



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

**Policy Brief:
The Urban Age of Aging -
Addressing the Multidimensional Barriers of Older
Toronto Residents**

By Mallory Lowes

Social Connectedness Fellow 2019

Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness

www.socialconnectedness.org

August 2019

ISSUE & EVIDENCE

Canada's aging population is in a triumphant state of continuous growth. The number of people over the age of 65 is the highest it has ever been, and will only continue to rise.¹ By 2030, it is projected that the age group of 65 and older will account for nearly a quarter of the total Canadian population.² As the population begins to shift toward an aging demographic, resources and services must be in place to efficiently and appropriately embrace this dominant change. To do so, it is crucial to understand the current livelihood challenges of the older population and address them.

In the dense and diverse city of Toronto, each individual experiences unique barriers that impede the quality of their life. Though unique, many older people experience similar, intersecting challenges that impact the overall livelihood of the older Toronto population. Three of these intersecting challenges include multidimensional poverty, food insecurity, and social isolation.

Multidimensional poverty

Approximately 17 percent of Toronto seniors are low-income, based on the low-income measure, after tax.³ An economic report from the Broadbent Institute indicates that Canadians are increasingly less prepared for retirement due to minimal personal savings and a trend of lower employment pension coverage.⁴ Beyond retirement savings, seniors who are willing and

¹ Bohnert, Nora, Jonathon Chagnon, and Patrice Dion. 2017. "Population Projections for Canada (2013 to 2063), Provinces and Territories (2013 to 2038)." Statistics Canada.

² Ibid.

³ Statistics Canada. 2017. *Toronto, C [Census subdivision], Ontario and Ontario [Province] (table). Census Profile. 2016 Census.* Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001.

⁴ Shillington, R. 2016. "An Analysis of the Economic Circumstances of Canadian Seniors." The Broadbent Institute.

healthy enough to work have extreme difficulty finding a job.⁵ Furthermore, gentrification is rampantly taking over the city, with new luxury developments and affluent businesses replacing what was once affordable housing and reasonable commercial spaces.⁶ Older residents have reported that they have had to move to different neighbourhoods due to rent increases in their area.⁷ Thus, as a result of unstable income, and the unaffordability of housing and goods, many seniors in Toronto are either at risk of or are currently experiencing poverty.

Food insecurity

As people age, access to food and obtaining adequate nutrition can be challenging. Lower income, lack of transportation, impaired mobility and dexterity, decreased appetite, declining oral health and loneliness are only a select few factors that negatively impact an older person's diet.⁸ Proper nutrition is crucial for seniors to lead active lives and feel healthy enough to engage in social activities. In Toronto, many older adults rely on drop-in centres and free food programs to obtain a meal.⁹ However, older individuals who struggle with mobility impairments or chronic health conditions have trouble accessing these options. Without proper nutrition, seniors are at risk of becoming frail and developing debilitating health conditions.

Social Isolation

Older individuals are at high risk of being socially isolated due to their tendency to live alone, living with health and mobility issues, the experience of losing loved ones, and financial

⁵ Legarde, Andrea. 2019. Personal interview.

⁶ Barrington-Bush, Liam. 2018. "Toronto's Many Faces of Gentrification." NOW Magazine.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ramage-Morin, P., Gilmour, H., and Rotermann, M. 2017. "Nutritional Risk, Hospitalization and Mortality among Community-dwelling Canadians Aged 65 or Older." Statistics Canada

⁹ Briggs, Alfred. 2019. Personal interview.

struggles.¹⁰ Seniors with the highest risk of social isolation include older immigrants, minority ethnic groups and those who have low income, attributable to language barriers, literacy and discrimination.¹¹ Being a multicultural hub, Toronto consists of numerous newcomer seniors and ethnic minority groups, resulting in high rates of social isolation among this demographic.

STAKEHOLDERS

Older people themselves are the most significantly impacted in the demographic shift of a growing aging population. Though aging should be viewed as more of a triumph than an issue, inadequate resources and services present challenges to living a dignified life in old age. Thus, in Toronto, the older residents will be the most heavily affected by insufficient attendance to aging needs.

In turn, **government policy makers, city officials, community organizations** and **local businesses** have the power to create meaningful policies and programs that benefit aging Toronto residents. **The Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility** currently offers senior-specific programs and health information, and thus have the capacity to distribute beneficial materials and develop aging-related policies. However, recent budget cuts (for instance, to Legal Aid) also expose how the provincial government poses a barrier to positive change.

The City of Toronto Council recently approved the Toronto Seniors Strategy 2.0, showing the power of cities and municipalities in making impactful decisions for their aging community. It is now the City Council's responsibility to ensure that the strategy is implemented and continuously adapts to changing needs.

¹⁰ Sibley, J., Thompson, H. and Edwardh, J. 2016. *Seniors: Loneliness and Social Isolation*. Community Development Halton.

¹¹ Ibid.

Community organizations, in their hands-on service delivery, can either create new programs or alter existing ones to address the barriers faced by older Toronto residents. There are various community-based seniors' programs already in place, therefore civil society organizations can build upon current initiatives. Furthermore, **local businesses** have a role in addressing issues faced by Toronto seniors by providing accessible and affordable goods and services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Partnerships between community food organizations and seniors' housing

Toronto Community Housing recently proposed to have a newly city-owned seniors' housing corporation, placing more responsibility for seniors' housing on the City of Toronto.¹² This new corporation can create partnerships between the seniors' housing complexes and community food organizations in the neighbourhood to provide accessible transportation to nutritious food programs. Having reliable transportation between seniors' housing and community food organizations motivates residents of the complex to take part in food programs. Thus, low-income seniors in Toronto would be provided with accessible nutritious food and social connection with fellow program users, contributing to long-lasting health benefits.

Providing ESL lessons in the community

As older immigrants and ethnic minority groups are at high risk of experiencing social isolation as a result of language barriers, providing accessible English as a Second Language

¹² City of Toronto. 2019. "Implementing Tenants First - A New Seniors Housing Corporation and Proposed Changes to Toronto Community Housing Corporation's Governance."

(ESL) opportunities is critical. To promote the usage of ESL services among the elderly, language classes can be held within common areas where older individuals congregate (seniors' complexes, public parks, community organizations).

These classes can be taught by fellow older Toronto residents who are aware of the needs of older individuals in the city. Providing accessible language lessons can empower older newcomers to navigate government income services, participate in social activities and understand nutritional guidelines. Ultimately, easy to access English language lessons would provide older immigrants with confidence to engage within their Toronto community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alfred Briggs (Resident of Toronto), interviewed by Mallory Lowes, Toronto, ON, July 2019.
- Andrea Legarde (Resident of Toronto), interviewed by Mallory Lowes, Toronto, ON, July 2019.
- Barrington-Bush, Liam. "Toronto's Many Faces of Gentrification." NOW Magazine, October 17, 2018. <https://nowtoronto.com/news/gentrification-toronto-parkdale/>.
- Bohnert, Nora, Jonathon Chagnon, and Patrice Dion. "Population Projections for Canada (2013 to 2063), Provinces and Territories (2013 to 2038)." Statistics Canada. April 28, 2017. Accessed July 15, 2019. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-520-x/91-520-x2014001-eng.htm>
- City of Toronto. "Implementing Tenants First - A New Seniors Housing Corporation and Proposed Changes to Toronto Community Housing Corporation's Governance." Official City of Toronto Website. July 2019. Accessed July 20, 2019. <http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.EX7.1>.
- Ramage-Morin, Pamela, Heather Gilmour, and Michelle Rotermann. "Nutritional Risk, Hospitalization and Mortality among Community-dwelling Canadians Aged 65 or Older." Statistics Canada. September 20, 2017. Accessed June 24, 2019. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2017009/article/54856-eng.htm>.
- Shillington, Richard. *An Analysis of the Economic Circumstances of Canadian Seniors*. Report. The Broadbent Institute, 2016. 1-23. https://www.broadbentinstitute.ca/an_analysis_of_the_economic_circumstances_of_canadian_seniors
- Sibley, Jessica, Heather Thompson, and Joey Edwardh. *Seniors: Loneliness and Social Isolation*. Report. Community Development Halton. Burlington, ON: Community Development Halton, 2016. 1-24. <https://cdhalton.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Seniors-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation.pdf>.
- Statistics Canada. "Census Profile, 2016 Census: Toronto, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Toronto, Census Division [Census Division], Ontario." Statistics Canada. Government of Canada, 2019. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>.