

The City-wide average for husband-wife families was 16.5% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate rose from 25.9% to 34.9% between 1995 and 1999.

For lone-parent families, the City-wide average was 42.0% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate rose from rose from 32.8% to 35.5% between 1995 and 1999.

For non-family persons (or unattached individuals) the City-wide average was 29.8% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate was below average, but rose from 18.2% to 23.3% between 1995 and 1999.

For seniors, the City-wide low-income average was 12.2% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate increased from 9.6% in 1995 to 12.8% in 1999.

Total Income

For husband-wife families, median total income was well below average (\$31,800 compared to \$51,300 in 1999), and falling in relative terms. Real incomes for this family type fell by 34.8% from 1990 to 1999, compared to a City-wide average decline of 13.0%. And real incomes fell even over the recovery period, falling by 6.5% between 1990 and 1999. This likely reflects changes in the population composition of the area.

For lone-parent families, median total income was slightly above average in 1999, but fell by more than average in the 1990s. Median total incomes of non-family persons were above average and fell by less than average over the 1990s.

Employment Income

The average employment income of husband-wife families with employment income shows the same general pattern as was found with total incomes. It was well below average in 1999 (\$38,000 vs. \$73,700) and fell steeply in the 1990s. The proportion of husband-wife families with employment income was a little below average.

Average employment earnings of both lone-parent families and non-family persons in this area were very close to the City average.

Social Assistance

City wide, the proportion of all husband-wife families receiving social assistance at some point in the year fell from 12.2% to 8.4% between 1995 and 1999. In this FSA, the drop was from 21.2% to 16.4%. Thus, the social assistance rate was falling but still double the City average in 1999. Assistance rates for lone parents in this community were about average and they were below average for non-family persons.

Meeting with Agencies in Thorncliffe Park: Summary of a community consultation held July 11, 2001

Thorncliffe Park overlaps closely with FSA M4H. Most agency representatives spoke mainly about this area, though many comments were also relevant to adjacent Flemingdon.

The troubling statistical data for the area came as no surprise to participants. Thorncliffe Park is, in the minds of all, very much a rising high needs area, particularly with respect to children, newcomers and seniors. There has been a very large recent inflow of predominantly Muslim immigrants from India and Bangladesh and refugees fleeing wars in Somalia and Afghanistan. Large extended families with young children are living in extremely crowded conditions in private high-rise rental housing. The large influx of newcomers has led to a very crowded community and extremely strained community infrastructure. Parents are having a great deal of trouble finding secure and decent paying

jobs, and many are unemployed or severely underemployed. Women in this community face severe problems, and agency representatives particularly highlighted violence against women as a pressing issue. Services to children with special needs, seniors and women have all dismally failed to keep pace with growing needs.

On a more positive note, this was described as “a very vibrant and exciting community” in which agencies have built close links with newcomer communities. It is also, in many ways, a welcoming community for newcomers who value not only the peace they have found, but also close and supportive ties with other newcomers from their own cultures. The mosque plays a particularly important role for recent Muslim immigrants and refugees.

Agencies reported extreme difficulties meeting rising needs, not least because of recent and pending provincial government cuts (e.g. recently announced cuts to Community Care Access Centre budgets). Staff were reported to be hugely overstretched and stressed. But there was a mood of cautious optimism in terms of prospects for community development.

Housing

Housing was identified as an extremely pressing issue. Large families with young children are doubling up and more to pay \$850-\$1200 per month rents for private apartments, leaving little income for other needs and causing huge strain on women and indeed all family members. Evictions are common because of inability to pay rent, leading to further overcrowding as people fall back on extended families. Evictions have also risen because landlords (under recent provincial legislation) can raise rents (typically by about \$250) for vacant units. Some unscrupulous landlords tolerate gross overcrowding to provide inflated rents, and are siphoning cash from highly leveraged buildings, investing little or nothing in maintenance. Recent immigrants have huge difficulties contesting evictions in the required 5 days, not least because of language problems and lack of knowledge. “People” we were told “are more and more suicidal when they face eviction.”

Income and Jobs

As our data show, low income is very much an issue in this community, particularly when account is taken of very high rents and the fact that many new arrivals need to remit money to their home countries to support other family members. To a limited degree, cash income from employment and social assistance is supplemented for some by a “survival economy” such as use of communal kitchens and running very small home based businesses.

Many male recent immigrants are employed – and often hugely underemployed – in low wage jobs such as taxi drivers and security guards. Professionals have enormous difficulty finding suitable jobs due to lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience, sometimes limited language skills, and discrimination by employers. Some

community residents, including women, are bused daily to factory jobs in the outer suburbs of the GTA. Recent immigrant women in this community generally have low levels of education, confining them to very low wage jobs.

Community Infrastructure:

The School

We were told that “the school population has more than doubled recently, with no increase in the surrounding housing stock.” Thorncliffe Park School is now at almost 300% of capacity, and 2 in 3 children are taught in portable classrooms which now fill most of the former playground space. The kindergarten intake is staggering: almost 20 kindergarten classes existed last school year. (A new school will be built, but construction has not yet started.)

Resources in the school have failed to keep pace with the huge rise in needs. There are many special needs children in the recent immigrant population, including many children with mental health problems. But it takes 6 to 8 months for a referred child to get an initial consultation with a specialist. Referrals of children with severe difficulties for long-term care take even longer to be followed up. This is a particularly serious problem because of the shame experienced by parents of children with disabilities in some cultures.

Amalgamation of school boards has led to a drastic reduction in services for special needs children e.g. speech therapists are no longer available.

Recreation

When asked about recreation infrastructure, agency representatives laughed derisively and said “none.” With about 9,000 children in the area, the great majority of whom live in high-rise apartments, there is no rink, no proper gym, and no swimming pool. One small community centre is available part of the time, but the modest user fee of \$1 is a barrier, and there are no programs for children age 10 and over who have nothing to do except “hang out in the mall.” The gym space is very small, air ventilation is extremely poor, and there is no money for equipment, no showers, and no change-rooms.

The park is very small and extremely crowded in the evenings, particularly in the Summer when many residents gather outside.

Community Spaces

Lack of meeting space in the community was identified as a major issue: “one of the biggest barriers in terms of community development is the lack of space for people to just meet.” Some agencies pointed to the need not just for a proper community centre, but

also for community offices in the larger high rises to provide a specific point of contact between particular communities and providers of services.

The Needs of Women

Many agency representatives highlighted the problems of recent immigrant women: “we need to look at poverty for women; they bear the brunt of it”; “there are many, many women living in very isolated and abusive situations.”

Women are forced to look after many young children in extremely crowded conditions while facing the often difficult task of adapting to a new culture. Often, birth control has to be arranged in secret because of opposition from male partners. Many women are trapped in abusive relationships, often the result of arranged marriages, living together with the husband’s family, and the cultural strains of settlement. Many mothers of large families are still very young because of particular circumstances in their home countries. (For example, very early marriages became common in Afghanistan to protect young women from being abducted by soldiers). Fleeing abuse is difficult if not impossible given a lack of services and the fact that realistic alternatives are just not available. Leaving the home means no income, no shelter, and loss of contact with the cultural community.

In terms of violence against women, agencies reported that “we can’t respond as quickly and as fast as we would like.” One agency commented that one of their social workers already serves 86 clients, four months into the funding year, when they should only be serving a total of 80 clients in a year. This has resulted in a 3 to 9 month wait for counseling services. On a more positive note, the police were commended for responsiveness and sensitivity to the issue.

Crowding creates specific problems for women looking after frail seniors or children with special needs. On top of cultural barriers and the general lack of home support services, respite workers cannot provide help.

The Needs of Seniors

Agency representatives reported deteriorating conditions for many seniors in Thorncliffe Park, particularly single women. Public pensions have increased at a much slower rate than rents, and \$800 per month rents for very modest units are not uncommon. We were told of seniors renting barely finished basement rooms with no separate bathroom or kitchen for \$700 per month. There is a 12 year waiting list for supported housing for seniors.

Agency representatives were fearful of the consequences of cuts to already badly strained services being offered through the Community Care Access Centre. With the annual budget for home care services almost used up in July, it was feared that there would be nowhere for hospitals to discharge patients needing home care come the Fall. Agencies are being forced to charge more and more for services from badly financially stretched

seniors just to meet minimum needs in the community. We were told that “all care workers are at breakdown level ...they are overworked and overstressed at all levels ... I just don’t know what will happen next.” Regarding pending cuts, one agency representative said that “I will have to lay off some very dedicated and marginalized workers serving very vulnerable seniors... it just doesn’t make sense.”

Discussion Group with Newcomers:

A discussion group was held with 13 adult immigrant residents of Thorncliffe Park. While all were originally from South Asia, their period of residence in the community varied between several weeks and 20 years. The group included several couples, and most were parents of young children.

Residents thought the most positive feature of the community was their sense of being connected to others from the same ethnic and cultural background. They appreciated the existence of the mosque and culturally relevant programs for their children. They also showed a high level of appreciation for the services provided by agencies, though some certainly called for improvements. For example, the need for services in high rise apartment buildings, such as child care and toy libraries was mentioned, as was the need for services for children with disabilities. They felt the school was far too crowded, and that children did not get enough attention. Lack of affordable training opportunities in the community, such as computer training, was mentioned.

The most negative feature of the community was seen to be congestion and overcrowding, particularly at the school; in the available, very limited, recreational facilities; and at the local mall. One said “there’s just no peace at all.”

The two key concerns of residents were housing and jobs.

Rents were seen as far too high, and rising out of sight. One couple with 4 children were paying \$1,000 per month for a 2 bedroom apartment from a monthly income of \$1,400. Even one-bedroom apartments becoming available rent for \$775 to \$950 per month. After rent consumes 75% to 80% of income, there is nothing left for anything except food. “There’s no money just to live... no money for child care or training either.”

The group included two highly educated professionals, an electrical engineer from Pakistan (who spoke good English), working as a security guard, and a recently arrived computer programmer still seeking work. Several participants were recent arrivals taking language training and looking for work. All agreed that there were “no real jobs” and thought that very few members of their community were “really getting ahead.” The jobs available to them as security guards, in retail and in factories paid \$8 to \$9 per hour (or little more after tax than the income needed to pay a typical monthly rent of \$1000-\$1200 for a 2 bedroom apartment.)

The key barriers to getting better jobs were seen as lack of Canadian experience, lack of contacts, lack of language skills for some, and the unwillingness of employers to give new arrivals a chance. Women cited the lack of child care, particularly for those working at night or on shifts. There was enormous frustration expressed over lack of recognition of skills: “Canada is taking the cream ... and it is a loss to Canada that our skills are not being used.”

The entire group saw coming to Canada as probably positive for their children, but some regretted the move and felt trapped. They said there was really “no going back” once they had quit jobs at home and had exhausted their savings in the months after arrival. Participants also said that “when you tell relatives not to come, they just don’t listen.”

Discussion Group with Working Parents:

A second discussion group was held with a small group of young working parents; a recent male university graduate of South Asian origin and three younger women parents working part-time (non-immigrants) who have been active in the community.

As relatively long-term residents, all perceived a decline in the quality of the community: “the park is always crowded”; “its littered and full of glass”; “its absolutely disgusting” “its packed with children at night.”; “the apartment buildings aren’t being kept up any more.” One of the women noted that there were now almost 20 kindergarten classes in the school compared to just one when she was a child. All but one said they would move out if they could, because of the overcrowding and the heavy ethnic concentration. “Those who can leave, will.”

They all thought that the neighbourhood was moving in the wrong direction compared to 10 years ago when “Thornccliffe Park was a great place to live”. They thought the area was becoming seen by others as “an East Indian ghetto”, and one noted that a city councillor had recently said “this is Mel Lastman Square not Thornccliffe Park.

That said, none felt unsafe or threatened. They also felt that it was not too late to turn things around, and that better services, a face lift for the park and more community involvement by residents would make a big difference.

The young women said they wanted to live in a mixed community but one said she felt “like an outsider“. Frustration was expressed over services for long-time residents because of enormous linguistic diversity. For example, a pre natal class was delivered in several languages, making it painfully slow.

Concern was expressed about apathy in the community: “people complain but they don’t want to get involved” but others said people pulled together. There were different views on the extent to which people from different cultures had much to do with one another.

With respect to jobs and incomes, the young women felt their families were falling behind. “The end of rent control is killing people like us.” One said “I have no relationship with my husband – I work on nights on week-ends and he works days.”

Summary

The major challenge facing Thorncliffe Park is the lack of resources and services sufficient to cope with a very rapidly growing, high needs population. Housing and job problems hugely compound already difficult settlement issues. Thorncliffe Park is not a ghetto: most residents seem to feel that the community is safe, close and supportive. But it could become one if the challenges are not responded to.

A statistical profile of Downtown East (FSA M5A):

The FSA has a very high proportion of non-family persons and an average proportion of children. It has much higher-than-average rates of low income for all family types, and this situation has been deteriorating, even during the recovery period from 1995 to 1998.

The FSA has experienced a large and continuing decline in both total incomes and earnings from employment, despite the economic recovery.

Population

In 1999, 19.1% of the population of this FSA were children. The proportion was stable and at about the City average. The proportion of seniors was low (7.3%) compared to the City-wide average (13.7%) and it was stable.

The proportion of lone-parent families was a bit above average – 12.3% vs. 11.1% in 1999 – but it fell slightly over the 1990s. The most notable characteristic about this area was the very high proportion of non-family persons – 60.8% of all household types in the area – well above the City average of 41.2%. This proportion was quite stable.

Low-income Rates

Low income is defined as having an income less than half the median (or midpoint) of a family of the same size. The City-wide average for all family types was 25.1% in 1999, up from 23.8% in 1995.

For low-income rate children in the City-wide averaged 32.3% in 1999. In M5A, the low-income rate for families with children rose from 59.4% to 64.6% between 1995 and 1999.

For husband-wife families, the City-wide low-income rate was 16.5% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate rose from 30.5% to 34.6% between 1995 and 1999.

For lone-parent families, the City-wide average was 42.0% in 1999; in M5A, the rate rose from 60.7% to 64.6% between 1995 and 1999.

For non-family persons, the City-wide low-income average was 29.8% in 1998; in M5A, the rate rose from 43.3% to 44.3% between 1995 and 1999.

For seniors, the City-wide low-income average was 12.2% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate increased from 15.5% in 1995 to 19.9% in 1999.

Total Income

For husband-wife families, median total income was well below average (\$31,400 compared to \$51,300 in 1999), and falling in relative terms. Real incomes fell by 23.4% in the 1990s compared to a 17.6% City-wide average decline, and they rose much less over the 1995 to 1999 recovery period.

Median incomes of lone-parent families and non-family persons are also well below the City average, but the gap compared to the City average did not grow in the 1990s.

Employment Income

The average employment income of husband-wife families fell in the 1990s, unlike the City average, and was well below average in 1999 (\$49,600 compared to \$73,700), even though the proportion of such families with some earnings was about average.

Lone-parent families in this area were much less likely than average to have earnings, and average incomes from employment were very low and falling in comparison to the City-wide average.

Non-family persons were very close to the City average in the likelihood of having employment earnings and average employment earnings.

Social Assistance

This community had very high, but falling, rates of receipt of social assistance. In 1999, 27.2% of husband-wife families, 59.0% of lone-parent families, and 32.8% of non-family persons received some assistance. In all cases, this was much higher than the City average.

Meeting with Agencies from the Downtown East Area: Summary of a community consultation held July 12, 2001

The Downtown East area is a long-standing high needs area. Many low-income residents live in social housing in Regent Park, and the community also has a very high and rising transient, 'street' and homeless population. Cabbagetown is part of the area and has a

much more mixed income and social profile, including many middle and higher income households. There are tensions between local residents and agencies serving the homeless and the street population in particular.

Agency representatives painted a deeply disturbing picture of loss of hope, particularly among the very marginalized 'street' clients they serve.

Social assistance cuts and the dominant ethos of "punishing the poor" have led to "hopelessness" on the part of those left behind." Most agencies felt they were struggling against growing public indifference to the needs of the very poor and marginalized whom they serve. "The poor are becoming the enemy." "The mainstream community has lost interest." "The meanness in the larger community is fuelling hopelessness here." "The punish the poor mentality has intensified all of the problems." While provincial government policies were considered the predominate cause, indifference in the general community was also cited. For example, the Christian Resource Centre reported a 70% drop in donations from the community despite the fact they are now feeding 200 people a day, up from 35 a year ago.

Drugs

Drug use is a mounting problem. "Loss of hope in the street level population is endemic – drugs is all there is." "It's a lot cheaper to buy crack [cocaine] than booze." The drug trade has become increasingly violent in recent months, and there have been as many as six recent, widely publicized cases of drug related murders and gunfire on the streets in broad daylight. Drug use is reported to have spread from the high schools into the public schools. Some parents are said to tacitly allow their kids to become drug dealers because it stops them from asking for money that families don't have. "The child in Grade 8 isn't pressuring mom and dad for the jeans or shoes because now they have the money themselves." The drug culture is seen by kids as one of very few avenues of opportunity. There are growing levels of drug use in the Chinese and Vietnamese community.

Street Youth and Homeless Persons

Agencies pointed to the almost complete absence of transitional housing and housing options for street youth and the mentally ill. Street City, which provides transitional housing is closing soon due in part to lack of support from the neighbourhood. The Shout Clinic, a community help centre for street youth, is overwhelmed by growing needs.

Mental health hospitals are discharging straight to the streets. Young people, including many native women and children in the child welfare system, are experiencing serious mental health issues much earlier than before, and are not getting early intervention when it is needed. "By 24, its too late." Many people with schizophrenia, paranoia and severe depression are turning to the agencies for help. "There are no borderline cases any more. We (the agency workers) are the ones who are borderline."

More and more street youth are showing up after being “lost in the child welfare system”. They are shunted from foster home to foster home until they hit 16, and then they are on the streets. “At 16, child welfare says you are on your own.” “My worst fear is that in 13 years I’ll be seeing the kids of youth I am serving now.”

The area, partly because of available services, draws troubled youth from across the City and indeed more widely. Many young women on the street become pregnant, and one worker reported that all of the mothers she had worked with over the past year had lost their children to the child welfare system. Housing for young women with children is simply not available, so they lose the children and face still deeper problems. There is a large group of lesbian kids in the area who are “completely lost.”

More and more youth refugees are also showing up in the community. One agency reported that 15 youth from Zimbabwe showed up last week “with nothing at all”, and not much can be done to help them. 80% of the beds in Covenant House are taken by refugee youth, many of whom have experienced torture and have severe immediate needs for help.

Mental health and addiction problems run together, requiring complex interventions, but housing and income supports are just not there. Younger people generally are seen to be losing hope. “Young people just don’t care anymore ... they know this is where they are going to be for the rest of their lives.” “I can’t really help them ... I’m bullshitting. They see what’s out there and its pretty blank.”

This sense of hopelessness is seen to be spreading to youth who grow up in the community. Disturbingly, the Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club report that there has been no applicant for the post secondary scholarships they offer for three years straight. Participation in youth employment programs has declined. Agencies thought the elimination of the provincial SEED (stay in school) program was a major move in the wrong direction.

Social Assistance

Cutting high-needs marginalized clients off social assistance, was seen by agency representatives as a major contributing factor to growing hopelessness and absolute destitution in the community. Making dependent young adults ineligible for welfare has forced many onto the streets. Many young women have lost welfare benefits because they can’t meet requirements to attend parenting class and to be in school. Agency workers were fearful that mandatory drug testing and a lifetime ban on social assistance for fraud will result in more completely destitute troubled youth and mentally ill clients on the streets and in shelters. “What will happen here when these rules start to bite?”

Agencies also reported that it is now “almost impossible” to qualify even very severely mentally ill persons for disability benefits under social assistance, and that virtually all initial applications are turned down, requiring agencies to assist through a complex and lengthy appeals process. “It almost always takes an appeal.”

Housing

Permanent housing for the high risk, street population is virtually non-existent. Very few rooming houses are left. A lot of street youth are couch surfing. Even basement rooms with a shared bathroom now go for more than \$450 - \$600 a month. A large homeless population is living in Bayview Ravine and using services in the area.

Seniors

A key issue is lack of resources for home care combined with lack of supportive and affordable housing for seniors. Many high need seniors are living in deplorable housing conditions in basement rooms. Many single, 'middle-aged' homeless clients have prematurely aged and face health and other problems similar to those of the elderly.

Children

Safety for children is becoming an increasingly important issue because of violence on the streets. A "Safewalk" program has been instituted to take children in escorted groups from home in Regents Park to school and back.

Participation in organized after school activities run by agencies has declined, partly because of safety concerns, but remains significant. Despite cuts from the City, there is high enrollment in summer day camps. Funds for summer day trips for kids have been cut. User fees and transportation costs are a major barrier to child and youth participation in recreation programs: "\$25 is a lot for these families." Strained budgets have led to very limited agency outreach to the community. The key challenge in working with young people is to "provide a positive direction". There have been some successes in building partnerships with the schools (e.g. in computer literacy programs).

Increasing numbers of young children are being taken into the child welfare system "mainly because their parents are very poor." The parents were often crown wards themselves.

Agency Resources and Needs

The agencies we met with conveyed a strong sense of facing huge and growing problems with shrinking resources and community support, fuelling growing despair and cynicism among staff and volunteers. "All we do is maintenance; we can't provide hope." "When you are poor you have no choice – and we can no longer offer them choices." "We are seen as bleeding hearts helping people abuse the system." Increasing hopelessness reflects the absence of options: "almost nothing is available" for clients with very severe needs.

Agencies reported that when they met together 10 and even 5 years ago, it was to plan. Now it is to talk about the futility of interventions compared to rising needs. Lack of

resources to keep paid staff has meant pushing tasks onto volunteers, such as counselling, which they are unable to take on.

Agencies reported huge difficulties functioning with just short-term dollars. Evaluations and applications for funding take up more and more time, and Human Resources Development Canada processes have become particularly cumbersome. Municipal amalgamation has reduced City resources for the inner city.

While similarly facing mounting needs with shrinking resources, other agency representatives thought that there was a tendency for staff to be even less hopeful and more cynical than clients, and that workers shouldn't just look at clients through their problems. "You have to deal with people's strengths and not just focus on weaknesses" one said.

Agencies generally agreed on a need to re-create a sense of entitlement among clients and to promote goals of social justice among the wider population.

Discussion Group with Youth:

We met with 10 young people aged 17-19, all of whom had lived in the community for almost all of their lives. Most belonged to racialized minority groups. Several were employed as summer camp leaders with the Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club and could be considered to be 'doing well' compared to others in the community, including their friends.

In many ways, the group had a more positive view of the community than workers with agencies, and felt that recent media publicity around drug murders and street violence had given the area a reputation it did not fully deserve. "More focus is on the bad stuff, but there are good things happening here." They pointed to the good community centre, recent community clean-up efforts, Sunday in the Park and the fact that this is a "tight community" where "you get to know everyone." and "everything is close." They thought that with 3 recreation centres and lots of sports programs, including free swimming, baseball and hockey, there was a lot to do. However, they also thought the schools "aren't in good shape" and that "other schools get the money." (Several of the group attended high schools outside the area.) Several thought the teachers had given up and just didn't care any more, though others disagreed.

While feeling that the area was still reasonably safe for them, they did think that "its getting kind of crazy around here", that violence and crime were growing, and that younger and younger kids were getting into drugs. They thought, though, that it was still possible not to get involved in the drug culture.

In terms of future plans, several expressed some interest in going on to some kind of post secondary education, but were unspecific and said that they were unwilling to borrow money for education. Going into debt was seen as a real barrier for people like them.

Others saw running a small business as an option. They thought a large part of the attraction of the drug trade to others was the prospect of income now, rather than owing money. They saw young people from the community as being interested in “money now.”

Many of the young people felt stigmatized as a result of being Regents Park residents. “The cops need counselling” (not to see all kids as troublemakers) one said to general agreement. A Regents Park address was seen as an obstacle to getting jobs, though many also felt that “you have to look for opportunities” and that they were there for those who actively looked.

Discussion Group with Single Parents:

We met with 8 women single parents. Most were long-term residents, while others had moved into Regents Park more recently.

Like the first group, they felt the drugs and violence problems of the area had been somewhat sensationalized. “It does scare me but people in the area are still pretty good. Its still one big community.” “Its okay for my kids... we’re not directly affected by the violence.” “Labelling is holding the community back.” But one said “I don’t let my kids play outside late anymore” and all agreed that things had become a lot worse. “The kids are really scared about what’s going on.”

The group felt this was a pretty good community for single parents. “There are programs for the kids.” “People know each other and look out for other people’s kids.” “People are involved in the community”. Overall, however, they thought it was easier for those with young kids rather than teenagers.

They saw major problems with housing. (All were in subsidized housing.) “Maintenance is really falling down.” “My fridge and stove are 20 years old.’ One reported waiting days to have leaking pipes in a wall fixed.

The largest gap in services was seen to be child care, especially for those working in jobs with unpredictable hours (most of the group.).

The biggest problem for all of the group was very low income from social assistance, and lack of access to jobs. All were on social assistance and reported severe income difficulties, but all were working in part-time jobs, often several jobs. (Social assistance recipients can earn about \$275 per month plus a child care allowance before losing benefits dollar for dollar.) Some reported working for next to nothing, once the earnings threshold was exceeded, just to make sure they were still called in for work the next time. One woman said she had just worked all night doing set up at the Sky Dome for about \$20 in her pocket because she was at the maximum and had to pay out for child care. Because of unpredictable hours, they bought bus and subway tickets rather than a monthly transit pass, even though this often turned out to be more expensive

Key barriers to getting the kinds of jobs that would allow them to get off welfare were seen to be lack of experience, and the unwillingness of employers to “give us a chance”. “Just because we are on social assistance and from a low-income area doesn’t mean we can’t do the job.” Lack of suitable work is also an issue. “All the jobs are temporary and part-time”, but they need regular hours to arrange for care for the kids and to get a high enough income to replace welfare.

All wanted to get off social assistance because “you would feel better about yourself”, and several said they were anxious that their kids not make the same kind of mistakes in life as they had. Several of the group had invested a lot in training and were carrying student loans as a result. They all thought they could get off welfare quicker if they could get income while getting real training, and some income support as they moved into work.

A statistical profile of Jane & Finch/Rexdale (FSA M3N):

Jane-Finch is one of the poorest FSAs in Toronto, with a particularly high low-income rate for children, who make up a much larger-than-average share of the population. Relatively speaking, the area appears to have been sharing in the recovery since 1995.

Population

The proportion of children aged 14 and under was very high in 1999 relative to the City average (26.4% compared 18.0%) and it was gradually rising, up from 23.8% in 1990.

The proportion of seniors was relatively low (8.0% compared to 13.8% City average in 1999), but was rising, up from 5.0% in 1990.

The proportion of lone-parent families was very high in 1999 (20.4% compared to 11.1% City average) and it was rising rapidly, up from 16.5% in 1990.

The proportion of non-family persons was relatively low (33.3% of all family types, compared to a City average of 41.2%). The proportion of husband-wife families was about average.

Low-income Rates

Low income is defined as having an income less than half the median (or midpoint) of a family of the same size. The City-wide average for all family types was 25.1% in 1999, up from 23.8% in 1995.

The City-wide low-income rate for children averaged 32.3% in 1999. In M3N, the low-income rate for families with children rose from 43.0% to 44.3% between 1995 and 1999.

For husband-wife families, the City-wide low-income rate was 16.5% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate declined slightly from 22.2% to 19.9% between 1995 and 1999.

For lone-parent families, the City-wide average was 42.0% in 1999; in M3N, the rate rose from 53.3% to 55.2% between 1995 and 1999.

For non-family persons, the City-wide low-income average was 29.8% in 1998; in M3N, the rate rose marginally from 41.2% to 41.6% between 1995 and 1999.

For seniors, the City-wide low-income average was 12.2% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate increased from 17.6% in 1995 to 20.0% in 1999.

Total Income

Median total income of husband-wife families was \$39,600 in 1999 – 22.8% less than the City average of \$51,300. The real incomes of such families fell by slightly more than the City average between 1990 and 1999, but actually rose a little faster than average over the 1995-1999 recovery period (8.2% compared to 5.6%).

Median total incomes of lone-parent families fell by a bit less than average between 1990 and 1999 (down 12.7% compared to a drop of 17.8%), but their incomes did not rise between 1995 and 1999 quite as fast as did the incomes of lone-parent families in the City.

Median total incomes of non-family persons fell by more than the City average between 1990 and 1999, and they rose by less than the average over the recovery period.

Employment

In 1999, 80.5% of husband-wife families had some employment income, slightly more than the 82.3% City average. However, average employment income for such families was just \$42,100, well below the City average of \$73,700. The same pattern was true of non-family persons in this area.

Lone-parent families in this area were less likely than average to have employment income, and those working had earnings that were well below average.

Social Assistance

This community had very high, but falling, rates of receipt of social assistance. In 1999, 18.0% of husband-wife families received some assistance, well down from 26.0% in 1995, but still well above the City average of 8.4%.

In 1999, 51.3% of lone-parent families and 21.2% of non-family persons received social assistance, again well down from the 1995 levels and also well above the City average for these family types.

Meeting with Agency Workers from the Jane & Finch / Rexdale Areas Summary of a community consultation held August 1, 2001

As with all agencies with whom we met, those in the Jane and Finch / Rexdale areas conveyed a strong and vivid sense of facing huge and growing problems with shrinking resources. Particular emphasis was placed on inability to provide sufficient support for newcomers who need more help than in the past, huge problems of housing affordability, the growing marginalization of youth, growing violence in the home and on the streets, and increased risks for children in poverty.

Long-time agency workers described the area in the 1970s as one that was in the process of development. People brought with them a sense of hope as they were part of the creation of something new. While the community has always had a large proportion of newcomers, the 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic increase in diversity, to well over 70 ethnic-cultural groups, and a lot of change in the community from year to year. Settlement problems have increased greatly, and agencies have been forced to turn to some degree from a community development focus to responding to an avalanche of immediate needs. “We have gone backwards in terms of settlement – having to deal with extreme poverty in the community, youth who have nothing to do... we are back to basic needs of development”. The sense of hope for the future that once permeated the community during the 1970s has changed to one of pessimism and even desperation.

The increase in new immigrants and growing needs in the established community have been accompanied by shrinking resources from governments, leading to a certain sense of futility on the part of agencies. Some reported dealing with clients they had seen in the 1980s who continue to struggle with the same issues. Further complicating their efforts to address the needs of clients is lack of core funding which would give agencies the flexibility to deal with problems on the ground. “We need to reinvent the wheel to create special programs in order to have that funding”. “There is greater control over how funding is used coming from the federal level”. “Many of the issues we are facing is because the funding is coming for programs defined by persons not in the community [Ottawa or Queens Park].” “We have been challenged by trying to work with funders who don’t understand how we work”.

Children and Youth

Agencies indicated one of the most pressing needs in the community is lack of adequate services for children and youth. Particularly school age children and youth. The issues facing children are increasingly more severe and complex because they involve systemic issues – poverty, domestic violence, and cultural barriers. “Kids in the community are being impacted tremendously by it [family violence], not because the parents are bad parents but because of the stress they [the parents] are having to deal with”. Depth of child poverty has been increasing. “More kids don’t have basic school supplies at home... no books, pencils and paper, no place to do their work. This has resulted in an increasing demand on Boys and Girls Club to provide these basics”. With parents

working in 2 or 3 jobs to survive, many children were reported to be fending for themselves at home or on the streets.

There has been a large increase in the demand for services for children with special needs, such as disability and language and speech difficulties. “There has been a four or five times increase in the number of children with special needs (partly because of better identification) some have multiple-needs, and the waiting list gets longer and longer”. “People who have children with mental or other difficulties or disabilities are really stuck. There are no programs for them and little assistance or respite care” “If a mother has a multiple-needs child, she can’t work. There is huge stress and the whole household is in a mess. Demands of one child also draws the mother away from her other children”.

Much stress was laid on growing marginalization of young people in the community, particularly racialized minority youth. Youth violence in the community is increasing, in terms of both level and intensity. Some reported that excessive policing has exacerbated the alienation of minority youth. “The intensity of community policing is incredible ... every young man of colour I know has had some level of involvement with the police.” At the same time, many youth in the community are themselves victims of violence, and fear gangs. “Overall youth are more concerned with their own safety today than before... they don’t feel safe in their communities or schools”.

Practices in the school system can lead to further difficulties for youth. “There is a zero tolerance for violence in the schools.” The policy is to immediately remove them...then they are out on the streets and don’t have skills or face barriers to employment”. “There is a growing disparity between kids of colour and white kids being kicked out of school for violence... many youth don’t know what their rights are and some just admit to doing something when they may not have. The result is they lose a year of school, and this adds to the barriers already faced in finding employment”. There was reported to be little or no follow up of youth excluded from school.

Several agencies addressed barriers to employment encountered by youth. “The barriers to employment that youth face are incredible...barriers from employers have been increasing – there is a stigma associated with coming from the Jane/Finch area... many [youth] don’t like to give their address”. “There is a technology gap.. there are jobs requiring higher training but these kids don’t have access to computers. Many kids are dropping out.” “There is too much emphasis on university and college, and not enough on trades or apprenticeships... and the level of education needed for these [apprenticeships] has increased, shutting the door for many”. “There are no provincially funded youth employment programs left here.... the Ministry consultant has never been in the area.”

Many youth were described as becoming increasingly fatalistic in their outlook on life. “Many young women are thinking that they might as well as have their babies now since there is little hope for them in school (due to cost)”. Also an issue is the growing number of transient youth. While they may not be ‘literally’ homeless, they are ‘couch surfing’ or sharing very overcrowded rooms and basement apartments.

New Immigrants

Another area of growing need is with respect to services for new immigrants. The settlement process is reported to be much longer and more difficult. Although many newcomers are highly skilled and well educated, they are unable to find skilled jobs. “They come with high hopes, all shattered.” Some agencies described the obvious barrier that language can pose for many new immigrants. Many of those who do not have a strong understanding of English seek employment for which they don’t need strong language skills. The consequence for many is that they end up stuck in these jobs. “They take survival jobs for three years, and then they are ineligible for the (language training) programs.” “The employment opportunities for newcomers and services to help them are just appalling. We see a lot of newcomers, but there are a lot of restrictions tied to funding. We are struggling to help clients who have been here longer than 3 years”. Lack of funding for employment services to immigrants beyond language training and very basic job market orientation was cited as a major problem.

Access to even basic services is a major issue. “In the area we serve, there is a high proportion who don’t have OHIP, but at the same time we have had to close our medical practices [the provision of doctors and nurses]”; “There are a lot of people in the area who don’t have any ‘status’, and they don’t show up in the data. We can’t turn our backs on them, yet they are not eligible for many services.”

Social Assistance

The impact of cuts to social assistance combined with increased rents and user fees have been immense. “Ten years ago, people could survive. Now the welfare cheque *is* the rent cheque.” Many clients were described as feeling humiliated when dealing with the welfare system, leading to mounting frustration, anger and violence.

Changes to the social assistance system have created specific problems for agencies that are asked to accept ‘volunteers.’ While they recognize that this will help their clients out financially, it places the agencies in a position of having to be responsible for supporting and supervising their clients as volunteers. “The welfare program has pushed a lot of people to ask for any kind of volunteer work. If it is really meant to help them find employment, why don’t they get a skills assessment to better help them get back into employment? The clients are put into a situation to have to find some kind of volunteer work without knowing how this is going to help them or why this is being done”. The greater requirements of the Ontario Works program, which were described as “not very flexible”, add to the difficulties faced by many new immigrants.

Also raised was the issue of downloading of income support services to the City of Toronto. “They [the city] are counting on us to determine what people are eligible [in regards to assistance]. They are counting on us to do their work – they have admitted to not having the time – this is a big issue with welfare and also for housing services”.

Employment

Agencies pointed to the lack of job development programs, particularly for newcomers and youth. “Employment services are a fundamental problem – there are a lot of IT people who could be employed”. There is no effort to look at individuals on a case-by-case basis. Adding further difficulty to finding employment is the barrier of childcare. Due to the very long waiting list for subsidized spaces, it can become a difficult choice between finding work and struggling to pay for childcare, particularly when it is minimum wage employment. “The choice is to take a minimum wage job and see it all go to child care, or go on welfare.” “The result for many is to leave children in very poor care arrangements.

Housing

The crisis in housing affordability for tenants in the City of Toronto, has been well documented. Social assistance recipients and, to a somewhat lesser extent, low wage workers have seen already inadequate incomes shrink while rents climb, leading to an increased depth of poverty which is hidden in income statistics. In light of the increasing numbers of new immigrants and lone-parent families, housing t has become an even greater concern. Cuts to social assistance has had an impact for many in the Jane and Finch / Rexdale areas, leading many to have to choose between paying their rent or buying food. “Many families are in an overcrowded situation just in order to afford the rent and other cost of living. With housing it is not only newcomers who are having difficulty, but also those with mental health issues. The largest group we see is young females – and it has a chain effect upon other issues”.

Agencies described the growing trend to multiple families and single individuals sharing accommodations just so that they can cover the ever increasing cost of rent. Frequently, individuals are finding accommodation that is by the room with a shared bathroom and kitchen. These kinds of arrangements were described as being particularly conducive to incidents of violence. “We have clients sharing apartments... people who are forced to live together and end up in violent disputes as a result”.

Due to increasing rental costs and higher allowable rents for vacant units , evictions have risen, and are occurring more quickly. Newcomers are particularly vulnerable to eviction because of income and language difficulties. Agencies reported an impossible caseload, and huge difficulties fighting suitable housing for evicted clients in this community.

Violence

As noted, violence is a growing concern in the community. Of particular concern is an increase in the rate of domestic violence. Agencies cited this as stemming from systemic problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and difficulties in finding affordable housing. “I believe there is more conflict stemming from the frustration that people are facing. Once they develop legal and economic problems, there comes more conflict within families and between neighbours.” “Community conflicts have increased at the same time

we are facing funding cutbacks. We are hesitant to do outreach (to provide information on counselling services since we are already inundated with demands and have such limited funding”.

Poverty

The increase in the depth of poverty in the community has led to an increase in basic needs services, such as food banks (reported use up 500% since 1996), and increasing numbers relying on food programs for children in schools.

A number of agencies view poverty as something that is here and will continue to be here. “We try to help families so that it has less of an impact on the children. We can’t do much preventive work but we can help reduce the impact”. The higher levels of stress experienced by residents in the community has led growing numbers to seek help dealing with anxiety. The stress of living in deep and continuing poverty is viewed as preventing many from finding employment.

Summary

Key issues that are regarded as significant challenges for this community include the lack of affordable housing, youth violence and safety, violence both in the home and schools, and programs directed towards assisting new immigrants and the poor.

Agencies perceived the greatest challenge to be funding. Currently, demand for services hugely exceeds available funding, and many stressed there needs to be core funding that would be adequate and flexible enough to allow agencies to respond more creatively and appropriately to fast-growing needs.

Discussion Group with Women Community Residents:

We met with a total of nine women who varied in age. Two were seniors, while several others were mothers in their 30s. The majority had lived in the community for a decade or more, and most were from minority ethno-cultural groups. The group all participated in agency programs.

With respect to changes they had seen in the community over the past few years, many raised the problem of youth who appear to have “nothing to do”. “There’s a lot of them just hanging around the hallways and the streets ... there’s nothing for them to do.”

The group spoke of “more cops in the area” and more frequent incidents of violence, particularly gang and drug -related. “The neighbourhood is very dangerous.” “The kids can’t go downstairs without me or somebody.” That said, all felt that the outside perception of the community is worse than the reality, and the media are largely responsible for this misperception. “We get a bad rap.. it’s the newspapers that do it to

us.” Some in the group perceived the crime problem to be not pervasive, and the result of ‘negative’ isolated influences or outside people who come into the community.

There was widespread agreement that the community had worsened as a place to raise children, with the women citing the ongoing violence and lack of safety for children. Some felt, however, that doing well still depended largely on the backgrounds of individual children (family, school, and with whom they socialized).

All agreed that the community has an increasingly varied ethno-cultural mix, and that a significant part of the population is transient.

There was general agreement that there is reasonable access to supports and services for families with younger children in the community, perhaps with the exception of good recreational opportunities and school bus service. However, a large number believed there was not enough for youth. “After the kids are 7-8 years old, this isn’t a good area.” With respect to services for women, many noted the existence of support groups. These were perceived not always to be culturally sensitive. However, many expressed a strong attachment to the community centre in which we met and which provided services to them.

When asked about the best qualities of their community, several spoke about the ability to have contact with others from the same cultural background. Most also cited the community centre as a source of social support and other services. Many spoke of a strong attachment to their community despite problems and the stigma associated with being from the area.

The group raised the issue of poor housing conditions, including neighbours who have a lack of respect for the buildings in which they live, vandalism, poor building maintenance and long waits for needed repairs. (A large proportion of community residents and of the group live in social housing.) This was regarded as an embarrassment for many in the community, including children, and leads to a reluctance to socialize with friends and family who do not live in the immediate neighbourhood. “Friends won’t come to my place.” “Its embarrassing for kids to bring friends and for us to bring relatives home.”

When asked whether or not they believed the community was benefitting from the economic recovery that has been ongoing in Toronto, many suggested that they didn’t believe the average family was, given the rising cost of living, particularly rent and public transit passes, and flat wages. It was thought that those who were moving ahead were moving out and that many residents were stuck. “Its hard to move out even if you have a job ... you need first and last month’s rent and have to find something affordable.” Women in the group worked in low pay service jobs such as cleaning, but said they had neighbours who commuted outside the City to factory jobs. “Only landlords and banks are making more money in this community, taking others’ money”.

The need for better job training and educational opportunities to get better jobs was raised by several participants. Lack of affordable childcare and inflexible workplaces were seen

as a barrier to finding better employment. The Ontario Works program was viewed negatively. "Ontario works keeps you at the same level ... if you go above it , you are penalized...they take it away.". There was seen to be no point working if any increase in income was deducted from rent subsidies. One participant was more positive: "it helped me realize I could do something." Ineligibility for language programs after 3 years in Canada was seen as a major barrier.

Discussion Group with Youth:

We met with a total of sixteen youths, 13 males and 3 females, mainly between the ages of 15 and 19 years, mainly drawn from minority ethno cultural groups. The group was drawn from those involved in agency programs.

Overall, these youths held quite positive views of their community, pointing to the relative ease of making friends, the general friendliness of people , close friends in the immediate area, the availability of recreation space to play basketball, and activities they could participate in at the community centre and at the local mall. A majority of the group wanted to remain in the community. Many noted that theirs is like any other community in that there are "bad people" everywhere. They argued that many people in Toronto make judgements based on sensational media coverage without knowing what it is really like to live in the area.. "They need to come and live in Jane-Finch before they talk about living here.". "People get along... the area gets a bad rap."

They group did, however, see a need to improve the community in terms of reduced violence and theft (such as frequent bicycle theft). The girls and young women in the group expressed fears over safety, particularly at night, and the group as a whole expressed concerns over increasing incidents of street violence and gang activity "They're going too far now, doing really crazy stuff." "They should stop shooting innocent people.". Personal safety was seen as partly depending on being in a crowd, and not getting involved with drugs. They group also saw a need to increase the number of recreational facilities -"there's not enough playgrounds' and a need to "clean up the community" and improve housing.

When asked about their relationship with the police in the area, several youths spoke of feeling like they were under constant surveillance. "The cops slow down". "They follow you around." "They bother you." A few believed they were targeted by police on account of their race. At the local shopping malls, youths spoke of security guards keeping a close watch on them, assuming they might steal merely because they were minority youths.

When the discussion turned to their schools and teachers, several youths indicated that there was a pretty high turnover in the teaching staff. When asked why this might be the case, some perceived the teachers as being "afraid' or "scared" perhaps for their own safety, or perhaps due to having done something wrong towards a student. "Some of them are racists." Others, however, spoke much more positively about their teachers,

particularly those that made an effort to do extra curricular things, or those who made an effort to speak to kids about what is troubling them.

When asked what would make for a better community, in addition to the reduction of crime and gang activity in the area, the group expressed a strong desire for opportunities to voice their opinions on community issues.

A statistical profile of Agincourt (FSA M1V):

This area now has a low median income and a much higher-than-average low-income rate for husband-wife families and for seniors. Incomes were very hard hit in the 1990 to 1995 recession period, even compared to the City average, and they have since staged only a very limited recovery. This is a community with many working-poor families and below-average receipt of social assistance benefits.

Population

The proportion of children aged 14 and under in 1999 was comparable to the City average (18.5% compared to 18.0%), but it has been falling in this community (down from 22.3% in 1990).

The proportion of seniors in 1999 was relatively low (9.9% compared to a City average of 13.8%), but is rising fast (up from 4.8% in 1990).

The proportion of both lone-parent families and non-family persons was relatively low in this area. In 1999, 62.8% of households were husband-wife families, compared to a City-wide average of 47.7%.

Lone-parent families made up 9.2% of families, compared to a City average of 11.1%. But this is well up from 7.4% in 1990. The proportion of non-family persons was low compared to the City average, and it was falling.

Low-income Rates

Low income is defined as having an income less than half the median (or midpoint) of a family of the same size. The City-wide average for all family types was 25.1% in 1999, up from 23.8% in 1995.

The City-wide low-income rate for children averaged 32.3% in 1999. In M1V, the low-income rate for families with children rose marginally from 28.1% to 28.5% between 1995 and 1999.

For husband-wife families, the City-wide low-income rate was 16.5% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate declined slightly from 27.6% to 25.5% between 1995 and 1999.

For lone-parent families, the City-wide average was 42.0% in 1999; in M1V, the rate rose from 35.7% to 39.7% between 1995 and 1999.

For non-family persons, the City-wide low-income average was 29.8% in 1998; in M1V, the rate rose from 45.6% to 48.0% between 1995 and 1999.

For seniors, the City-wide low-income average was 12.2% in 1999; in this FSA, the rate increased from 39.5% in 1995 to 40.3% in 1999.

Total Income

The median total income of husband-wife families in 1999 was \$42,300, compared to a City average of \$51,300 (or 17.5% less). Between 1990 and 1999, real median income for this family type fell much more than did the City average (down 31.1% compared to a drop of 13.05%), and it rose by less than the City average between 1995 and 1999 (4.4% compared to 5.6%). This pattern of falling well behind was true of all family types in this area.

Employment

In 1999, 82.6% of all husband-wife families had employment income, in line with the City average. However, average employment income was \$53,500 in 1999, well below the City average of \$73,700. As with total incomes, employment income fell sharply in the recession, and rose slowly in the recovery.

Earnings of lone-parent families were somewhat above the City average in 1999, and at 73%, a slightly higher-than-average proportion of such families had some employment earnings in 1999. Non-family persons in this community had well-below-average earnings in 1999, and they were somewhat less likely than average to have earnings from employment.

Social Assistance

The proportion of husband-wife families in this area receiving social assistance was 6.1% in 1999, below the City average of 8.4%. The same was true of lone-parent families and non-family persons.

In 1998, 10% of all households received social assistance benefits, well below the City-wide average of 15%. This was down from 12% in 1995.

Meeting with Agency Workers from the Agincourt Area Summary of a community consultation held August 2, 2001

To an even greater degree than agencies from other areas in the city, those in Agincourt conveyed a strong sense of facing huge and growing problems with grossly inadequate

resources. The community was described as one that had been quite middle-class but has changed rapidly in the 1990s as a major influx of immigrants and refugees from Mainland China, South East Asia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and elsewhere has joined the more established Chinese community. Over the past 10 years, there has been a dramatic increase in diversity in the community, and the settlement process has become much more difficult. There is an overwhelming demand for services for newcomers, most notably language training and services that will assist entry into the labour market. Difficulties in settlement have led to growing problems in the community such as family violence and marginalized youth. It was believed that “the upturn didn’t touch the poor” in this community.

The community is ill equipped to deal with these problems because the agency infrastructure is thin and stretched to the limits. For example, Agincourt Community Services has just 6 staff to run a multi-service agency. While stressing just how limited resources are compared to other low-income parts of the City such as Downtown, agencies stressed that they were not calling for diversions from other areas with pressing needs.

Problems in this community also tend to be hidden. Sometimes many families share a single family dwelling in a middle-income area. Many middle-income people continue to live here and nearby with few links to newcomers. “Many aren’t aware of the difficulties their neighbours are going through, including extreme poverty and hunger. There is a huge denial of these problems in the community (and) denial on the part of many politicians”. “We are becoming a very cloistered society.” “We live in enclaves that don’t know one another at all.” “People are going to bed hungry here in Third World conditions, and no one knows.” We provide a food program to children and sometimes to their parents. The program is busting at the seams, and yet there is the perception that there is no (hunger) problem in the area.”

Problems Confronting Agencies

As elsewhere, agencies are frustrated by increased bureaucracy around funding. “The only way you can get money is through grants – but grant writing is extraordinarily complex, and requires so much time, and then sometimes you don’t get the grant after investing so much into the process.” Project based parameters are seen as excessively narrow, hindering needed flexibility on the ground. “Everything is piecemeal.” One director reported that she had to work more or less full-time filling out grant applications to keep her 5 staff employed, and that required evaluations are out of proportion to available resources. More staff are needed, not just to deliver programs but also to train others. A major problem is limited resources to recruit staff knowledgeable of and linked to the diverse ethno-cultural communities in Agincourt.

“It is appalling that we have so little planning and so few resources. This is a city that worked but it’s collapsing and I am not sure we will be able to recover.”

New Immigrants

Agencies reported that people who arrived 10 years ago were wealthier “There wasn’t the need then like there is now.” This partly reflects increased flows of non-English speaking refugees from war torn countries such as Sri Lanka, and generally lower levels of language skills. The poorer job market has also meant that many new immigrants quickly exhaust resources on arrival.

There was a strong view that many immigrants had been misled in their home countries about the opportunities in Canada. “The people are coming from all over, and many are the cream of the crop from their countries. The key problem they are facing when they come here is employment. I don’t know whether or not the government is giving them the wrong idea of what they will face once they are here.”

Agencies stressed the acute social problems flowing from a sense of personal failure among many well educated male new immigrants who have “burnt their bridges” at home and ended up stuck in dead end jobs in Canada. “People are mentally dying.” “It’s not just income but also a matter of social status.” “They (professionals) sell everything to come here, and end up as factory labourers. Some take it out on their families.” “They go through the heartbreak of giving all of their money to an agent, find that even if they are professionals they can’t work. There’s no housing and they have to live sharing with others.”

Often, new immigrants exhaust resources while learning the language. “They expect to be able to get a job once they arrive in Canada but they can’t because they don’t have the language skills yet.” Those who do find work get stuck in jobs which leave them too exhausted to go language classes at the end of the day.

While many workers from the area were reported to be working in “terrible conditions” in near minimum wage factory jobs, others were said to have found better paid industrial jobs in the GTA. Many women, however, work in “sweatshops” or as very poorly paid home based garment workers “fighting for piecework.”

It was stressed that many employers need to be informed that many recent immigrants do have good skills and qualifications, as well as practical experience in their countries of origin. “I have a lot of clients with good skills and good experience.”

Agency workers felt that while jobs were the key to settlement and to the resolution of many other problems (“jobs are the key”; “we have to treat the cause (of family and community level problems)- lack of proper jobs”), most were not optimistic that employment issues would be easily or quickly resolved.

The need for individualized solutions, going beyond basic language training and job search assistance, was stressed. As an example, one agency worker reported that she had been able to find training for a woman doctor from China who had been working in a donut shop, allowing her to eventually get a job as a lab technician.

Housing

Newcomers face particularly severe housing issues because of low income often combined with large families. Members of the Tamil community are often living in an extended family environment, partly because of efforts to get family out of war torn areas even when those who have already arrived are not yet well established. Multiple family occupancies of apartments and houses are common to cut rental costs, and cases of 6-7 people living together in a small apartment are not uncommon. Many people in large homes rent out rooms where some families will live because rents are so high.

“Housing is a big issue for so many.” Rents in the area run at \$900- \$1200 per month for a 2 bedroom apartment and it is not uncommon for 75-90% of income to be spent on rent. “Waiting lists (for subsidized housing) are just incredible: 5 to 9 years for a family.” “People come to us looking for help with subsidized housing, and there is a growing problem with evictions.” Tenants are quickly evicted if they fall just a day or two behind in rent, and many then end up in shelters.

Housing is also a major issue for the growing numbers of single mothers in the area, and psychiatric patients. The latter are stigmatized. If evicted, people have to move downtown where the shelters are located. The issue in Agincourt itself is hidden homelessness in the form of very overcrowded apartments and rooms. “There has been a big increase in invisible homelessness. It is not like downtown where you see it.”

Children and Youth

“The plight of children and youth here is unbelievable. Its as though society just doesn’t give a damn. We treat them abominably.”

One participant spoke of retiring early from teaching because she found it increasingly difficult to deal with the growing numbers of children who had multiple problems tied in part to the difficulties their families are having once they have immigrated. She reported that in the school system, there is a “blind eye” approach to kids with problems. “They either don’t have the time to do anything, or if you ask, you have to do something.” Then it is found that there are few links from the school to resources in the community. There is “a total breakdown in terms of support.”

Agencies saw a major need for programs for youth and places for youth to go. Youth need space for computer and reading programs, and facilities for organized sports which build self-esteem, independence and a positive outlook. Lack of recreation and programs for young people are seen as one source of growing problems with gangs and street violence in the community. “We are going to pay a terrible price for these alienated youth. Many feel they are being discriminated against because of their colour. (There is) the perception that nobody will listen to them.” “The kids just hang out after school getting into trouble.”

The \$25 dollar charge for City recreation programs is a major barrier to youth recreation, though there are some subsidies and people can get free access to limited programs. Transportation costs are another barrier. “Many kids don’t even have the money to take the TTC.” “We have a lot of fine athletic facilities in the schools” but no means for agencies to access them for after school hours programs. As in other areas, agencies reported that it was no longer possible to rent affordable space for programs for youth in strip malls. (One agency has to pay \$2000 per month for a small room in a mall.) There are hardly any youth centres like that in Scarborough Town Centre.

“There has been a focus on seniors in the Agincourt area but at the expense of youth.” One spoke of a centre previously used only by seniors now extending hours to allow for evening programs for youth as a positive departure.

“Off the radar in this area are young girls who have higher STD rates than the rest of Toronto and high pregnancy rates. Many have been suicidal.”

Safety and Policing in the Community

Agencies reported a growing perception that it is not safe to walk the streets. There have been recent reports of rapes in the area, and drive by shootings related to gang activity. There is a lot more drug activity and theft, and participants who live in the area say they feel much less safe than ten years ago. The police response to calls has sometimes been “why don’t you just move?”

One policing problem lies in the fact that 42 Division is located in other end of Scarborough and response times can be very long. There are only very limited programs to link the police with youth in the community, and a lot of tension between minority youth and the police. One (black) agency participant reported that her son would no longer drive his sister’s sports car because he had been pulled over so frequently without cause by the police.

The Experiences of Women

We were told that there is “a lot of isolation” of immigrant women within some communities. Men want the women to stay in, and “don’t want them to interact with others in the community.” Domestic violence was seen as a major issue. On top of spousal abuse of women “we have seen elder abuse and children who see it in the home (and) perpetuate the poor treatment of women in how they deal with their mothers.” Women tend to bear much of the burden of inter-generational cultural conflict.

Problems in dealing with these issues include the fact that information on services is not often available in the clients language, and that agency workers themselves are not always familiar with other cultures. One participant spoke of dealing with immigrant women and children and how it was difficult to be sensitive to their cultural and background when she (and others in the education system) know nothing or very little about immigrant groups. “How can you help people if you know nothing about them?”

Agencies reported the pressing need for more resources for growing numbers of young women single-parents. Affordable accommodation is a pressing need. There is also a large unmet need for counselling for women and their children coming out of abusive relationships. There is “no structured safety net for women who leave (abusive relationships.)”

Discussion Group with Mixed Participants:

The group of low-income residents from Agincourt and North West Scarborough consisted mainly of women (8 of the group of 10) and included several newcomers along with others who had lived in the community over a long period of time.

Overall Perceptions

The group had a positive overall sense of their community, in large part because of knowledge of and appreciation for programs being delivered by agencies. “I just got into Metro Housing and in my area there is a lot of help available” (food for kids, groceries for parents in need, clothing drives). “People are inviting me to church, there is outreach making residents aware of supports in the community.” “Programs help bring people together.” However, it was mentioned that services might be more readily available to residents of public housing, and some thought that people had to take responsibility for seeking out needed services. There was general agreement that good recreational services were available in the community, particularly through the Agincourt Community Centre, but concern was expressed over possible pool closings. As in other areas, there was seen to be much more available for younger children than for youth. North West Scarborough was seen as an area with good opportunities for jobs, and the great majority of the group expressed no desire to move.

Crime and Violence

One major community level concern was with increased violence. “There wasn’t so much violence before.” “It was safe. Now I’m afraid to go out. I don’t go out.” “Five years ago it wasn’t so bad.” “There are many problems – you have to take precautions.” As with other low-income areas, there was also a perception that problems of crime and violence were much more widespread than media coverage would tend to suggest.

Youth

Crime and violence were linked to problems facing youth in the area. The group thought that were far too few programs for youth who end up “just hanging about and getting into fights”. “The kids need to do something, be off the streets.” “They are just idling ... they need to get into some kind of activity.” “They should organize something for the kids to get into, a camp or something ... at every public school they should have a (summer) day camp.”

The need for jobs for youth was cited also. “The kids have to hustle because there are no jobs. If they can’t get it one way, they’ll get it another.”

Poverty, Social Assistance and Barriers to Employment

When asked if the community was benefiting from the recovery, discussion turned to the continuing problems of those on low incomes. As in our other sessions, social assistance was seen as very difficult to escape, even for those who are working. All those in the group receiving social assistance wanted to work, and almost all had some paid work.

One woman reported working close to full-time hours most of the time (in child care), but still not making enough to get off assistance. She faces a complex set of calculations in that she has to work at least 25 hours per week to retain subsidized day care, has her earnings clawed back once she works more than a certain number of hours, but cannot get enough guaranteed hours at a high enough wage to leave social assistance. Another woman reported that her social assistance cheque leaves her with just \$250 per month after rent. She gets an extra \$100 by working, but almost all the extra is swallowed by the cost of a Metropass, leaving her nothing for the additional child care costs of working. Working more hours is futile unless the hours are stable.

Those on social assistance reported major problems finding the kind of jobs needed to leave the system, even though they do actively participate in the paid work force. “I can get jobs easily, but I can’t get off the system.” “There are no secure jobs.” “You’re either falling into a bucket, or trying to crawl out.” “It’s like you’re in a bag and you can’t get out.” “A job at MacDonald’s isn’t going to get us off the system. It’s not that it’s degrading. It’s just that \$7 per hour just isn’t enough if you have kids.”

Newcomers reported not being able to find steady work at all. For example, a qualified veterinarian doctor from Egypt had, to date, only been able to find 3 days work per week as a dishwasher and salad maker in a restaurant. Lack of language skills, lack of Canadian experience and lack of formal education (including among those born in Canada) were seen as the major barriers to finding better jobs. “They don’t look at the person as a whole, they only look for a piece of paper.” “They demand Canadian experience, but won’t give us a chance to get it.” Newcomers also reported difficulties obtaining useful job related information. “There’s nowhere to go for information on how to get an education.”

The group as a whole felt the area was lacking in employment services, and that they and others in the community would benefit if more personalized employment planning services were available. “I need someone to help me get off assistance.” One participant reported the great lengths to which she had gone to have a learning disability identified, and the fact she had since been unable to obtain the needed help. “I need to learn how to read and write. Nobody cares. I can’t get help.”

Another barrier to getting job training is lack of child care. Few if any English as a Second Language programs have day care. “I can’t just leave my kid in a basement.”

Working in low pay, long hours jobs allows for bare survival, but blocks moving ahead. A woman going to language classes reported that her (qualified pharmacist) husband works 12 hour days, 6 days per week in a bakery for \$7 per hour. Rent of \$1600 per month for a house for their family of 3 kids leaves them with little disposable income. "He wants to study (as well) but he is too tired to study."

The group as a whole reported major and growing problems living on very low incomes, particularly given high and rising rents and transit costs. "Housing is really tough." One recently arrived woman told us "I'm paying \$600 per month for a basement. There's nothing left." The failure of the system to get maintenance payments from absent fathers was seen as another source of low incomes.

Discussion Group with Seniors:

A second discussion group was held with a group of 13 seniors from various cultural backgrounds, at a senior centre in Northern Scarborough. The group all participated in agency programs at the senior centre. Some participants were accompanied by interpreters.

There was widespread agreement among the group that conditions in the community have deteriorated over the past few years. "Those who are lower economically are getting lower because of the (social assistance) cuts in 1995." "Rents are increasing while incomes are going down." "Landlords are evicting more people and do not keep up with the maintenance, and newcomers are afraid to fight back or complain." One participant commented that seniors who live with extended families sometimes have to choose between spending their pension income on medication that is not covered under OHIP (such as vitamins), or buying food for their family. "Even living/surviving on a widow's pension is not enough". The group also noted that the community was not as safe as it used to be.

When asked about the accessibility of services in their community, several felt that it was difficult for seniors who were not proficient in English, and those with physical disabilities to access services. Most also spoke of the cost of transportation as a barrier to accessing services. One participant, an elderly woman from Somalia, commented that she couldn't take advantage of the services provided to seniors because she couldn't afford public transportation. As a result, she stayed at home most of the time, and had to rely on family members for transportation. This sense of isolation was also felt by the other Somali seniors in the group. The women found themselves housebound and isolated, especially in the winter, because of their inability to afford the cost of transportation.

Another concern for many participants was the cutbacks to homecare/personal care services. Many felt that the amount of homecare they received was inadequate. A participant, whose husband needed homecare, noted that her homecare worker was late on several occasions because she had so many clients. "I still have to work, and my

husband needs all-day care...the homecare worker showed up late so many times. Now my husband only gets one hour of homecare a week, so I had to put him into a day program and that's very expensive." An interpreter, who was also the daughter of one of the participants reported that her mother also does not receive enough homecare/personal care. About two months ago, the personal care that her mother received was cut from 15 hours per week to only 6 hours per week. This women who also suffers from hip problems, is her mother's primary caregiver. With the cut in person care/homecare hours, and with her own health problems, she is finding it increasingly difficult to care for her mother.

**List of Participating Agencies
Thorncliffe Park/Flemingdon Neighbourhoods
July 11, 2001**

ORGANIZATION
Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office
Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office
Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office
Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office
Alternatives: East York Mental Health Counselling Services Agency
Thorncliffe Park Public School
East York Access Centre for Community Services
East York Access Centre for Community Services
Japanese Social Services Centre
Flemingdon Neighbourhood Services
Community Care East York
Community Care East York
E.P. Taylor Place Community Services
Flemingdon Community Legal Services
Friends and Advocates Centre North York
Ontario March of Dimes

**Downtown East Neighbourhood
July 12, 2001**

ORGANIZATION
Homes First Society
Homes First Society
Central Toronto Community Health Centres - Shout Clinic
Neighbourhood Legal Services
Native Women's Resource Centre
Open Door Centre
Toronto Christian Resource Centre
Jessie's Centre for Teenagers
Dixon Hall
South East Asian Services Centre
Toronto Kiwanis Boys & Girls Clubs – Gerrard Kiw
Fred Victor Centre
South Riverdale Community Health Centre
All Saints Church Community Centre
Yonge Street Mission

Jane & Finch/Rexdale
August 1, 2001

ORGANIZATION
Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre
Braeburn Neighbourhood Place
Delta Child Care Network
Elsbeth Heyworth Centre for Women
Jane/Finch Community Legal Services
Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services – Daystorm Family Resource Centre
Rexdale Community Legal Clinic
Northwood Neighbourhood Services
YMCA of Greater Toronto – Employment & Community Services
COSTI Immigrant Services – Centre for Foreign Trained Professionals and Tradespeople
Albion Neighbourhood Services
Black Creek Community Health Centre
Conflict Mediation Services of Downsview

Agincourt
August 2, 2001

ORGANIZATION
South Asian Family Support Services
Caring Community Connections of Toronto
Goodwill, Scarborough North Community Employment Centre
Goodwill, Scarborough North Community Employment Centre
Stephen Leacock Community Centre
The Community Breakfast Club
West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre – Scarborough Crossroads Family Resource Centre
West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre – Neighbours East Family Resource Program
Agincourt Community Services Association
Agincourt Community Services Association
Toronto Public Health
Toronto Public Health
Toronto Public Library
Riverdale Immigrant Women’s Centre
Hong Fook Mental Health Service