



# Community Voices

A study into what residents value in Toronto's inner suburbs

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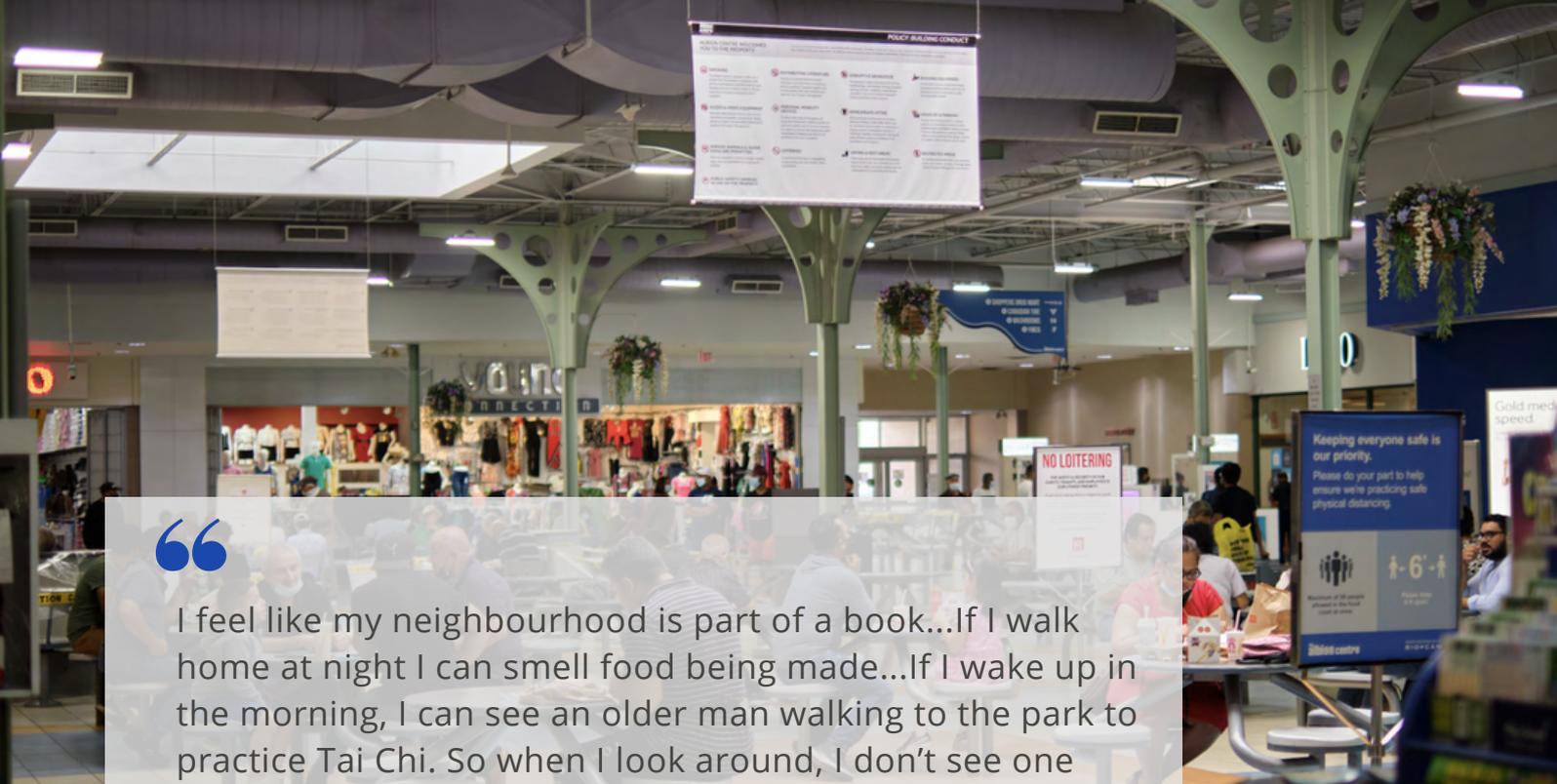


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“

I feel like my neighbourhood is part of a book...If I walk home at night I can smell food being made...If I wake up in the morning, I can see an older man walking to the park to practice Tai Chi. So when I look around, I don't see one thing, I see many different things

—Interviewee

## Executive Summary

In recent decades, the City of Toronto has experienced a deepening socio-economic divide between a prosperous core and its so-called ‘inner suburbs.’ United Way Toronto’s 2001 ‘Poverty by Postal Code’ report and the subsequent official designation of ‘Priority Neighbourhoods’ in 2005 helped focus policy-makers’ attention on these post-war neighbourhoods. They highlighted the fact that these communities faced compounding dynamics of lower income levels, poor access to rapid transit, and lower levels of city services.

Despite these issues the reality is that these neighbourhoods on the City’s periphery are dynamic communities. They are filled with diverse, creative, and ambitious persons from across the globe. But a legacy of underinvestment has left many of these areas lacking neighbourhood elements which are key social determinants of health. While policy makers have produced many strategies and interventions to support inner-suburban communities, and numerous research studies have been undertaken, we believe Community Voices demonstrates new and innovative techniques for exploring the variety of opinions and views of residents.

Covering five inner-suburban neighbourhoods, all with indicators of lower socio-economic status (and two upper income control neighbourhoods), we examined what residents value in their neighbourhoods, the factors that drove their preferences, and their views on local government. Throughout we consider how local preferences connect to policies that improve the social determinants of health.

Our findings are grounded in a **door-to-door survey that was administered to a random sample of 688 households, along with qualitative interviews with 24 residents** who had taken the survey. Our research focused on a cluster of neighbourhoods in the East and West ends of Toronto: Dorset Park, Eglinton East, Cliffcrest, Jamestown-Mount Olive, Elms-Old Rexdale, Thistletown, and Edenbridge.

From this data, which reflected much of the diversity found within Toronto’s inner-suburbs, we identify a series of critical neighbourhood issues that the majority of residents prioritised. These priorities included: feeling **safe**, having good options for **transportation and mobility** and access to a variety of high quality **neighbourhood services and amenities**. We also identified two other secondary priority areas: living in diverse communities and quality and affordable housing. All of these areas are clearly connected to multiple social determinants of health.

Throughout our research, it was evident that residents hold a great diversity of views about their city and communities. This diversity moreover does not map directly to a single demographic characteristic, such as race or income level. Instead, our survey revealed **five clusters of respondents**, composed of individuals who shared multiple demographic characteristics aligned with similar responses to questions around neighbourhood preference and opinions about government and institutions. These clusters are:



Community Voices also provides insights into residents’ views about government and their confidence in key societal institutions. Residents tended to conceptualise government at the neighbourhood level not through the lens of political ideology but as a **provider of services and maintenance**. They also showed **low levels of confidence in the municipal government**. Many residents felt their local leaders needed to be more present in person and that **underinvestment in their communities may have been driven by stigma and stereotypes**.



Learn more about the five clusters of respondents via the Five types of Toronto inner suburban residents section.

# Overview of Community Voices

## Key Points:

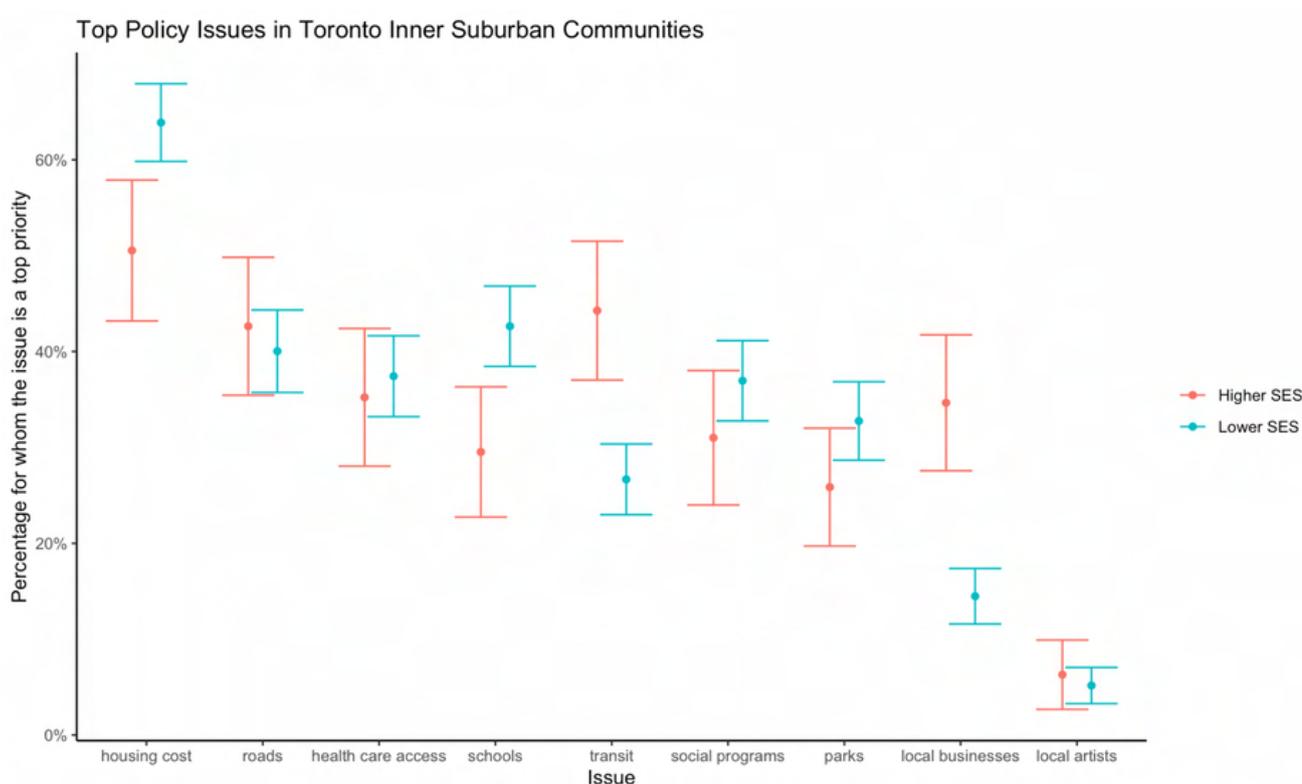
- Community Voices is a partnership between the Wellesley Institute and the University of Toronto School of Cities
- Community Voices seeks to incorporate the voices and local priorities of Toronto's inner-suburban communities into broader policy discussions about how to improve the health and vitality of their neighbourhoods
- We conducted an innovative door-to-door random sample survey of seven neighbourhoods, and qualitative interviews with participants from each neighbourhood
- Residents shared three core priorities: safety, transportation & mobility, and local services & amenities
- Residents' views of the government showed little concern with political ideology, and much greater concern with tangible results, such as infrastructure maintenance, improvements in the public realm, and personal engagement of leaders
- We identified five 'clusters' of residents with similar survey responses and demographic qualities

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on residents of Toronto's inner-suburban neighbourhoods has highlighted the importance of improving the social determinants of health within these vibrant and diverse communities. Rich scholarly and policy research has discussed how to support these post-WW2 neighbourhoods; yet rarely has such work been grounded in the engagement of residents from these communities.

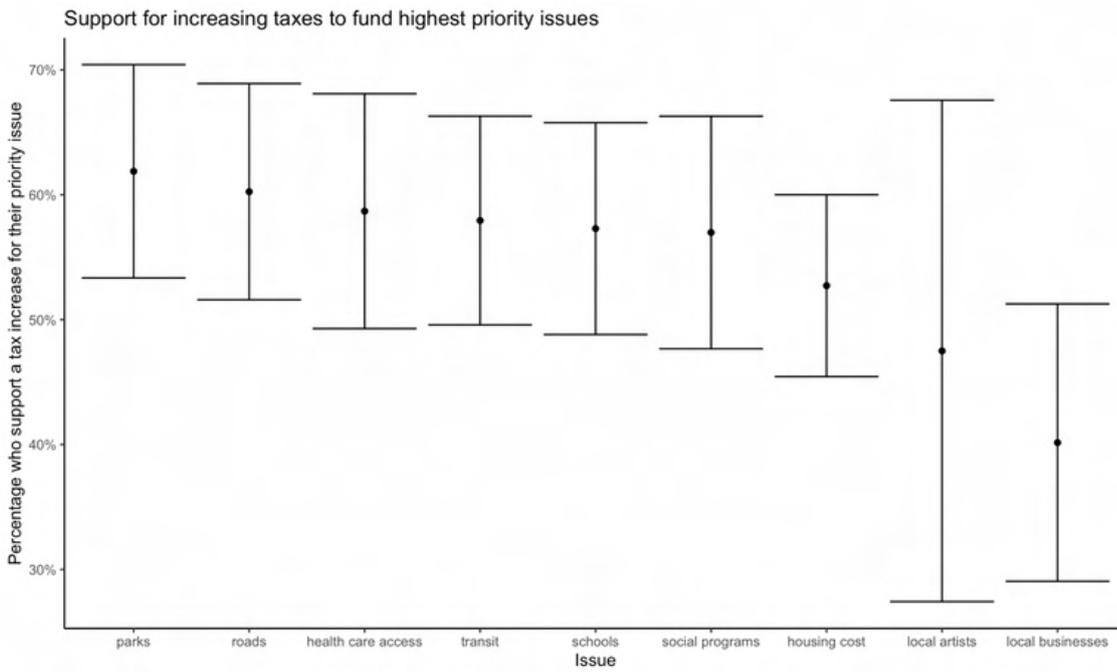
Community Voices seeks to bring the voices and interests of these neighbourhoods into conversations about neighbourhood planning, through original data collected between 2019 and 2020. We conducted an innovative door-to-door random sample survey that offers representative information about the views of residents in seven neighbourhoods. This level of detail and focus, supported by qualitative interviews, allows us to paint an extremely rich picture of the experiences and priorities of inner-suburban residents. The guiding themes of Community Voices arise from the shared vision of the Wellesley Institute and the University of Toronto School of Cities.

Both view a healthy city as one where neighbourhoods have key elements in place that allow all residents to thrive and residents' voices to matter in policy making for their own communities. Both organisations support community-engaged research to make this vision a reality. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of Community Voices is to inform policy conversations around how best to improve health equity in Toronto's inner suburbs, hopefully leading to more effective and community-grounded policy in the future.

As an exploratory study, we aimed to capture the range of views that exist in our focus communities, while also developing new methods for capturing these views that can be replicated by other Toronto-based organisations or researchers. We focus on Toronto's inner suburbs because urban inequality in Toronto is increasingly tied to geography, with a long-standing divide between our city's downtown core and its surrounding communities. This divide is deep and far-reaching, encompassing not only income but also politics, poverty, access to services, and a number of key health indicators (MacDonnell, Embuldeniya, and Ratanshi, 2004; Hulchanski, 2010; Doering, Silver and Taylor, 2020; Wang and Ramroop, 2018; Clarke et al., 2017; Shah, Bell and Wilson, 2016; Wheaton et al., 2015). Though our study was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe it still offers rich insight to support equitable recovery and future policy initiatives. This underscores the critical importance of investments that improve the social determinants of health in Toronto's inner suburbs.



*This figure shows the percentage of respondents who selected each policy area as one of their three most important priorities. Whiskers show 95% confidence intervals. To view our findings on the types of policies study respondents wanted government to focus on, please visit the [Policy Priorities section](#) of our report.*



*This figure shows the percentage of respondents who support increasing taxes to fund each high priority issue. Whiskers show 95% confidence intervals. To view our findings on the nine types of policies respondents wanted government to focus on, visit the [Policy Priorities section](#) of our report.*

# Core Findings



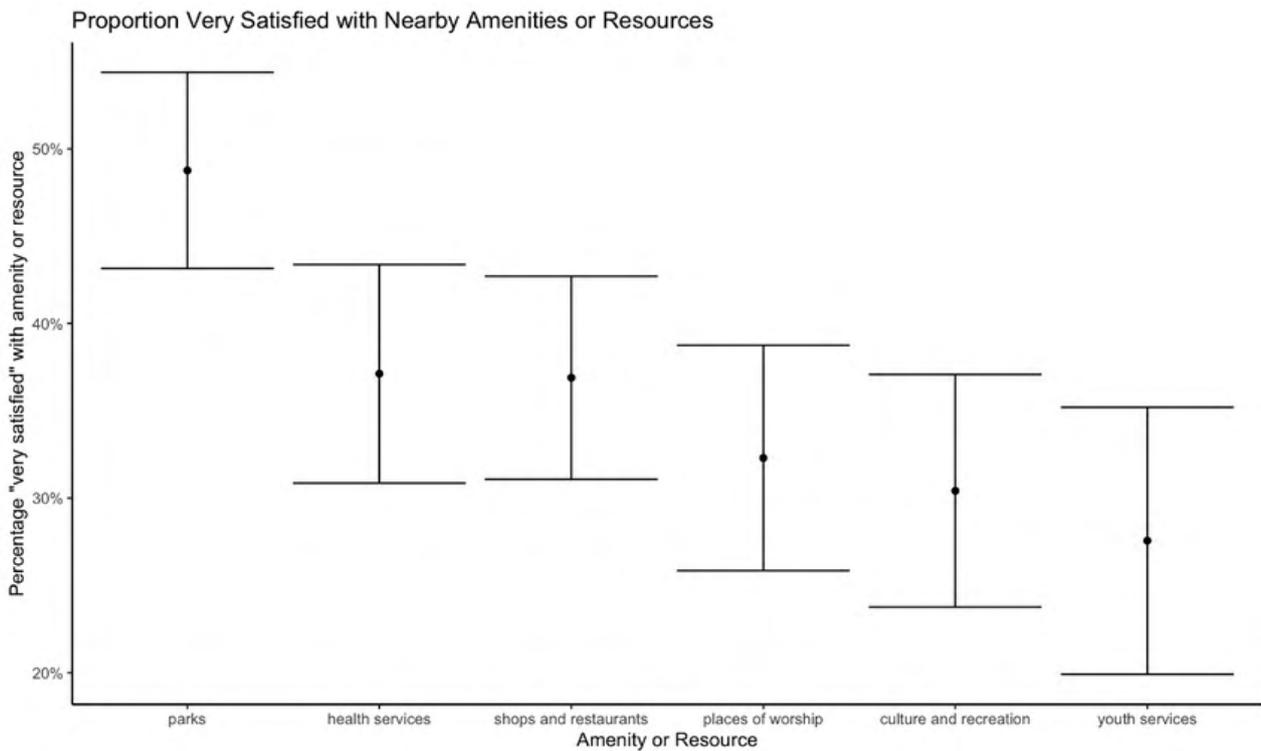
Community Voices addresses the following core research questions:

- What neighbourhood characteristics are valued by residents living in lower socio-economic status (SES) inner suburban neighbourhoods in Toronto?
- To what extent do these characteristics align with policies believed to promote the social determinants of health?
- How do residents view the role of government at the neighbourhood level?
- What factors drive residents' neighbourhood preferences?

Community Voices demonstrates the tremendous diversity of perspectives and priorities within Toronto's inner suburbs. Nevertheless, across the sample of residents we surveyed and interviewed, there was consensus on three core priorities:

- **Safety.** Residents value living in neighbourhoods where they do not feel threatened by either interpersonal violence or by unsafe road conditions.
- **Transportation and Mobility.** Residents prefer neighbourhoods with shorter commutes, nearby and frequent transit service, and ample opportunities for walking.
- **Local Services and Amenities.** Residents prioritise neighbourhoods with rich sets of amenities such as restaurants, libraries, grocery stores and other retail, as well as community centres and health clinics.

In addition to these three broadly shared priorities, we also identified secondary priority areas that, while important to many residents, were not as consistently expressed. These include affordable and well-maintained housing and living in diverse communities. The report elaborates on each of these priorities, highlighting the range of views residents hold and specifying what they believed made that priority important for their neighbourhoods.



The figure above shows the proportion of respondents who indicated they were “very satisfied” with each category of amenity or resource (whiskers show 95% confidence intervals). More information about these findings can be found in the section on satisfaction with local amenities and resources and also the key theme of neighbourhood services and amenities.



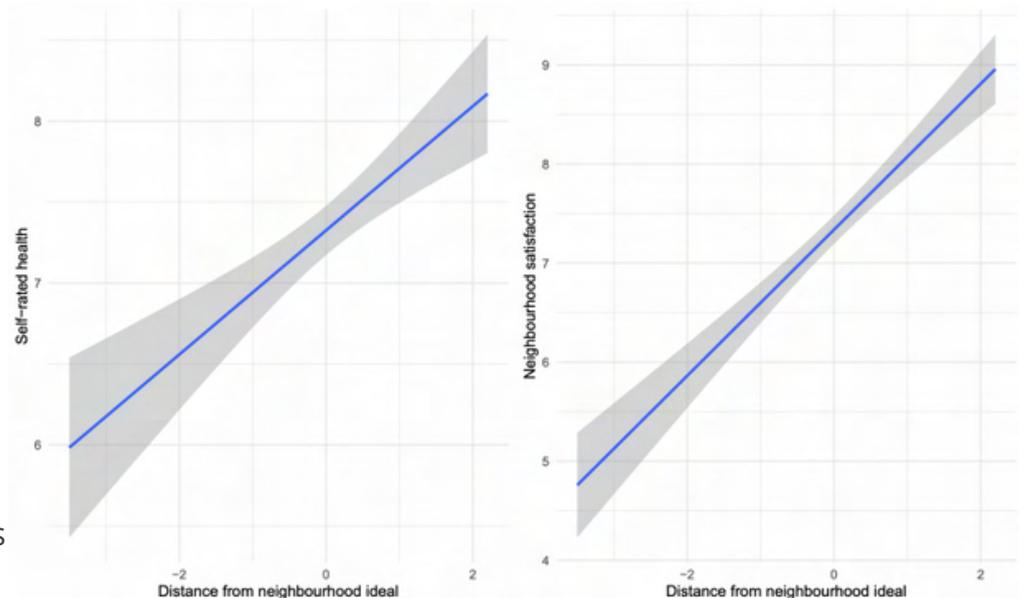
## Recommendations for Better Policy

**The resident priorities we identify show strong connections to the social determinants of health:** they are social conditions that tend to affect individuals' health outcomes, whether physical or psychological. And while many of these priorities may seem familiar to the priorities urbanists refer to with concepts like 'complete communities,' we also observed that **many in our study approached these qualities from a distinctly 'inner-suburban perspective.'** For example, stores and amenities in strip malls, a built form not usually associated with walkability or convenience, were noted by many residents as being very accessible to them. Similarly, while respondents overall displayed a traditional suburban aversion to "downtown" living in which apartments predominate, they also showed **substantial openness to living in neighbourhoods with a mix of houses, apartments, and condominiums.**

Because neighbourhood-oriented health policies are implemented by governments that depend on local support and uptake to be effective, we also sought to discover residents' views about the role of government at the neighbourhood level. Notably **absent in these conversations were references to political ideology or more abstract concepts of government.** Our sample of residents viewed government in highly concrete ways; for example, stressing the importance of maintenance and upkeep of infrastructure and of elected leaders being visible in their communities.

We examined the individual- and neighbourhood-level factors that may help explain resident priorities and perspectives. We found that homeownership, age, family composition, living in a mixed income neighbourhood, class, immigration, and race helped explain experiences and responses more than simply where an individual lived within a neighbourhood. To codify this mix of experiences and attributes, we present five clusters of survey respondents. These individuals shared demographic features and tended to respond in similar ways to our questions, suggesting that **these clusters represent distinct perspectives** and worldviews grounded in these shared characteristics.

Community Voices suggests an agenda for addressing inequality in standing in Toronto. In particular, our study reveals ways for policy-makers to incorporate the voices, interests, views, and aspirations of the City's inner suburban communities as part of their routine deliberations.



*This figure shows that residents who live in neighbourhoods that fall short of their ideal enjoy substantially lower levels of satisfaction and self-rated health, compared to otherwise similar residents who live in a neighbourhood that aligns with their ideal*

To this end, we stress that **resident perceptions are worth taking seriously in their own right**. Residents who **perceive their neighbourhood falls short of their ideal report substantially lower levels of well-being**. Tangible efforts to close the gap between perception and reality are vital.

We believe [it is possible to improve the standing of inner-suburban neighbourhoods in urban policy discussions](#):

- **Focus on the assets that exist** within these communities;
- Instead of chasing an idealised downtown Toronto centric vision of a healthy community, **respect the lifestyle choices and different understandings** of concepts like walkability which local residents may have
- **Short-term:** Prioritise tangible, attainable improvements to buildings, roads and the public realm
- **Long-term:** Focus on making these communities more complete neighbourhoods by increasing access to core local services and amenities neighbours prioritise, rather than re-engineering them from scratch.

9 more specific recommendations emerged from repeated themes encountered over the study:

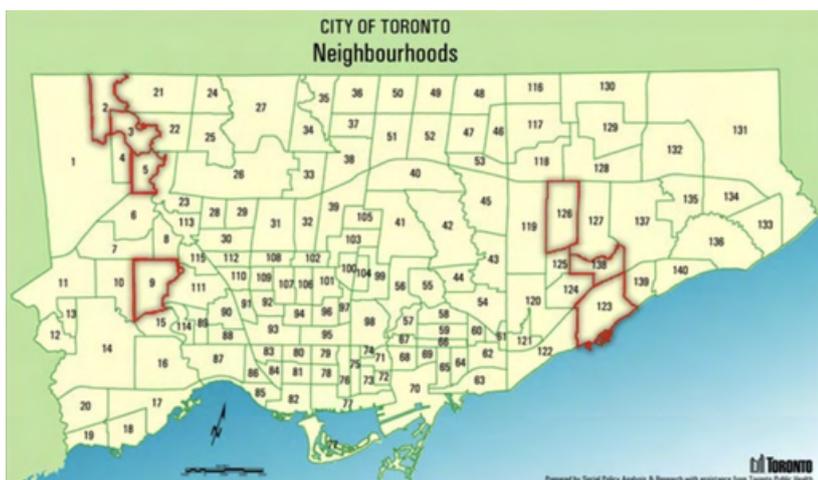
1. *Safety first.* Prioritise measures to make residents feel safe in their communities with a focus on pedestrian safety and traffic control, and reducing gun violence.
2. *Maintenance matters.* Take maintenance of roads, buildings and public spaces seriously as a condition for almost any other successful policy initiative.
3. *Palaces of the people.* Invest in libraries and community centres.
4. *Mental health support as core local service.* Consider urgent investments in locally accessible mental health services
5. *Increase awareness of available services.* Support increased investment in connecting newcomers to services.
6. *Increase frequency and quality of buses.* More than mass transit residents spoke about the need to improve current bus journey's.
7. *Increase investment in social services and upkeep within Toronto Community Housing.*
8. *Show you care.* Create more accessible lines of communication with the city and elected leaders.
9. *Political boundaries are largely invisible to ordinary citizens.* Avoid building policy off of official city or neighbourhood boundaries.



# Study Design

## Key Points:

- Community Voices is a **community engaged, mixed methods study of seven inner-suburban Toronto neighbourhoods**, involving academics and community members.
- Study areas were chosen that a) have lower socio-economic status (SES), b) contain within themselves a mix of typical inner suburban social groups and urban environments, c) are geographically nearby one another.
- Two higher SES neighbourhoods provided comparison cases.
- A door-to-door random sample survey polled nearly 700 households and generated highly representative results. The survey probed residents' neighbourhood priorities and perceptions, policy preferences and perceptions of institutions, and demographic characteristics.
- Nearly **25 interviews** provided in-depth insight.
- Analysis of joint results revealed three highly consensual priority areas and two additional priorities.



*Communities bordered in red were surveyed; blue indicates high socio-economic status control neighbourhoods.*

Our study adopted a **community engaged, mixed methods approach** based on a sample of residents from seven neighbourhoods (see map) that participated in a survey. A sub-sample of respondents gave more in-depth insight through qualitative interviews. Community Voices sought to capture the perspectives of residents in a way that represents the full range of their views, while also bringing into focus traditionally underrepresented voices in neighbourhood policy-making, such as racialised and low-income persons, youth, and recent immigrants. Members of local and academic communities served in an advisory capacity at several stages of the study and assisted with our goal of designing scientifically sound and culturally appropriate/sensitive research instruments. Survey questions were also refined based on feedback gained from two focus groups, one for East-end residents held in Scarborough and the other for West-end residents held in Weston-Mount Dennis. We focused on conducting the survey in a set of neighbourhoods that allowed us to provide in-depth understanding with statistically representative samples, while strategically selecting areas across the inner-suburbs that reveal both common concerns and local distinctiveness.

Our study took place in the following communities:

#### **East End of Toronto:**

1. **Dorset Park**
2. **Eglinton East**
3. **Cliffcrest** (Control)

#### **West End of Toronto:**

1. **Jamestown-Mount Olive**
2. **Elms-Old Rexdale**
3. **Thistletown**
4. **Edenbridge** (Control)



We chose these neighbourhoods by using the City of Toronto's 140 official neighbourhoods as the basis. We then applied statistical techniques to identify areas within the inner suburbs that are a) lower socio-economic status, b) contain within themselves a mix of the most common inner suburban social groups and urban environments, and c) are located in the same geographic area. We also included two higher SES neighbourhoods as "controls" or comparison cases, to allow us to examine what is shared and what is different across these contexts. The final selection was made in consultation with our community advisory group, who also contributed to the survey and interview design.



## Quantitative Survey Design

We administered our survey to a random sample of 688 households in our focus neighbourhoods and conducted interviews with 24 residents (13 from the East End, 11 from the West End). The survey probed residents about the following:

1. Neighbourhood priorities and perceptions
2. Policy preferences and perceptions of institutions
3. Demographic characteristics

Interviews allowed respondents to articulate their experiences in more depth. Most survey questions were adapted from other high quality surveys, such as the General Social Survey or the Canadian Census. Overall, the survey achieved a highly representative sample of the study areas, especially after weighting by education, age, and housing type (see table). Interview respondents did not differ markedly from the overall sample as a group, except in containing a higher proportion of women and racialised persons.

Category	Sample #	Sample %	Census %	Weighted %
<i>Age</i>				
20-34	238	37%	25%	26%
35-64	317	49%	51%	52%
65+	91	14%	23%	23%
<b>Non-Response</b>				
Non-Response	22	3%		
<i>Race</i>				
Black	88	17%	16%	19%
South Asian	144	27%	24%	26%
White	182	34%	33%	36%
Chinese	33	6%	4%	4%
Filipino	26	5%	7%	5%
South East Asian	49	9%	1%	7%
Arab	19	4%	3%	4%
Latin American	18	3%	3%	4%
<b>No Response</b>				
No Response	73	11%		
<b>Other</b>				
Other	65	10%		

Category	Sample #	Sample %	Census %	Weighted %
<i>Family Income</i>				
Under 40,000	148	28%	32%	35%
40,000-140,000	292	56%	59%	54%
Over 140,000	81	16%	9%	11%
<b>Non-Response</b>				
Non-Response	147	22%		
<i>Education</i>				
No Post-Secondary	360	50%	70%	67%
BA or Higher	308	50%	30%	33%
<b>Non-Response</b>				
Non-Response	29	4%		
<i>House/Apartment</i>				
Apartment	234	35%	48%	49%
House	434	65%	52%	51%
<b>Non-Response</b>				
Non-Response	4	1%		

*These two tables (including one on previous page) summarize key characteristics of our survey respondents, and compares them to figures for the same communities from the Canadian Census. Especially after weighting our sample by age, education, and housing type, the study population approximates the Census to a very high degree.*

## Qualitative Study Design

Following the survey we conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with respondents, which ran 40 minutes on average. The interviews took place over approximately 6 months, beginning in October 2019 and ending in March 2020. Of those interviews, 13 of the 24 were conducted from our East End neighbourhoods and 11 from West End neighbourhoods. Initially, interviewees were chosen from a random sample of survey participants, but as this yielded limited numbers of respondents, we opted for an open call to all survey participants, except for those who resided in the control neighbourhoods.

The aim of the interviews was to explore at a greater depth some of the trends that were beginning to emerge from the quantitative data at the time, and to gain a much deeper understanding of the social and environmental factors that may have informed survey responses. Demographic information on each interviewee was pulled from the survey. Of those interviewed, sixteen participants self-identified as women, seven as men and one did not provide a gender. Five of the interviewees were over the age of 50 (with one participant over the age of 65), and 19 of those interviewed belonged to a visible minority and/or racialized group (four Black, one Black/Latin American, one Arab/Black, four White, seven South Asian, two Chinese, two other/did not specify). It should be noted that a higher proportion of interview participants were middle income and/or had a post-secondary education compared to our overall sample. Recruiting racialized men and women over 60, and recruitment of men in general was a challenge and it should be noted that the advent of COVID-19 led us to end the West end interviews earlier than planned.

## ***Consistent priorities across surveys and interviews***

Based on the data that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative analysis, we identified three areas that were prioritised by residents in both the survey and interviews:

- 1. Safety**
- 2. Transportation and Mobility**
- 3. Neighbourhood Amenities and Services**

We also determined two additional priority areas for many residents, but which did not appear consistently across the survey and interviews:

- 1. Housing**
- 2. Diverse Communities**



# What Residents Value in their Neighbourhoods



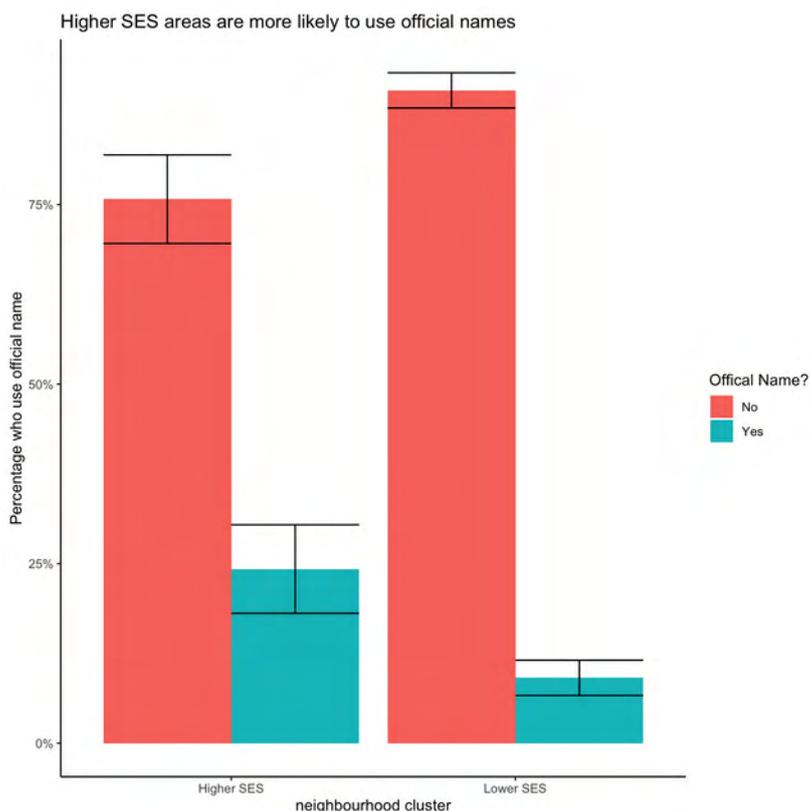
## Key Points:

- Residents' definitions of their neighbourhoods rarely align with official City definitions, and this is even less common in lower SES communities.
- We conducted a "conjoint survey experiment" that identifies causes of neighbourhood desirability.
- The strongest causes include: safety, commute time, school quality, mutual support from neighbours, parks & green space, a built environment not dominated by high rises. These desires transcend socio-economic status.
- Many residents perceive their actual neighbourhoods to fall short of the experimentally identified ideal. The gap between desirable and actual neighbourhood is a very strong predictor of key indicators of wellbeing, including overall neighbourhood satisfaction, self-reported health, and confidence in civic institutions.
- Housing Cost is the highest policy priority, especially in lower SES neighbourhoods.
- Residents show strong willingness to support tax increases for their top policy priorities.
- Residents are most satisfied with local parks and green spaces, and least satisfied with local youth services.
- Interviewees were asked "what do you like most about your neighbourhood?" The most common responses were about local amenities, convenient access, transit, and diversity.

## The meaning of “neighbourhood”

To understand what residents prioritise in their neighbourhoods, it is important to get a sense of what they understand their neighbourhood to be. Our study, and much of city policy making in Toronto, uses the City of Toronto official neighbourhoods as the major unit of analysis. We found, however, that **respondents rarely described their neighbourhoods with the official City of Toronto names**: only about 13% did so.

More commonly (about 25%) residents would refer to former municipalities from pre-amalgamation Toronto, such as Scarborough or Etobicoke, or to nearby streets or intersections (about 20%). Still, there were significant differences between the lower SES neighbourhoods and the two upper SES areas we surveyed. In those latter cases, nearly 25% of respondents used the official neighbourhood name, whereas in the lower SES areas less than 10% did. This is one small example of how upper status areas possess advantages in asserting their policy views, by having a more shared conception of what their neighbourhood is that also aligns with the official City view.



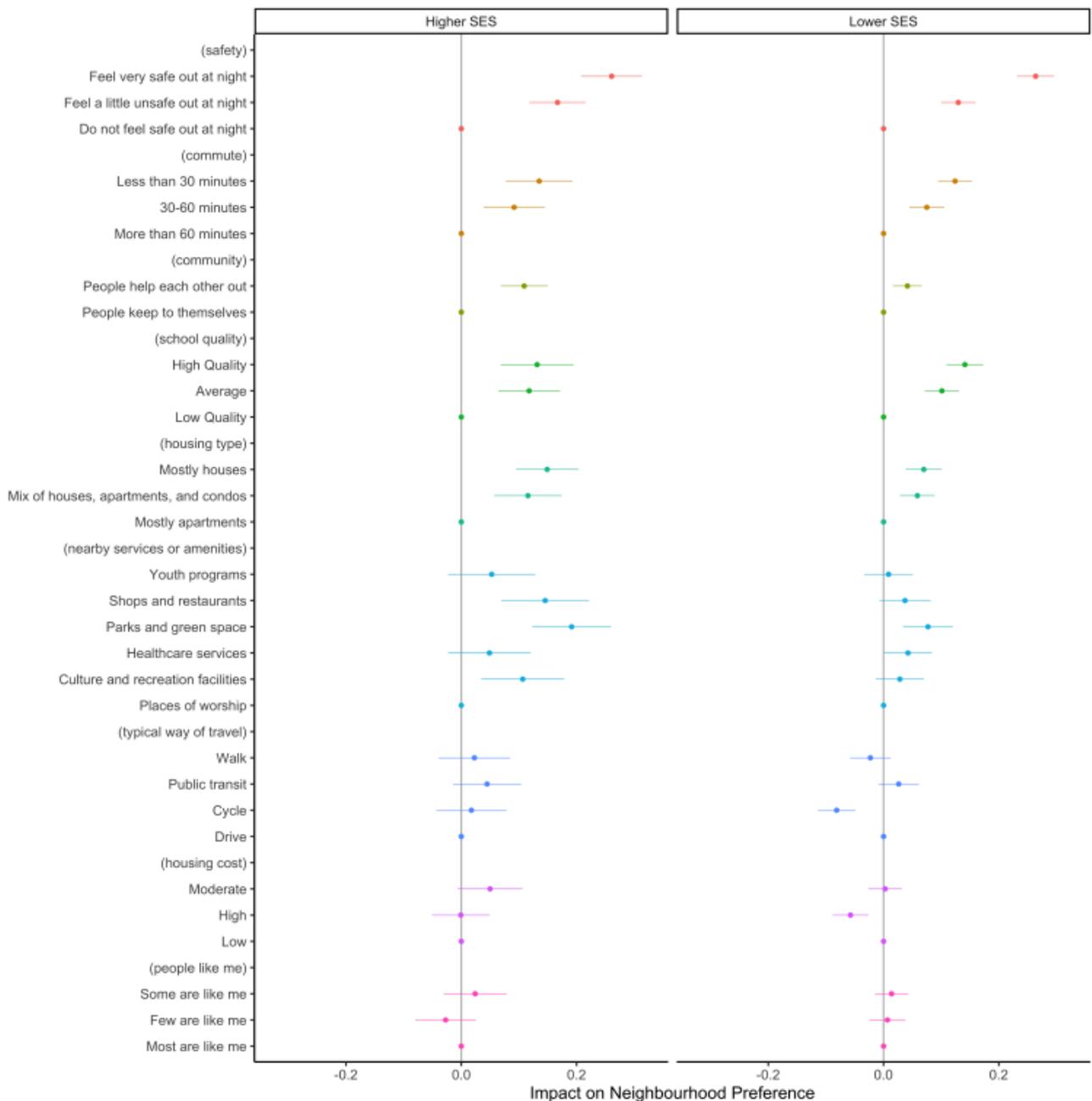
*In this figure, we show results separately for our focus neighbourhoods as well as the control areas, to highlight interesting and significant differences. Other graphs show only overall results as they are largely similar, though we comment on differences that are statistically significant. Elsewhere we dig deeper into the basis of these differences between and within neighbourhoods.*

# A survey experiment to identify neighbourhood priorities



We conducted a “conjoint survey experiment,” an innovative survey instrument which presents respondents with two neighbourhood profiles, each composed of a set of attributes. Attributes include features like commute time, safety, school quality, diversity, local amenities and services, housing cost, typical mode of transit, sense of community, and built form (e.g., condominium apartments, single-family homes, etc.). Watch a video on our website [community-voices.report](https://community-voices.report) to see what it is like to participate in this experiment.

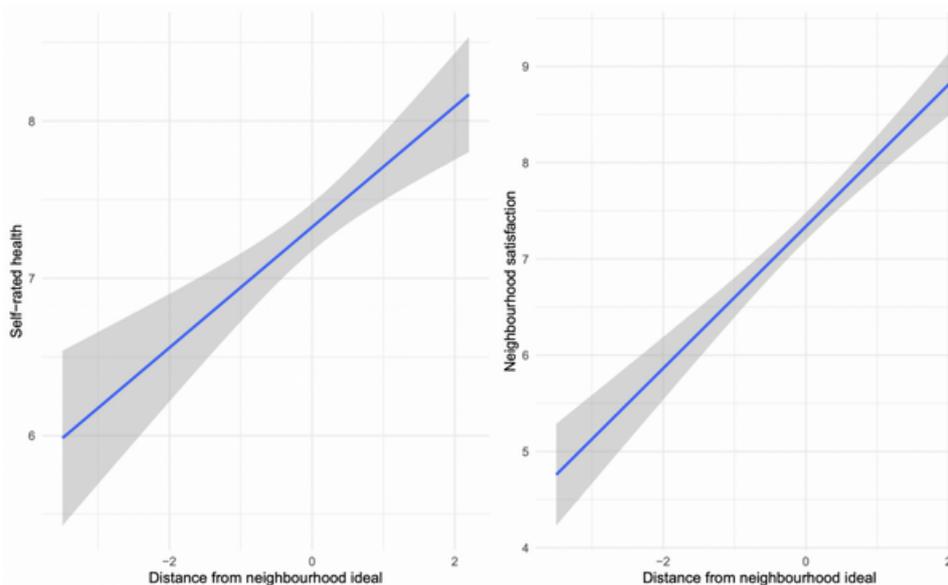
We selected attributes for the experiment based on prior research about neighbourhood preferences and social determinants of health (e.g. Ciorici and Dantzler, 2019; Wilson, Krizek, and Ahmed 2004; Mummolo and Nall, 2017; Schachter, 2016; Wheaton et al., 2015; Marans, 1979). Attribute values are randomly mixed and assigned to each of the two hypothetical profiles. Respondents were asked to pick which of the two neighbourhoods they preferred. Each respondent repeated the exercise six times. This randomization is central to the experimental design, which allows us to identify the causal effect of each attribute on neighbourhood desirability. The overall results of the conjoint experiment are shown on the following page.



This figure summarizes results from our conjoint survey experiment. It represents a multivariate regression model, where the outcome is the neighbourhood profile selected by residents. Colored dots represent regression coefficients with the whiskers around showing their 95% confidence intervals. Where the whiskers cross the vertical line this indicates an effect that is not reliably positive or negative. Dots to the right of the vertical line indicate positive effects: these attributes increase the chance respondents will select a neighbourhood profile. Dots to the left indicate the attribute decreases the chance the profile will be selected. Dots without whiskers are reference categories for a given bundle of attributes. For example, for the “safety” attributes, “Do not feel safe at night” is the reference category. This means that the effect of the other safety attributes is in reference to not feeling safe at night. In other words, the dot for “feel very safe at night” shows that respondents are much more likely to select profiles with this attribute compared to profiles showing a neighbourhood where they “do not feel safe at night.”

The figure on the previous page compares results for our core study areas (on the right) and the control, higher SES neighbourhoods (on the left). One key takeaway is that the **overall shape of residential priorities is very similar across these contexts**. In other words, residents in **lower SES neighbourhoods share many of the same priorities that residents in higher SES neighbourhoods do: a safe place without long commutes or low quality schools, where neighbours help each other out, with ample parks and green space, and which is not dominated by apartments or high-rises**. In addition to these commonalities, we found some differences. Residents of the lower SES communities more strongly valued low or moderate housing costs over high costs, whereas the higher SES communities were less sensitive to housing cost; lower SES communities were less likely to prefer neighbourhoods where people get around by cycling; and higher SES communities had somewhat stronger preferences for a neighbourhood with shops and restaurants or culture and recreation facilities.

Our survey also asked respondents about the presence of the same attributes from the conjoint survey in their own actual neighbourhoods. Comparing the two responses allowed us to **determine how closely residents' actual neighbourhoods correspond to their ideal neighbourhoods**. We created a metric that measured this difference between ideal and actual, which ended up giving us a number of insights. In our study, **residents of the lower SES communities perceived their own neighbourhoods to be substantially further from their ideal**, compared to residents of the higher SES communities who live in neighbourhoods that more closely resemble their ideal neighbourhood. **Though neighbourhood aspirations are similar across these contexts, the degree to which actual neighbourhoods permit residents to realize these ideals is not.**

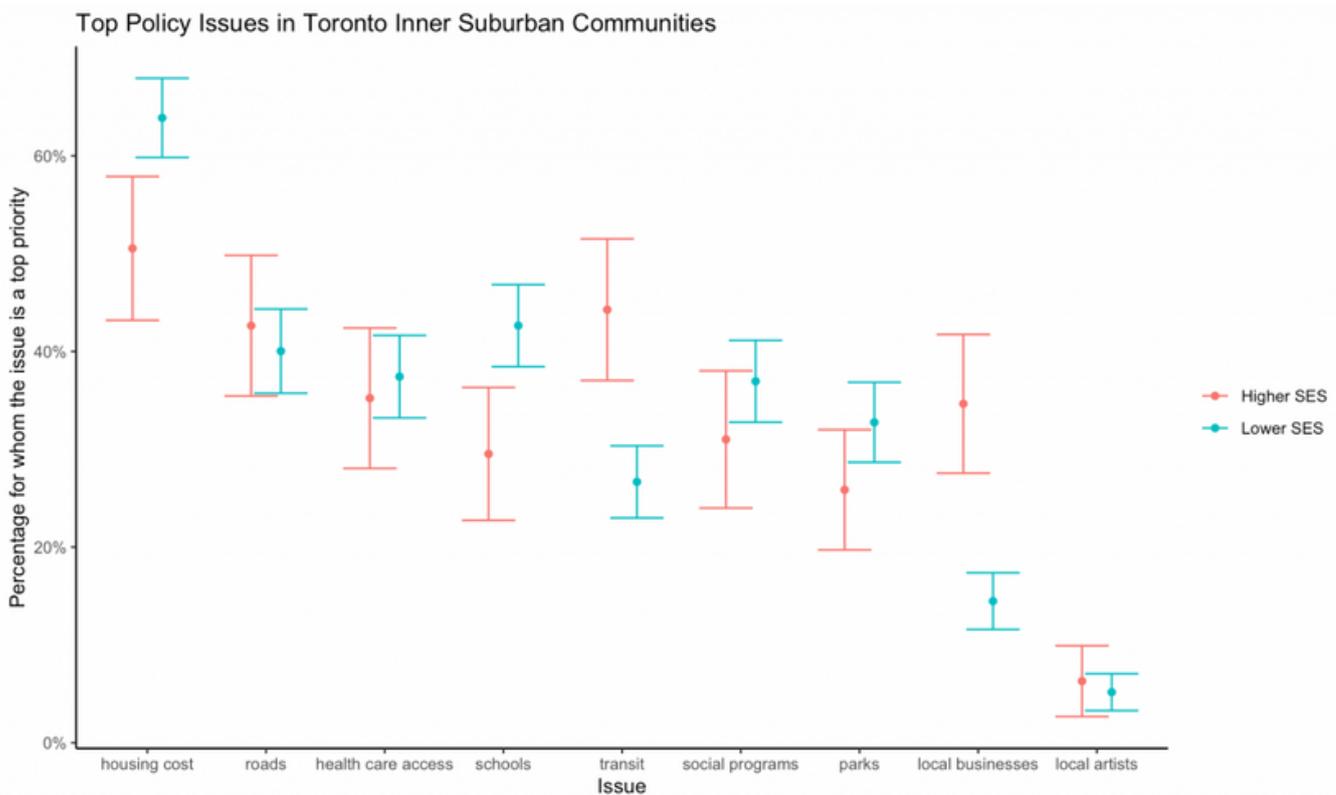


*This figure shows that residents who live in neighbourhoods that fall short of their ideal enjoy substantially lower levels of satisfaction and self-rated health, compared to otherwise similar residents who live in a neighbourhood that aligns with their ideal.*

As one's actual neighbourhood grows farther from one's ideal, overall neighbourhood satisfaction, self-reported health, and confidence in civic institutions all substantially decline. These consequences flowing from the gap between one's actual neighbourhood and one's ideal neighbourhood were some of the strongest we observed in our research. This underscores the crucial importance of resident priorities for local policy: residents' beliefs about how their neighbourhoods align with their values and priorities has material significance in a number of areas that impact overall satisfaction with their communities and ultimately their health.

# Policy Priorities

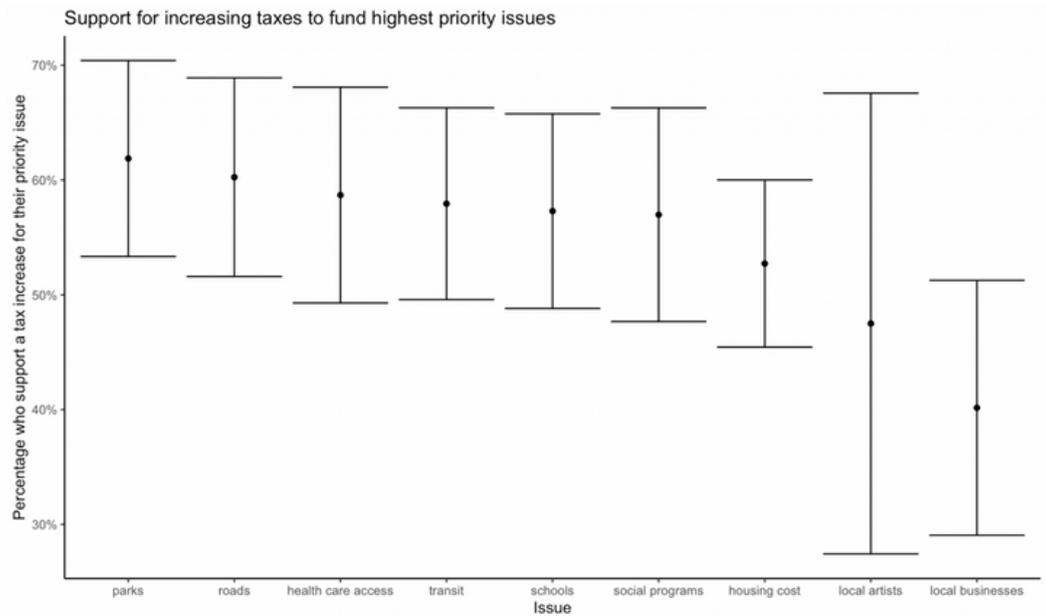
We also asked our respondents to rank and prioritise a set of **nine types of policies they wanted government to focus on**: reducing housing costs; improving neighbourhood parks and recreation facilities; enhancing local social programs (job training, youth programming, and newcomer programs); increasing health care access; maintaining roads; supporting local artists; supporting local businesses; and improving local schools. For these same areas, we asked respondents **whether they would support a tax increase for their priorities**, as a way to capture the degree of public appetite and sense of urgency with which each area should be addressed. The below figure shows the proportion of respondents that placed each of these policy areas among their top 3 priorities.



*This figure shows the percentage of respondents who selected each policy area as one of their three most important priorities. Whiskers show 95% confidence intervals.*

Generally, resident priorities fell into three broad groups. On the one end is reducing housing costs, which 60% of respondents considered to be a policy issue of central importance. Our lower SES neighbourhoods gave this issue even greater priority, though in higher income neighbourhoods a majority still considered this a top priority. This speaks to the **broad sense of crisis in Toronto around housing affordability**. In the middle are a range of policy areas that 30-40% of respondents supported, running from maintaining roads to improving health care access. Within this set of issues, **focus neighbourhoods gave higher priority to schools, whereas control neighbourhoods were more likely to prioritise transit**.

Overall, the number of policy areas in this range speaks to the **diversity of concerns among inner suburban residents, and to some of the challenges in building political coalitions.** At the border of this range is support for local business (around 25%, stronger in the control neighbourhoods), and then at the other extreme is support for local artists, which less than 10% of respondents placed among their top 3 priorities.



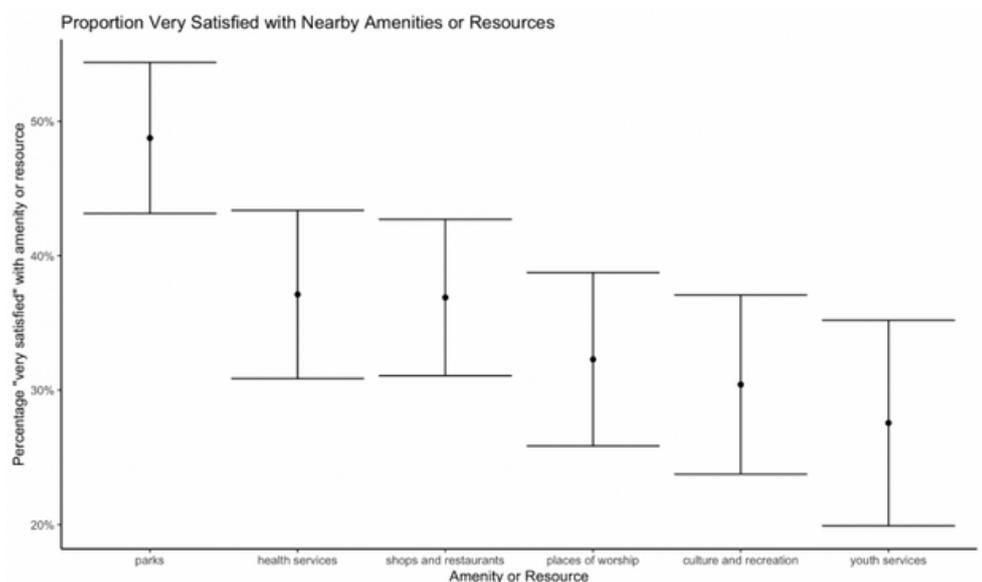
*This figure shows the percentage of respondents who were willing to support a tax increase to fund their preferred policy priorities. Whiskers show 95% confidence intervals.*

Perhaps just as important is that fact that, as the figure to the right shows, a **majority of respondents are willing to pay increased taxes for their high priority concerns,** including to reduce housing costs. This willingness to support increased taxes in areas they deem important was shared between focus and control neighbourhoods.

# Satisfaction with local amenities and resources

Finally, though not directly connected to determining neighbourhood priorities, we also asked two questions about the amenities residents perceive their neighbourhoods to offer and how satisfied they were with them. Specifically, we included questions that asked what amenities/services residents were aware of in their neighbourhood and then asked participants to indicate their satisfaction with these amenities/services. The below figure summarizes the results. Regarding awareness of amenities/services, the major finding was that **new Canadians (i.e. Canadians born outside of Canada) generally had the lowest level of knowledge of local amenities and services.**

In regards to satisfaction with existing amenities, we found **most respondents were satisfied with their local parks and green spaces**, with over 50% indicating they are very satisfied with them, though the rate of satisfaction was even higher in the control neighbourhoods. On the other end, residents were **far less likely to be very satisfied with their nearby options for culture and recreation or youth services.** These are two areas where improvements could have a significant impact on residential satisfaction.



*This figure shows the percentage of respondents who indicated they were "extremely satisfied" with each amenity or service.*

## What do you like most about your neighbourhood?

Interviews provided additional opportunities for residents to articulate what features of their current neighbourhoods they value most. Based on a textual analysis of the interviews we were able to identify a set of common themes of priority areas that arose. We also asked a specific open-ended question, “what do you like most about your neighbourhood?” Analyzing this question in specific we noted that very few interviewees were entirely dissatisfied with their neighbourhoods. Only 3 out of 24 said there was nothing to like about where they lived. Contradicting the image of suburbs as often lacking in resources compared to the downtown core, many (11) viewed their neighbourhoods as offering a rich set of amenities, such as libraries, restaurants, parks, shops, tennis courts, universities (University of Toronto Scarborough and York), community centres, or ravines. Nearly as common (9) were references to valuing the convenient access afforded by one’s neighbourhood, whether to travelling downtown, to other suburbs, or to amenities. Similarly, a number of interviewees (7) specifically valued the access to transit their neighbourhoods offer — often relative to their experience of outer suburbs such as Brampton or Vaughn. Finally, others (6) valued the opportunity to interact with diverse ethno-cultural groups, sometimes citing events such as multi-cultural food festivals or diverse shops or restaurants. All in all, the interviewees painted a rich portrait of vibrant inner-suburban communities.

Based on the larger themes and analysis for the ‘what do you like most question’ responses, we were able to identify key focus areas from the qualitative work. Comparing these with the quantitative priority areas, we were able to come to three priority areas and two secondary areas that are elaborated in the following sections. In doing so we paid close attention to priority areas that came up clearly both in the quantitative and qualitative data sets.

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## Key Themes



Residents care most about **Safety, Transportation & Mobility, and Local Amenities & Services.**

These sections discuss in more detail the areas that our survey and interviews identified as key themes of concern to residents in our study areas. These themes speak to our guiding research goal, to reveal what Toronto inner suburban residents themselves see as key priorities for their neighbourhoods and to tap into their collective knowledge about why these are areas of significance and what they think should be done about them. We discuss the clearest areas of shared priority — safety, transit & mobility, and amenities & services — as well as other areas that showed widespread importance: housing and diversity.

# Safety

Residents want to feel safe in a broadly defined sense within their neighbourhoods.

## Key Points:

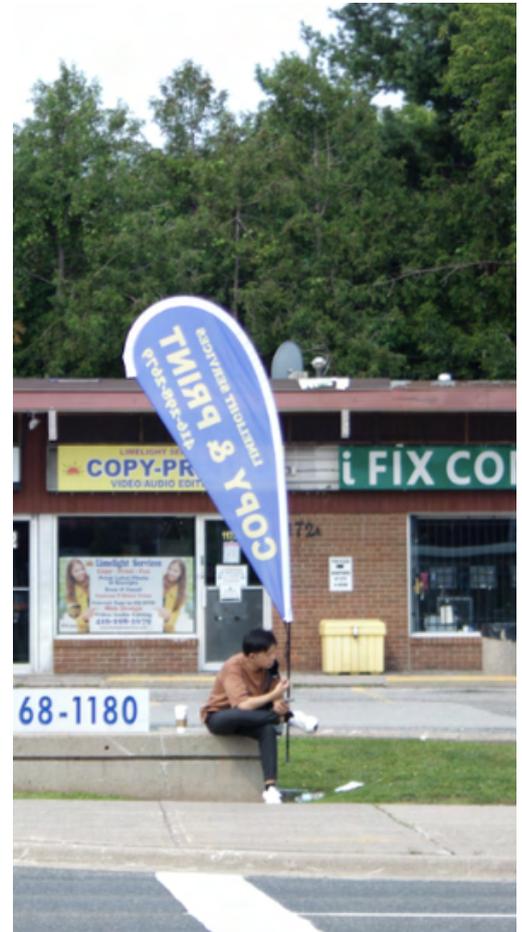
- Safety was consistently reported to be a top priority across all neighbourhoods we studied, encompassing both crime and road safety concerns.
- Residents of lower SES communities felt less safe compared to higher SES neighbourhood residents, as did younger and lower-income individuals.
- Despite similar crime rates, West End interviewees tended to express greater concern around violence than East End interviewees; East End interviewees were more concerned with road and pedestrian safety.
- Common ways to improve safety identified by residents included: increased policing, improved lighting and security cameras, greater foot traffic and “eyes on the street,” and enhanced youth programming and services.

## Residents care most about safety

Safety emerged as perhaps the most important local priority in our study. In the conjoint experiment, “feeling very safe at night” was the attribute that most clearly caused neighbourhood desirability to increase. **The importance of safety for neighbourhood desirability was consistent across low and high SES neighbourhoods, and East and West ends of the city.** Qualitative interviews revealed additionally that many residents understood safety in two distinct ways: concerns around violent crime and concerns about pedestrian safety. Much of the dialogue in the interviews touched on perceptions of safety when residents were outside of their homes and centred on roads. Themes included perceptions of being vulnerable to crime while walking along certain roadways at specific times, and worries about traffic accidents or pedestrians fatalities that were blamed on congestion, poor road/sidewalk maintenance or lack of traffic calming features.

It is understandable that safety in these diverse definitions would be critical to residents. The literature is quite clear in demonstrating that safety and perceptions of safety have clear health impacts.

While being a victim of violent crime can have obvious health impacts, it has also been well established that ‘neighbourhood crime is a risk factor for common mental disorders and poor general mental well-being, particularly for vulnerable populations’ (Kumar, Aery and Weston, 2019). Multiple studies have also noted the psychological impacts of being a victim of crime but also the negative mental health impacts of simply living in proximity to violent crime (Kilpatrick and Acierno, 2003). In fact, violence has such a negative impact on health that in 2008 the Toronto Board of Health recognised exposure to community violence as a social determinant of health (City of Toronto, 2018). In regards to road safety, a number of studies have demonstrated a link between social class and pedestrian fatalities in children (Christie, 2017), and the way in which a fear of road safety can lead to reductions in the use of active transportation and active play in neighbourhoods that ultimately reduce opportunities to engage in healthy lifestyle activities (Christie, Ward and Kimberlee, 2010).



Yet while **respondents across neighbourhoods generally agreed on the importance of safety in their ideal neighbourhoods, their feelings of safety in their actual neighbourhoods differed.** Residents living in higher income neighbourhoods and those who earned over 140,000 dollars in 2018 were much more likely to say that they felt “very safe at night.” **Mount-Olive Jamestown residents were the most likely to feel unsafe and the least likely to feel very safe.** Those who felt that they would not be able to afford to live in their neighbourhood in 10 years were also more likely to feel very unsafe (nearly 25% compared to under 10% for others). Younger residents (18-35) were less likely to feel very safe (30%) compared to older (65+) residents (55%).

Feelings about safety are bound up with residents’ broader experience of their neighbourhood and city. Analysis of the survey suggests that safety is a core neighbourhood feature, so much so that **a residents’ perception of how safe their neighbourhood is tied up with how they view the overall direction of their neighbourhoods and local government.** Those who felt their neighbourhoods were unsafe were much more likely to say their neighbourhood was moving in the wrong direction and to feel City Hall was not giving their neighbourhood enough attention. They also tended to feel the responsiveness and service levels from city government were poor, and showed low levels of trust in City Hall and City Councillors. Though the causal arrow is difficult to determine precisely, overall it appears that **perceptions of safety go beyond direct personal threat and are bound up with residents’ entire experience of their neighbourhood and the city government.**

## Definitions of Safety

“Safety,” however, is a broad term and qualitative interviews helped to unpack its differing meaning to residents. Interviews revealed two major ways residents understood it: safety in regards to violence and crime (gun violence in particular) and safety in the sense of pedestrian safety around roads. Interestingly, we saw major regional differences in the relative emphasis of how interviewees understood safety. Concerns about violent crime, and particularly gun violence, were raised by 60% of West End interviewees (gun violence specifically in 50%), whereas these concerns only came up in 30% of East End interviews. While a handful of respondents spoke about domestic violence and multiple respondents, mostly female, spoke about general feelings of safety walking home, gun violence and gang-related crime predominated in discussions on threats of violent crime. West End residents also spoke repeatedly about how their communities were unfairly associated with crime and labelled as unsafe, creating a negative stigma towards the community. **As we will explore later, some residents saw this stigma as driving a lack of government attention or support for their neighbourhoods.** On the other hand, multiple East End residents reported seeing improvements with regards to crime in their neighbourhoods. Interestingly when one looks at outside data, it appears that pedestrian fatalities are indeed higher in East end neighbourhoods, mirroring the regional differences shared by the residents we interviewed.<sup>2</sup> But in regards to violent crime, rates are actually comparable between the two neighbourhoods,<sup>3</sup> demonstrating perceptions of safety are not simply driven by the actual number of reported crimes, but other factors which may include media coverage or the public nature of incidents.

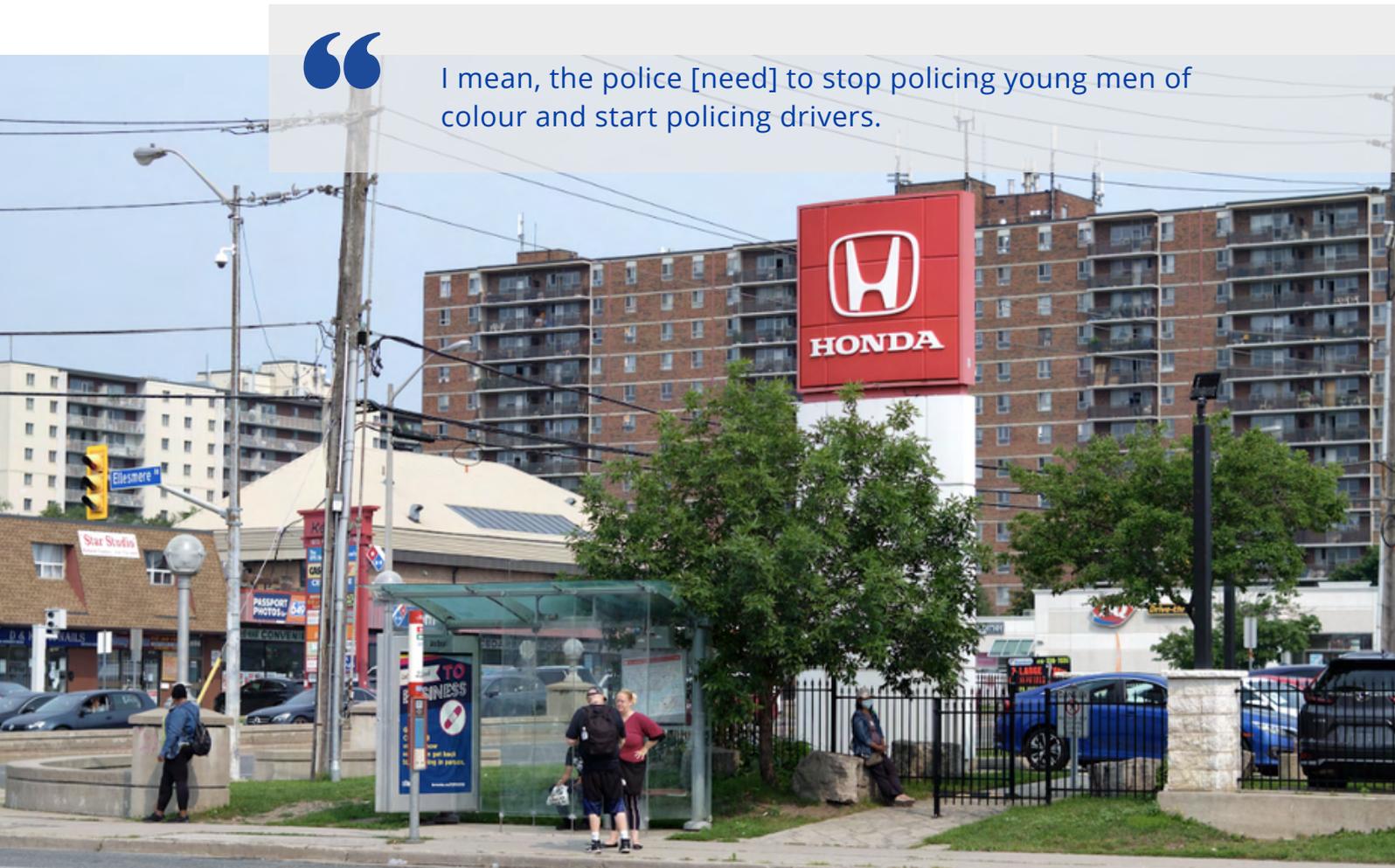


Interviews also provided an opportunity to learn from residents about what, in their view, drives the level of safety in their neighbourhoods. Regarding pedestrian safety, in multiple interviews respondents noted that their local roads were not built with the safety of pedestrians in mind, especially when it came to those with disabilities or mobility issues.

Participants mentioned how driver frustration and speeding helped create an unsafe environment for pedestrians and cyclists. Other irresponsible driving habits like drunk and distracted driving were also discussed. Given these concerns, residents spoke about the need for more traffic lights as well as clear speed limit signage. The need for better road maintenance was also a consistent theme, with multiple respondents commenting on the excessive presence of potholes. More lighting and more frequent clearing of the sidewalks during the winter were also mentioned as ways to keep roads safe. Some residents also advocated for more police presence dedicated to enforcing traffic laws.



I mean, the police [need] to stop policing young men of colour and start policing drivers.



<sup>2</sup> Our Scarborough low-SES neighbourhoods stretch over two police divisions: Divisions 41 and 43. In 2019, there were five traffic fatalities (three pedestrians) in Division 41, and in Division 43, seven deaths (five pedestrians). Meanwhile in Division 23 where all of our West-end neighbourhoods are located, there were five deaths (2) pedestrians that same year. SOURCE: <https://data.torontopolice.on.ca/>

<sup>3</sup> The Homicide rate in 2019 was 8 per 100,000 in Dorset Park and 9 per 100,000 in Eglinton East. Elms Old Rexdale and Thistletown-Beaumont Heights had no homicides in 2019, but the most populated neighbourhood in the West-end cluster West Mount Olive-Silverstone-Jamestown had a homicide rate of 9 per 100,000. Meanwhile the average assault rate across all of our East End neighbourhoods was 758 per 100,000, while for our West-end neighbourhoods it was 745 per 100,000. SOURCE: <https://data.torontopolice.on.ca/>

## Factors that create or prevent safety

Several factors were identified by residents as influencing safety concerns around violence. Multiple residents cited specific areas or communities as being sources of violence. Many times such responses displayed existing stigma or bias against subsidised housing communities. Class divisions within our focus neighbourhoods may help explain some of these perspectives we encountered. Multiple homeowners we interviewed specifically mentioned apartment buildings within their communities as sources of danger. Another set of stereotypes voiced by residents was around the role of demographic changes, such as influxes of immigrants and low-income residents in impacting safety. Yet, as frequently as we heard these views, another group of respondents focused on the social factors that can lead to violence, with a number of residents suggesting that violence arose from a lack of recreational and employment opportunities for youth.



Well it's because of all the gunshots. I mean...the...area where the Ontario Housing is. It's notorious and... unfortunately, it stigmatizes the Ontario Housing.



Liz

Gifts



I think there should be more patrolling...I feel more safe when they're around there especially when I'm walking at night.

Residents shared diverse opinions about what could improve their neighbourhood's safety. Several noted personal tactics such as avoiding specific locations and travelling at specific times of night. In Dorset Park, many residents focused on the hydro fields running through their community as a place to avoid in the evenings. Yet, several interviewees raised more general responses. While some offered critiques of the police (especially in regards to profiling and biased treatment of Black and racialized communities), increased policing was suggested frequently as a way to reduce violence. Similar was the desire for more security guards, specifically within apartment buildings. Some respondents, typically homeowners, discussed neighbourhood watch groups and neighbours looking out for each other as being a key factor in increasing safety. Changes in the built environment, such as more light fixtures and security cameras, were also a common refrain. The importance of 'eyes on the street' from having foot-traffic and people out at night frequenting establishments was noted as being a helpful factor in increasing safety. Finally, multiple interviewees commented that youth programs and 'giving youth something to do' played a key role in producing safety. Overall, residents' perceptions and recommendations provide important information for policy-makers seeking to improve feelings of safety across multiple dimensions.



“

Yeah, yeah, private security....Some guy just urinated into our door and there's people stomping, like kicking doors down, on the other side people yelling and trying to like shoot each other. Stuff like that...should not be happening.

“

Cameras can be more practical because there's always a lot of drive-bys happening.

# Transportation and Mobility

Residents want reliable and efficient ways to travel out of their neighbourhoods and enjoy walking locally.

## Key Points:

- Residents consistently identified long commutes as among the least desirable features of a neighbourhood.
- Transit users had longer commutes than drivers, who tended to have higher incomes and own their homes.
- Those with short commutes report substantially better mental health, feelings of safety, and a stronger feeling of community.
- People who get around their neighbourhoods by walking reported better mental health and feelings of safety.
- Interviewees spoke to the benefits of walking.

Access to active forms of transportation (e.g., safe cycling routes, maintained sidewalks, etc.) and shorter commute times have been identified as significant social determinants of health. Studies have shown the connection between long commutes and a number of health issues including: increased absence due to sick days at work, increased anxiety and social isolation and decreased time activities that increase health like sleep, food preparation and physical exercise (Ala-Mursula et al., 2006; Christian, 2012; Pohanka and Fitzgerald, 2004). Meanwhile communities that have easy access to active transportation are shown to be 'more physically active, have less weight gain, have lower rates of traffic injuries, and are less exposed to air pollution' (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012).

## Short commute times increase neighbourhood desirability and community well-being

Perhaps not coincidentally, transportation and mobility are among the more important neighbourhood characteristics cited by our respondents. In the conjoint experiment, for example, a short commute (less than 30 minutes) increases neighbourhood desirability about as much as high quality schools.

By contrast, a long commute (more than 60 minutes) is among the least desirable features of a neighbourhood in the conjoint experiment. Similarly, respondents with shorter commutes reported more positive responses along several indicators of well-being. For example, respondents with shorter commutes reported substantially better mental health compared to respondents with long commutes (65% reported excellent or very good mental health, compared to 50% of respondents with long commutes). They were also much more likely to feel very safe in their neighbourhoods (50% vs. 30%) and that people in their communities help each other out (60% vs. 48%).

Interviewees expressed similar sentiments. Several respondents discussed the importance of transit access in providing a positive experience of their neighbourhoods. By contrast, some interviewees noted the psychologically draining effects of a long commute. And several noted that car traffic is among their greatest concerns regarding neighbourhood safety.



## Residents who depend on transit face significant hardships

Commute time interacts with mode of transit in respondents' neighbourhood experience and priorities. Most residents typically drive to get around the city, but those who take public transit reported substantially longer commute times. The inconvenience of public transit leads some to choose to drive, despite the fact that they value transit.

Mode of transit plays a significant role in other ways as well. Higher income residents are much more likely to drive than are lower income residents (75% vs. 33%) who are more likely to use public transit (33% vs. 10%). Drivers were also more likely to be home owners than renters. Coupled with poor transit access, this creates hardships for some of the neighbourhoods' more vulnerable residents, who in interviews often noted concerns with long wait times, poor service status updates, and overcrowded buses.

## Residents value the convenience of walkable neighbourhoods and the personal and community benefits of walking



The grocery stores, the shopping centre or a coffee shop or restaurants. If I want to dine-in with my friends, it's easy and close. Even it's easy to walk.

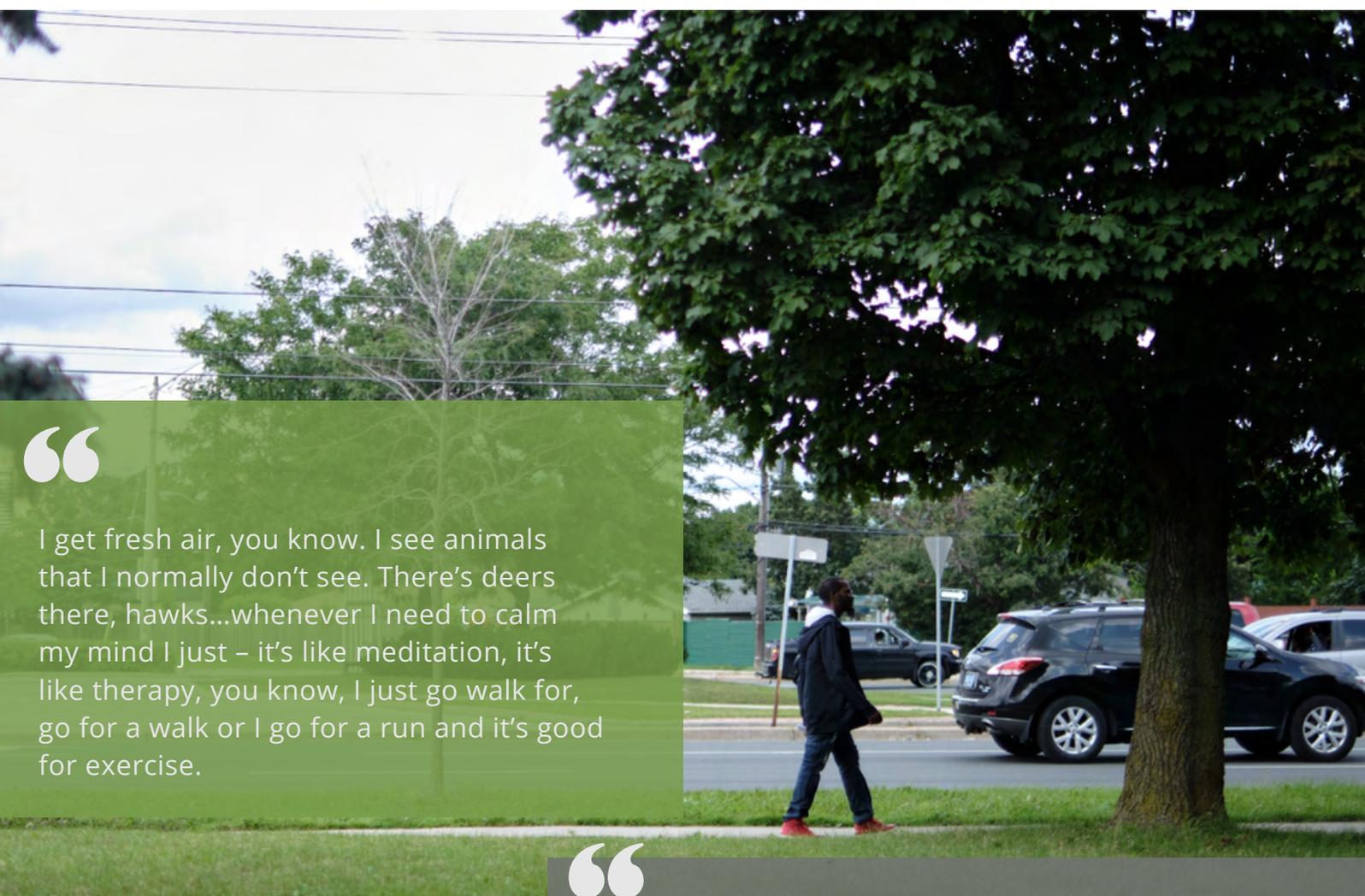


I can take a stroll at the park in the daytime, walk through my neighbourhood in the daytime like kids will be playing outside so that would, seeing other kids outside playing ball and like people walking out will make me feel safe cause I'm not alone.

Despite preconceptions about walking and walkability in suburban contexts, walking played an important role in many respondents' local priorities. About 25% of residents typically walked to get around **their neighbourhoods, and this group tended to have middle to lower incomes. Walking was linked in our survey with better self-reported mental health and with a reduced likelihood of reporting feeling "a little unsafe" in the neighbourhood compared to drivers.** Interviewees discussed how walkability can enhance a sense of safety, particularly if others are out in the streets as well. Part of the reason for this disconnect between our respondents' experience and standard preconceptions about suburban areas is that **our respondents rarely defined their communities in reference to downtown Toronto.** More commonly, they would use outer suburban communities, where many of their friends and family resided, as points of reference. In this comparison, it makes sense to perceive Toronto's inner suburbs as decidedly more "urban," not only in terms of walkability, but as we see below, in terms of access to amenities and services.

The benefits of walking were a common theme among interviewees. Some commented on the convenience of walkable neighbourhoods. Beyond convenience and physical exercise, **several interviewees noted psychological benefits to walking, citing access to nature and a deeper connection to the surrounding environment.** Nevertheless, some respondents noted **significant barriers to walking in their neighbourhoods**, often by way of pedestrian safety or poor upkeep of walking paths.

In sum, transit and mobility are central to our respondents' experience of their neighbourhoods. They value shorter commutes and transit access, and see the personal and community benefits of walking and walkability. While many respondents take pride in the convenient access their neighbourhoods give them to nearby local amenities and other parts of the city, they also note various barriers to fully realizing their neighbourhoods' potential, most notably the inconvenience and overcrowding of public transit, pedestrian safety, and road and trail maintenance.



“

I get fresh air, you know. I see animals that I normally don't see. There's deers there, hawks...whenever I need to calm my mind I just – it's like meditation, it's like therapy, you know, I just go walk for, go for a walk or I go for a run and it's good for exercise.

“

Even if it's like one foot of grass you feel scared to walk on the grass.

# Neighbourhood Services and Amenities

Residents want to be informed of and have access to a variety of high quality local services and amenities.

## Key Points:

- Local amenities and recreational opportunities are associated with improved individual outcomes, and this is reflected in our results.
- School quality and parks & green spaces are key causes of neighbourhood attractiveness in our survey experiment.
- Immigrants and racialized persons were less aware of nearby local services, even though they are often among key populations targeted by these services.
- Mutual support among neighbours increases knowledge of local amenities.
- Respondents valued health care services and places of worship, but did not necessarily prioritise their location in their residential neighbourhoods.
- Interviewees expressed willingness to travel to visit family doctors, but a preference for local walk-in clinics, mental health supports, and youth services.

Local amenities and services are often very valuable to residents in our study areas. This is not surprising, given their value to neighbourhood health. A number of studies have shown that the quality of local amenities and recreational sites has a direct connection to individual outcomes such as health behaviours, mental health status and obesity (Altschuler, Somkin and Adler, 2004). Access to parks and recreation facilities in particular plays a clear role in preventing chronic health conditions and reducing physical decline in older adults (Besenyi et al., 2014; Ranchod et al., 2014). In line with this past research, we found that **parks and green spaces were significant causes of increased neighbourhood attractiveness**, even when set against factors like safety, commuting, and schools. **School quality also stood out** amongst all amenities. Neighbourhoods with high-quality schools were significantly more attractive than neighbourhoods with low quality schools, controlling for other amenities or neighbourhood attributes, and this effect was among the strongest the experiment revealed.

## Awareness of local amenities and services differs significantly among residents

The survey also revealed significant differences among respondents in terms of their knowledge of local amenities and services. Residents **born outside of Canada and racialized respondents in particular tended to list fewer total amenities or services in their neighbourhoods compared to Canadian-born and white residents, even when they lived nearby each other.** Residents who felt that their neighbours “kept to themselves” also tended to list fewer local amenities and services compared to those who described their neighbourhood as one where neighbours “look out for each other.” This trend may suggest that **residents who live in neighbourhoods with fewer interactions with their neighbours are less likely to be informed of and utilise neighbourhood amenities.** Interviews also showed the challenges newcomers face in learning about available services. Many remarked that they **did not know how to get information or had difficulties accessing services such as classes and recreational opportunities.** Sometimes, internet and computer access were the primary issues. Other barriers included language as well knowledge about where to look for resources: “I’m very unaware of some of these services, I don’t know where to go.” These results point to the importance of amenities and services in sustaining community trust, as well as the challenges in informing newcomers about available local services.



Additionally, it is worth noting that services such as healthcare and places of worship were not principal determinants of neighbourhood attractiveness according to the conjoint experiment. This does not necessarily mean these services are unimportant to residents, far from it. Rather, it indicates that when imagining their ideal neighbourhood, the presence of those amenities is outweighed by factors such as safety and commute time. Residents may also value access to health care or places of worship, but in some cases not consider them important for them to be located close to their residence.

“There are some free recreation centres out there but I don't know how to get into that. People with good Internet connection and good computer can login first and they can get it.”

# Community vitality



“

It's very accessible to the library, mall, to the station, community centre, so I like that about it.

## Residents see local amenities and services as central to community vitality

Many interviewees cited local amenities and services as what they like most about their neighbourhoods. Many mentioned parks and green spaces, in line with our survey findings. However, **interviewees also often mentioned abundant grocery stores, diverse restaurants, and key community assets such as community centres and libraries.**

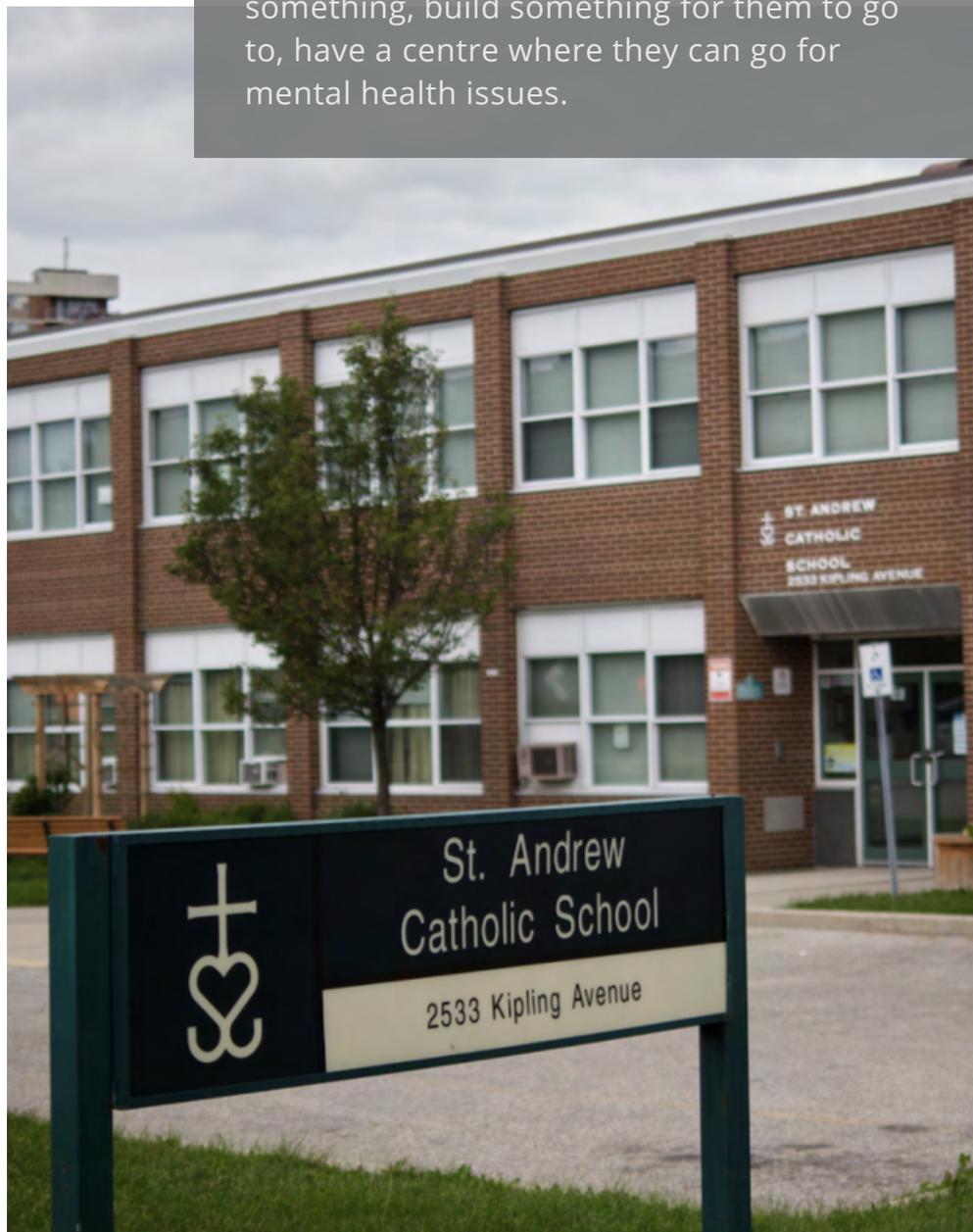
In **contrast to the image of the inner suburbs as defined as lacking in contrast to downtown**, many interviewees saw their communities as offering a vibrant set of amenities and services suited to their preferences and desires. Residents often pointed to a few assets in particular as having created important hubs for the local community. These included the **Albion Library, Rexdale Community Centre, and the YMCA, as well as retail clusters in Scarborough Town Centre or Albion Mall.** **Comments like this illustrate how key social institutions contribute to the feeling of being more deeply connected** to a strong neighbourhood community.

## Many residents believe that youth and mental health services would improve their neighbourhoods

Given our study's focus on neighbourhood health, our interviews explicitly probed respondents regarding health care services. In line with the survey, a number of interviewees indicated that they traveled outside of their neighbourhood to visit their family doctors. Many suggested this was grounded in the trust they had previously established with their doctors. At the same time, **dissatisfaction with long wait times and dated medical technology and/or equipment at their local hospitals are also key reasons why residents decide to travel out of their area or city for urgent and non-urgent hospital visits.** That said, a number of residents did value having nearby medical services. Mental health services in particular were frequently highlighted as a missing piece of community infrastructure. Walk-in clinics were also seen as a valued local service.

“

Have something for youths. Have something, build something for them to go to, have a centre where they can go for mental health issues.





“

It's amazing. It's like a multicultural community here. Even the Albion Library, they do a foodie festival. Even sometimes like in February they do the Black History Month

Given the great importance residents attach to local amenities and services, it is no wonder that when asked about what would most improve their neighbourhood, many pointed to additions or improvements in this area. **Youth services and after school programs were among the most commonly cited, often in connection with their mental health benefits.** Others wished for **more opportunities for personal growth and enrichment across the life course**, highlighting a need for services and programs that reflect the diversity of the communities they live in. Where these programs exist, residents would like to see more investment and offerings or an expansion of services to be more inclusive and accessible, such as pre- and post-natal programs, sewing classes for seniors, social clubs for women, and art programs for youth.

In sum, amenities and services are crucial to our respondents' experience of and priorities for their neighbourhoods. They **value access to everyday amenities** such as grocery stores, shops, and restaurants, as well as the community-building aspects of key assets such as libraries and community centres. A **concentration of these types of amenities and services, both commercial retail and non-profit government hubs and centres, provides social infrastructure that promotes a sense of community and supports a more walkable and convenient neighbourhood.** While most residents appreciated the assets already available in their neighbourhoods, they also noted significant gaps and barriers to accessing and learning about them, as well as opportunities for improving them.

## Secondary Priorities: Diversity and Housing

Residents have a range of opinions on the importance of housing type/cost and living in diverse neighbourhoods.

### Key Points:

- Housing cost tends to arise as a concern for residents when thinking about general city policies and about moving to or from neighbourhoods.
- Housing cost was less important when thinking about what features of neighbourhoods they like or do not like.
- Ethno-cultural diversity was less important than factors like safety, schools, or commutes in the survey experiment and did not carry clear significance for respondents.
- In interviews, a significant minority of residents identified living in diverse integrated neighbourhoods as their favourite neighbourhood attribute, but this was countered by a smaller group of dissenting voices who preferred more mono-cultural communities.

Housing and cultural diversity are two topics that receive significant discussion in local media and popular culture; further, they impact our health. Improper housing can accelerate the spread of infectious disease, expose individuals to chronic respiratory symptoms and increase the chance of injury at home (Krieger and Higgins, 2002). Living in housing in a poor state of repair has also been linked to chronic stress, with even higher levels of instances of mental disorders for children who live in such environments (Kumar, Anjana and Nina, 2019). And high housing costs have been shown to impact health, especially as high costs of shelter force families to reduce spending on areas like nutritious meals (Krieger and Higgins, 2002). While living in a diverse community is less clearly a determinant of health in itself, racism has been shown to have a real impact on health (Gee, 2016), making the cultural makeup of neighbourhoods and the interaction between communities within them important to consider. All of this makes it not surprising that both Housing and Diversity came up throughout our study. However, findings were not as consistent across our data in these areas, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions about resident perceptions and priorities in these areas.

Regarding housing, the survey clearly shows that reducing housing costs is the top policy priority among respondents, and there is strong preference against neighbourhoods dominated by apartment buildings. In interviews, however, housing costs were rarely mentioned as among the major problems in respondents' neighbourhoods as part of their response to open-ended questions on this theme, though sometimes the issue did arise in discussing why they chose to live in the current neighbourhood or why they might or might not move. Regarding housing type, we found a clear stigma against social housing and a strong preference for detached homes. Speaking generally, we can say that **housing cost seems to arise when residents think about general city policies and about moving to or from neighbourhoods, but it is less important when thinking about what features of neighbourhoods they like or do not like.**



The topic of diversity also had unclear significance across our data. In this case, its importance was much clearer in the qualitative than the quantitative results. A **significant minority of residents listed living in diverse integrated neighbourhoods as their favourite neighbourhood attribute, but this was countered by dissenting voices who preferred more mono-cultural communities.** In the survey, however, diversity was by far the least relevant variable in driving neighbourhood preference in the conjoint experiment. While it was clear that the cultural make-up of a neighbourhood was important to residents, there simply was not the unambiguous evidence one way or another to say that this attribute carried the same weight for residents as did safety, commuting, or amenities. This stands in contrast to similar research in the US that found the desire to live with people similar to oneself was one of the most consistent factors in location priorities.

# The Role of Government in Moving Neighbourhoods Forward

Residents perceive government at the local level through personal connection and service delivery, with lower levels of trust for City Hall.

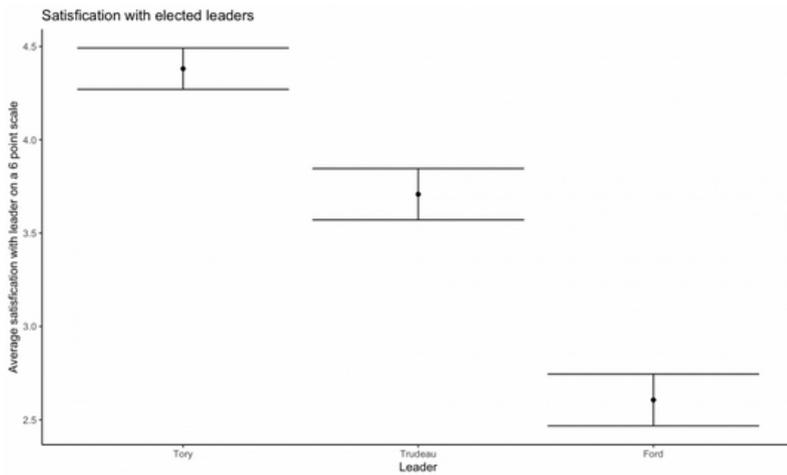
## Key Points:

- Policy implementation depends on resident confidence in government, leadership, and societal institutions.
- Residents indicated strong satisfaction with Mayor John Tory and considerable dissatisfaction with Premier Doug Ford.
- The police were the most trusted institution, while city hall, city councillors, and unions were the least trusted. Residents also showed greater trust in the school system and local charities and organisations.
- Interviewees often attributed spotty service provision and poor upkeep of infrastructure and the public realm to a lack of respect.
- Direct personal engagement by politicians and leaders was seen as a sign of care and concern
- Residents prioritised tangible improvements to the public realm over political ideology

In addition to understanding what residents prioritise in their neighbourhoods, Community Voices aims to unpack residents' views about the role of government in achieving these priorities. This is important because **without trust and confidence in government and leadership, even policies that evince widespread agreement will be difficult to implement.** Accordingly, this section discusses our findings regarding residents' confidence and support for leaders and institutions as well as their satisfaction and engagement with government.

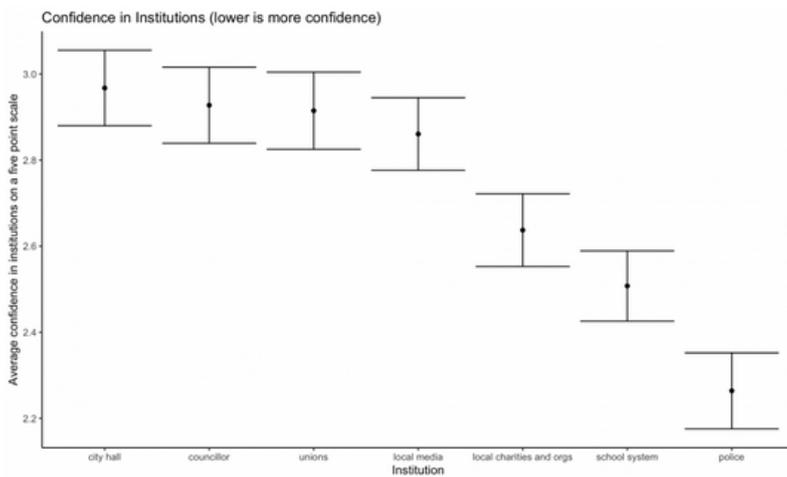
## Residents' confidence and support for leaders and institutions

Overall, our survey showed a majority of residents **generally held positive views of leaders** (especially mayor John Tory and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau) and governments, with two major exceptions: residents strongly disapproved of Ontario Premier Doug Ford, and **confidence levels in City Councillors and City Hall were notably lower than for other civic institutions.**



The low satisfaction with Premier Ford was especially notable in that much of our study area includes parts of Toronto known colloquially as “Ford Country,” which suggests that Doug Ford’s appeal in these communities had waned relative to his brother, former Mayor Rob Ford. Our survey was conducted during the 2019 Federal election

and a public controversy about school funding, and this might have influenced results — though we saw no meaningful deviation throughout the course of our data collection in respondent ratings of any elected officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Respondents overall showed strong support for Mayor John Tory.



Confidence in institutions is a widely used indicator by social researchers to gauge societal or community trust overall and in particular organisations. **We examined confidence in the police, local media, unions, local charities, city hall, local city councillor, and the school system. Results showed that confidence in Toronto City Hall and Toronto City Councillors were the lowest;**

**in fact, the majority of respondents were either neutral or did not have confidence.** By contrast, about 60% of respondents had some level of confidence in the police, 18% were neutral, and only 15% did not have confidence. Moreover, 48% of respondents agreed that City Hall pays enough attention to their neighbourhoods, though a slim majority did feel the City was responsive and delivered quality services. Still, the lower levels of confidence in City Hall and City Councillors, as well as the high levels of confidence in police, were shared between the lower and higher SES neighbourhoods. These findings are consistent with prior studies conducted in Toronto.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, the survey shows multiple overlapping trends around residents’ perceptions of government. In regards to taxation, **a majority of respondents (around 60%) did want to see the government raise taxes for policy areas that they prioritised in their neighbourhoods.** This seems to suggest that residents in our focus communities were not averse to government intervention or paying more for taxes to pay for their priority areas, especially if they are for amenities or direct services.

<sup>4</sup> See the Toronto Social Capital Study ([toronto-social-capital-study---final-report.pdf](https://toronto-social-capital-study---final-report.pdf) ([environicsinstitute.org](https://environicsinstitute.org)))

# Residents' Satisfaction and Engagement with Government

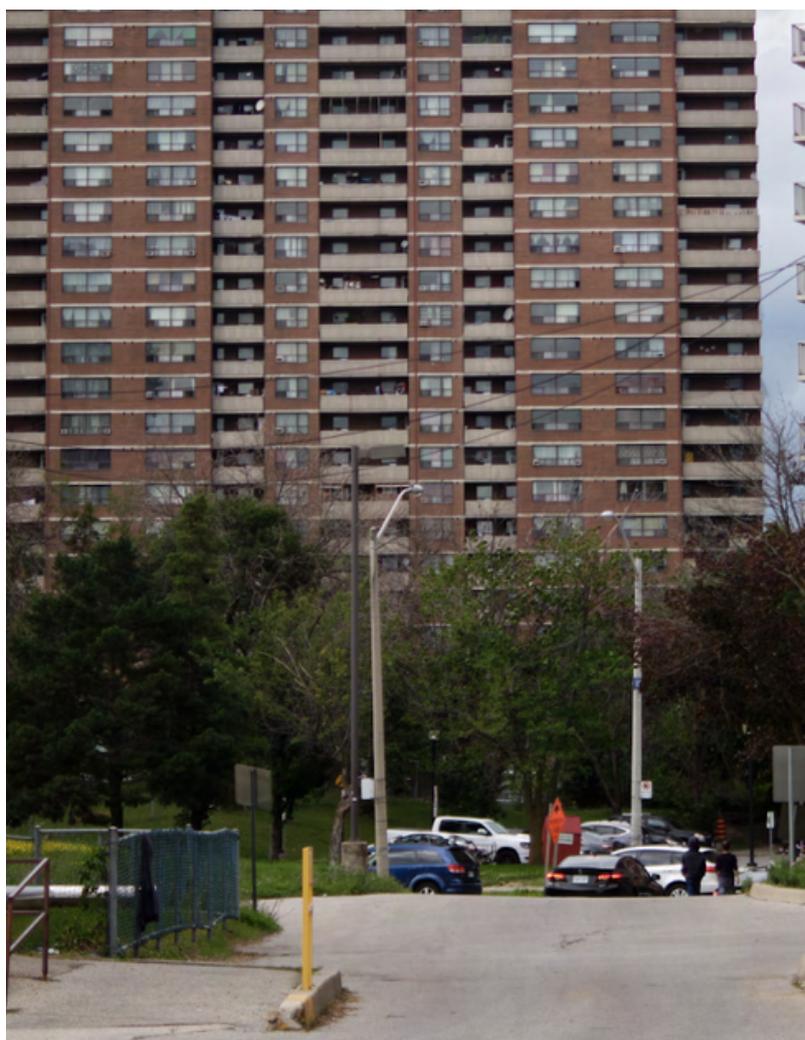


The qualitative interviews helped us to unpack **how the amorphous concept of 'government' is conceptualised** at the neighbourhood level and how residents imagine its role in neighbourhood improvement, along with providing some insight into why people held particular stances captured by the survey. In general, **interviewees pointed to tangible, visible government action rather than ideology**. For example, many pointed to the level of service provision (both variety and quality) and upkeep of public infrastructure. These served as visual signals of financial investment and respect for local residents. Examples of dilapidated buildings (often specifically those of Toronto Metro Housing), dangerous road infrastructure, and unkempt recreational areas were repeatedly used as evidence that residents' neighbourhoods were not prioritised by government actors.

At the same time, **direct engagement by local politicians was an important indicator of government care, and respondents stressed that engagement needs to be continual rather than only during election season**. Some even reminisced about former Mayor and Councillor Rob Ford, who famously called back constituents personally. This gesture was especially strong for those who did not feel that they could navigate traditional feedback channels to voice their concerns. Often these were immigrants who additionally struggled with a language barrier. Those that did feel current channels were sufficient often had personal experience working in government, were longer term residents or had higher education or income. Altogether, **respondents cared much more about direct personal and financial investment in their neighbourhoods than abstract principles about the government's role in daily life or party affiliation**.

These same concerns loomed large in interviewees' thoughts about what the government should do to help their neighbourhoods. Suggestions to increase funding towards schools and other forms of educational programming were frequent. This may have also been influenced by provincial cuts to education that were being implemented during the time interviews were conducted. In fact, this was one of the only topics in which interviewees mentioned specific political figures or parties. Instead, **many framed increased service provision (including schools) as a public good that would increase the overall health of their neighbourhood.**

When residents felt that there was a continued failure to address local needs, **many concluded that stigmatization played a role in resource allocation.** When asked about what caused this stigma, the demographic makeup of their neighbourhood was a common answer. **Having a high number of racialized, immigrant, or low-income households was thought to explain low levels of investment.** At times these feelings of neglect led to a low willingness to engage with elected officials due to a lack of trust. Whether or not interviewees felt they had the knowledge to navigate these systems, most showed a clear conception of what services and amenities were public assets and the changes they wanted to see in them. Coupled with a relationship with the representatives that advocate on their behalf, residents' understanding of the role of government is tangible and built on engagement.



It is important to note that feelings of distrust and lack of attention from the government can have clear health impacts, best understood when they are considered through the lens of social inclusion/exclusion. Social exclusion is defined as the inability of individuals to fully participate in society, including political participation (van Bergen et al., 2019). Studies have shown a direct correlation between high levels of social exclusion and negative health effects particularly around mental health (van Bergen et al., 2019). As such our residents perceptions of local government do not just matter from a perspective of the vitality or efficacy of our democracy, but also as a social determinant of health.

# What Drives Resident Priorities?

Resident priorities derive from personal experiences of their neighbourhoods, and their views cluster around shared characteristics.

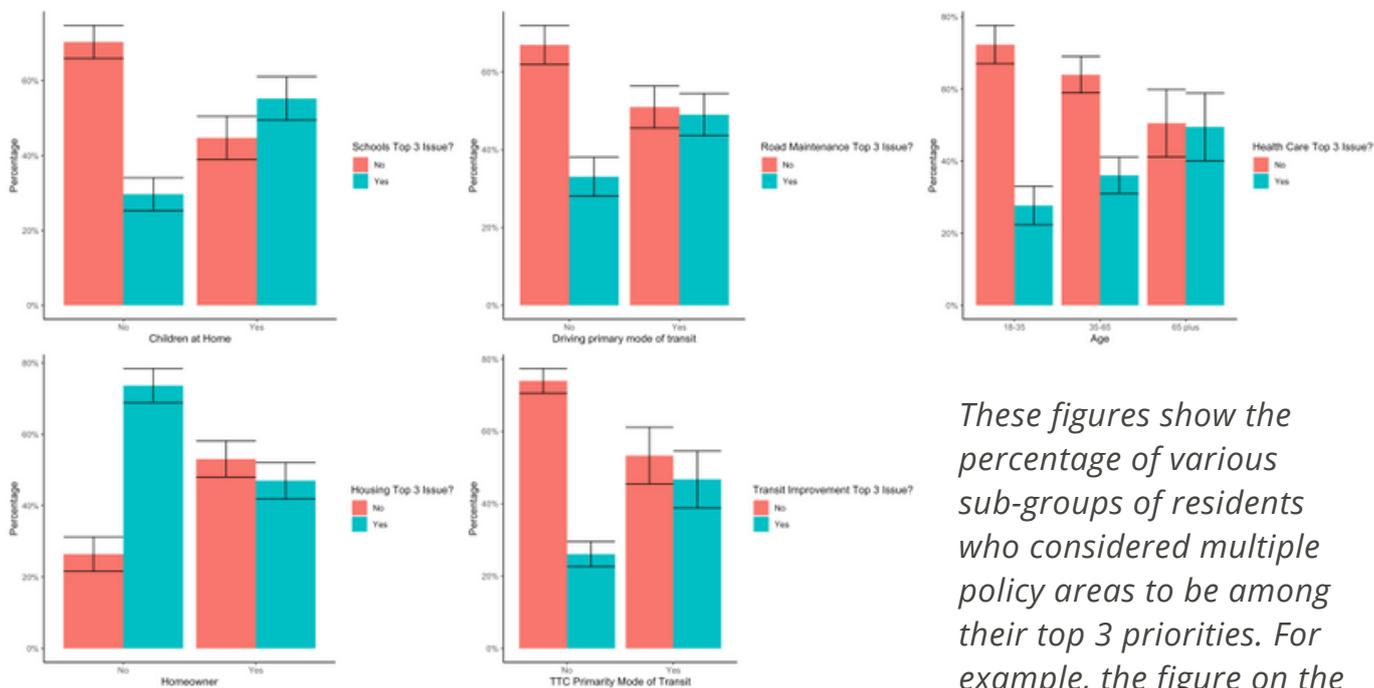
## Key points:

- Neighbourhood priorities and perceptions do not align neatly with geography. Neighbours often perceive their neighbourhoods in very different ways.
- Personal experience explains perceptions to a greater degree: drivers tend to prioritise road maintenance, renters tend to prioritise housing costs, older individuals tend to prioritise health care.
- Some homeowners do strongly prioritise reducing housing costs, however, especially those who live in lower income neighbourhoods.
- We identified five overall types of inner suburban residents: dissatisfied, left-leaning young people; hopeful, trusting new Canadians; well-connected, racialized middle class; highly educated and wealthy liberal homeowners; conservative leaning, older homeowners.
- Neighbourhood and policy priorities align with these groups, which reveal the underlying structure behind the diverse community voices we uncovered.



Community Voices' survey and interviews give voice to some shared concerns as well as a range of neighbourhood preferences, priorities, and perceptions in Toronto's inner suburbs, many of which overlap with factors identified by researchers that are conducive to community health. This section probes some sources of differences in residents' priorities. In doing so, it reveals the rich diversity of Toronto's inner suburbs, demonstrating that far from representing a monolithic suburban mindset, they contain a range of voices and overlapping priorities. These priorities can be traced back to personal experiences, social relationships, and social statuses such as homeownership, parenthood, mode of transit, income mix, age, class, immigration, and race. Understanding these various bases for residents' perceptions can help policy-makers respond to them more effectively.

# Place and personal experience drive local priorities and perceptions

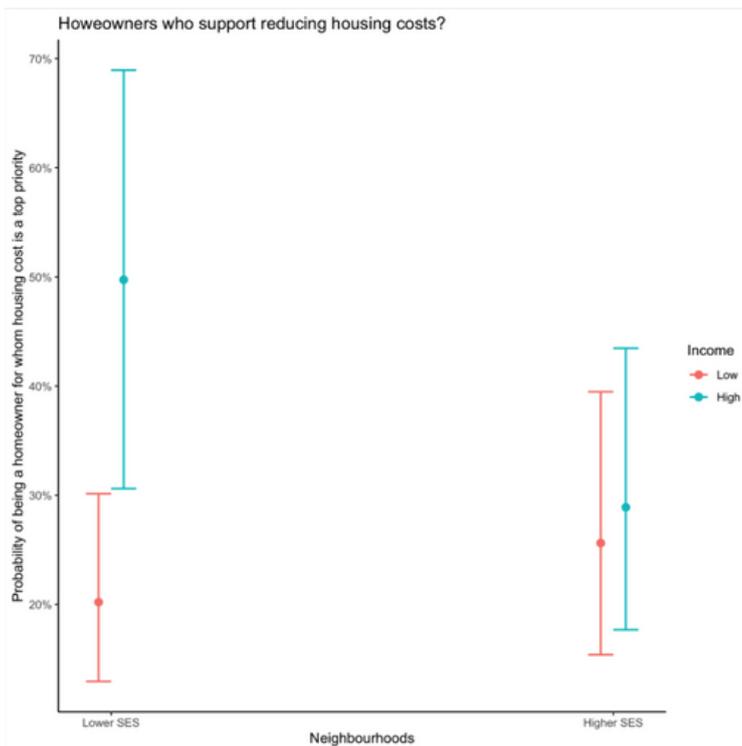


*These figures show the percentage of various sub-groups of residents who considered multiple policy areas to be among their top 3 priorities. For example, the figure on the upper left shows that around 70% of those without children at home do not consider schools to be a top priority, whereas a majority of those with children at home do rate schools as a top priority*

What factors explain why some individuals prioritise some dimensions of neighbourhoods over others? Surprisingly, **people who live very close to one another are not especially likely to share similar neighbourhood priorities.** For example, neighbours often had very different perceptions about how many local amenities were available in their neighbourhoods and about how safe their neighbourhoods are.

In general, **people who live on the same block and walk the same streets may very well experience the same space in different ways.** Similarly, as we saw in the conjoint experiment, views about ideal neighbourhood characteristics were largely similar in both our lower and higher income areas.

If geography does not directly account for residents' priorities, what does? In fact, they follow patterns that our research identified. A critical basis of policy priorities is personal experience. Generally, **residents prioritise issues that are relevant to their own concerns.** The figure to the right makes this clear.



*This figure shows results of a multiple regression analysis examining the impact of respondent income on their probability of rating housing costs as a top policy priority, controlling for a number of other variables.*

We examined the proportions of respondents who ranked various policy areas among their top 3 in importance. We compare, for example, how likely home-owners and non-home owners are to prioritize reducing housing costs. The differences are striking: **over 70% of non-homeowners rated reducing housing costs as a high priority, compared to about 45% of homeowners**; residents with children at home were much more likely to prioritise improving local schools than residents without children at home (over 50% vs. 30%); drivers tended to prioritise road maintenance, while transit users were more likely to prioritise improving transit; older individuals rated health care as a more important priority than did younger people.

In general, there are **clear linkages between residents policy priorities and their personal situations. Local policy is not an abstract question of ideology for our respondents but flows directly from concrete experience and a desire to improve quality of life.**

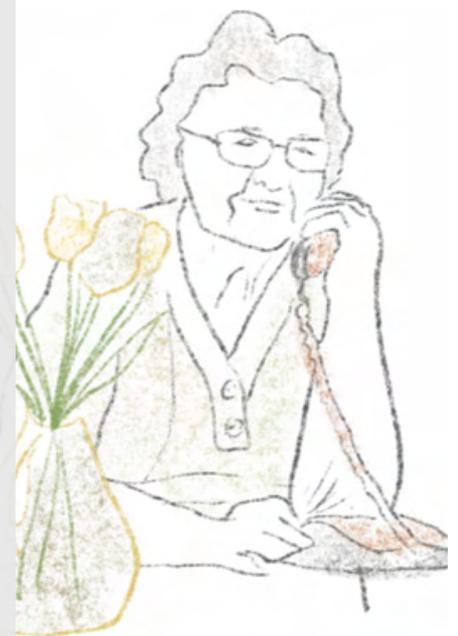
Nevertheless, these linkages between personal experience and policy priority are not always straightforward. Consider again housing costs. While homeowners are less likely to prioritise reducing housing costs compared to non-homeowners, nearly 50% of homeowners still placed reducing housing costs among their top 3 most important issues. **Personal experience and interest can extend widely, including beyond the individual self.** Thus, if we probe deeper we find some patterns here as well. For example, if we examine which homeowners tend to support reducing housing costs, we find that **wealthier individuals who live in lower income neighbourhoods are substantially more likely to do so than wealthy individuals in higher income neighbourhoods**, even when we control for a battery of other variables. While we cannot give a definitive interpretation of this result, it is intriguing; it indicates that wealthier persons living in more economically mixed communities can develop different outlooks compared to those who live in more economically segregated areas, and in particular may be more likely to support policies that can help their lower income neighbours.

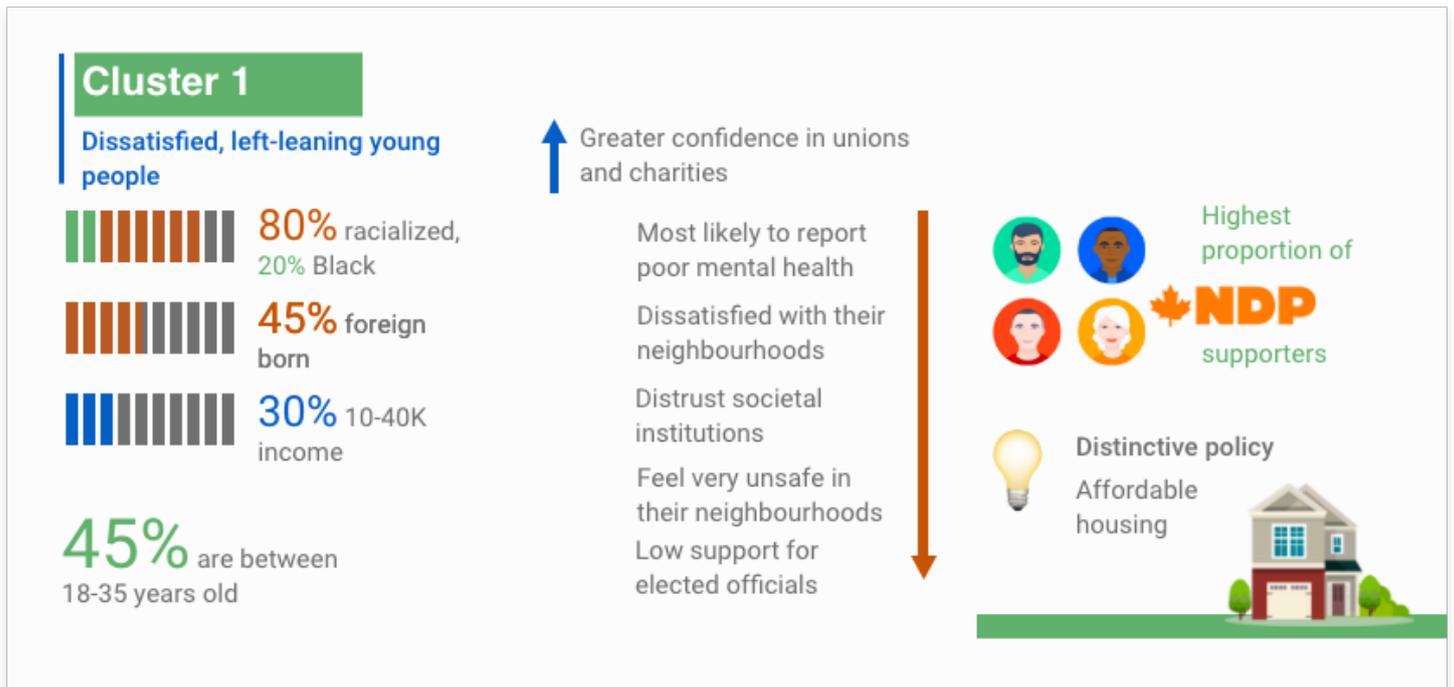
# Five types of Toronto inner suburban residents



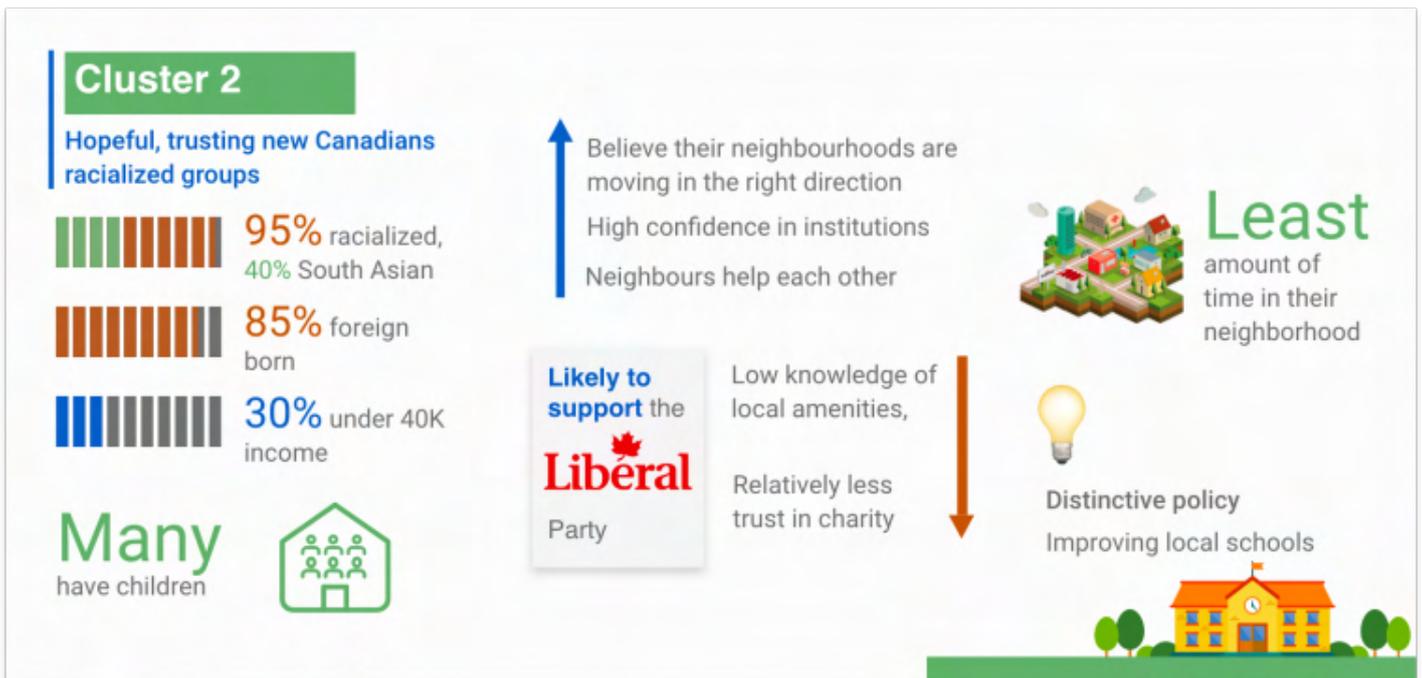
These results suggest taking a more holistic approach to understanding the basis of residents' perceptions and priorities of their neighbourhoods. **Individuals are complex, and cannot be reduced to any single attribute.** Therefore, to understand diverse sources of residents' views, we used statistical techniques to identify five clusters of respondents. Broadly speaking, these clusters identify respondents who tend to answer different questions in a similar way. They show major axes along which individuals differ from one another, and help to determine the most important sources of those differences.

The 5 clusters broadly follow the intertwined lines of class and race, with two lower income groups (average annual family incomes between \$50-60,000), a middle income group (average family income around \$65,000), and two upper income groups (around 110k and 190k, respectively). 75 to 95% of the three lower and middle income groups are members of racialized groups, while racialized persons comprise about 40% of the upper income clusters. All clusters are around the same size, with the exception of cluster 2, which is the largest and about twice as big as the others.

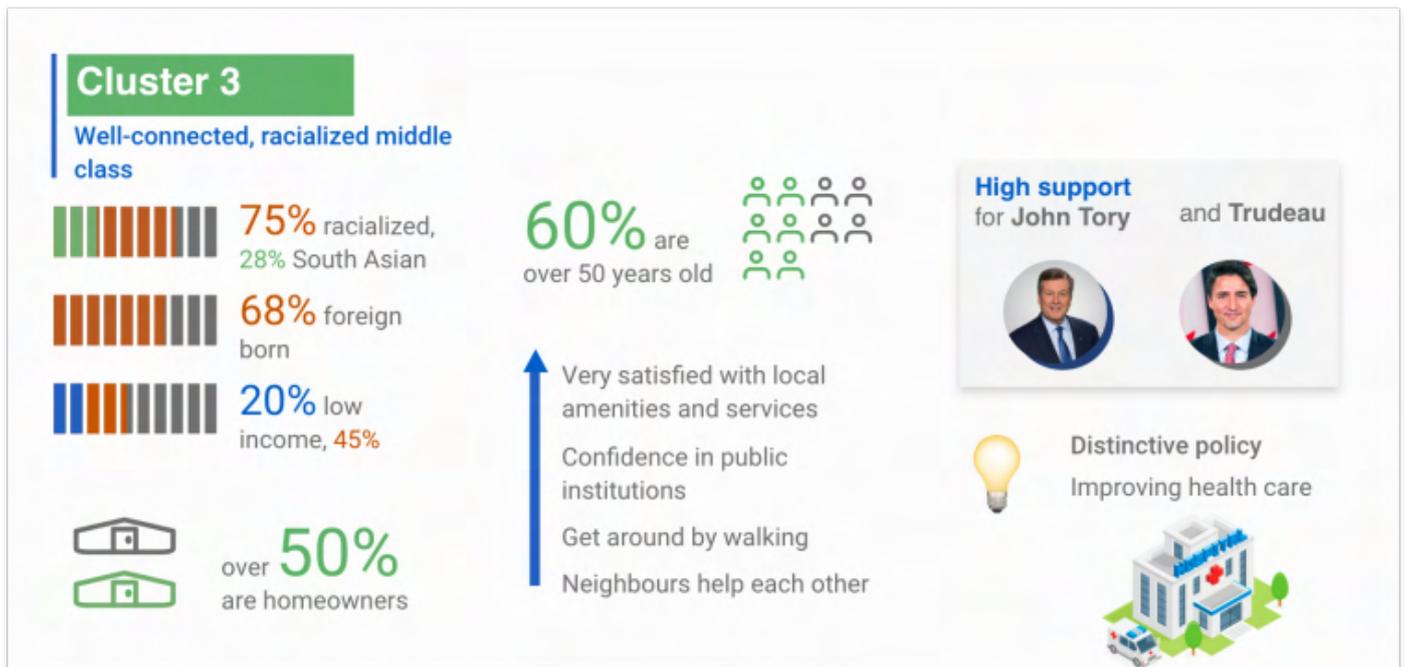




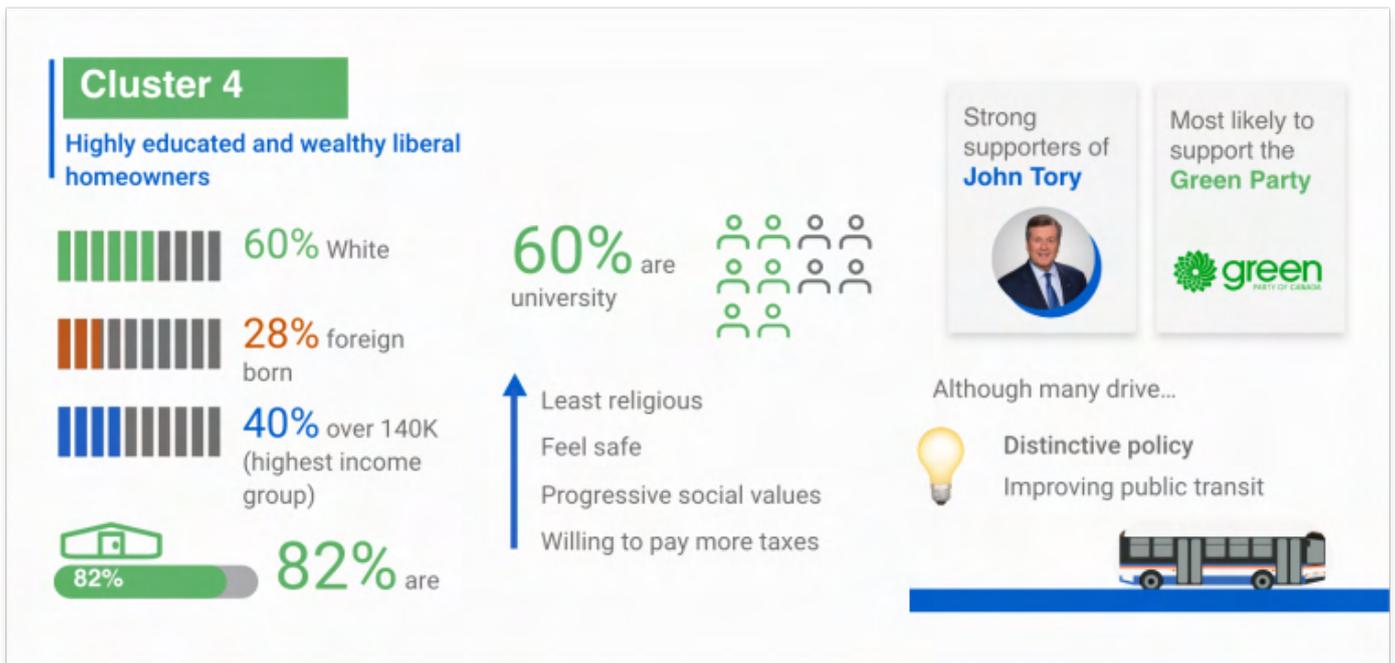
Cluster 1 could be described as **dissatisfied, left-leaning young people**. Residents in this cluster are predominantly young (45% between 18-35 years old), lower income (45% have 10-40k family income), racialized (80%; 20% Black). Around 45% were born outside Canada, and most (75%) live in high rises. **This group tends to be dissatisfied with their neighbourhoods overall (only rating it around 5 on a 10-point scale) and distrust societal institutions, especially police and schools, though they show greater confidence in unions and charities.** Only 25% believe that people help each other out in their neighbourhoods, and relatively few feel their neighbourhood receives enough attention from city hall. **They feel very unsafe in their neighbourhoods** (around 75% feel very unsafe or a little unsafe) and are the most likely to report “poor” mental health. Almost none are Conservative Party supporters, and this group contains the highest proportion of NDP supporters and those with no political affiliation. They show relatively weak support for elected officials at all levels of government, but especially for Premier Doug Ford. **Housing costs were the #1 issue for over 40% of this group**, the highest priority of any issue for any group, though they also prioritized social programs (e.g., job training, newcomer programs, etc.).



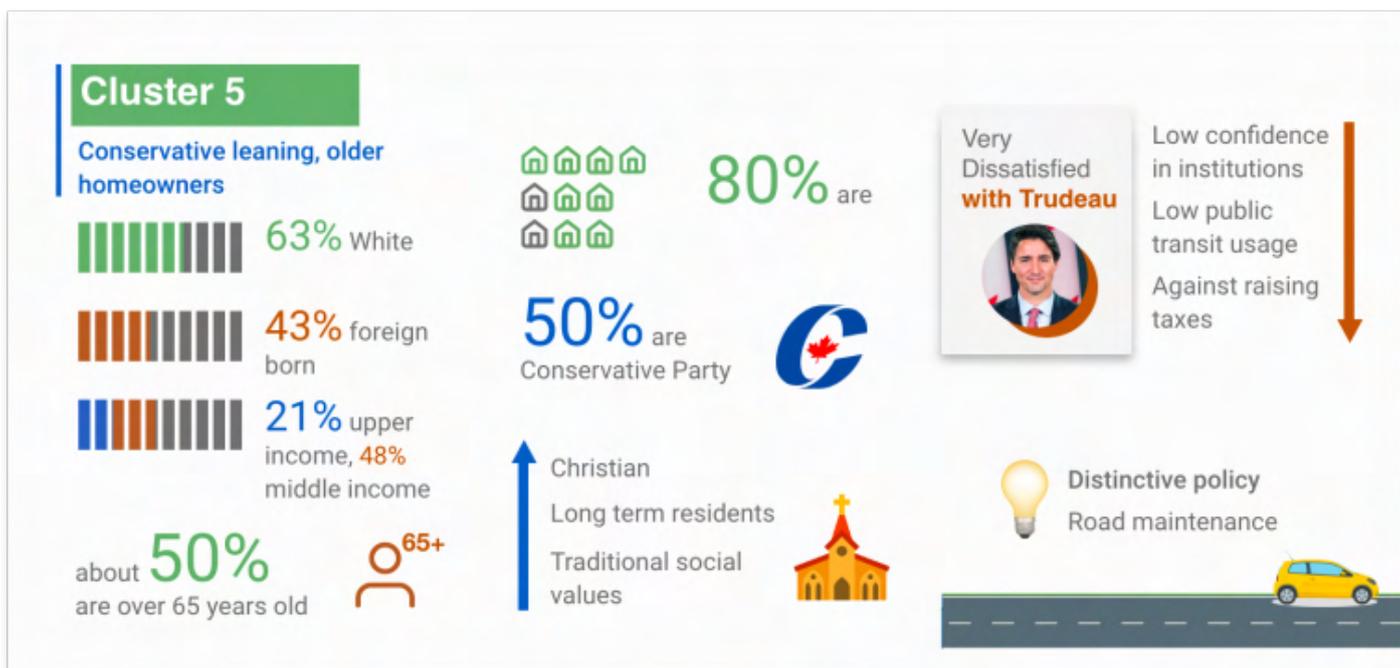
Cluster 2, the largest cluster, could be characterised as **hopeful, trusting new Canadians**. Residents in this cluster are also relatively young and lower income; 95% are members of racialized groups (40% South Asian), most live in high rises, 85% are foreign born (the highest of any cluster), and on average they have lived the least amount of time in their neighbourhoods. Many have children at home. **The most distinctive feature of this group is a general lack of awareness regarding neighbourhood services and amenities.** At the same time, **they show strong confidence in institutions**, though they have relatively less trust in charity organisations. They tend to **believe their neighbourhoods are moving in the right direction**, that neighbours help each other out, and that city hall is providing good services and appropriate levels of attention to their neighbourhoods. They are relatively satisfied with all political leaders, but are most likely to be Liberal Party supporters. Reducing housing costs and improving local schools are the top policy priorities for this group.



Cluster 3 could be described as **well-connected, racialized middle class**. Over 50% are in the middle-income bracket and 60% are over 50 years old. Around two-thirds are foreign born, 75% are racialized (28% South Asian, 15% Black). Over 50% are homeowners, and nearly 60% have lived in their neighbourhood for over 10 years. **These residents stand out as the most likely to be “very satisfied” with their local amenities and services, to think neighbours help each other out (80%), to believe that their neighbourhood is moving in the right direction (nearly 60%), and to feel very safe (nearly 60% report feeling “very safe”).** They are strong Liberal Party supporters, and show especially high support for Mayor John Tory and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. They have the **highest match between their perception of their neighbourhood and the local ideal**, the greatest confidence in institutions (especially city hall), and are very satisfied with city services and the attention their neighbourhoods receive. **These residents have very good self-reported health, the shortest commute times, and are the most likely to get around by walking.** Reducing housing costs and improving health care tend to be their top policy priorities.



Cluster 4 could be characterised as **highly educated and wealthy liberal homeowners**. This is the highest income group (40% over 140k) with the most homeowners (82%) and university graduates (60%). Around 60% are white and a similar proportion live in higher SES neighbourhoods (Cliffcrest and Edenbridge). **These residents stand out in affirming the most progressive social values, being the least religious, the most likely to support the Green Party, being relatively trusting of city hall, and the most likely to call their neighbourhood by its official name.** They are strong supporters of Mayor Tory. They are also the least likely to feel unsafe at night. **Although they are heavily reliant on their cars, their top policy priorities relate to transit;** they strongly support improving public transit and road maintenance, and are especially likely to be willing to pay greater taxes to improve public transit. They are also the most likely to prioritise supporting local businesses.



The final cluster could be described as **conservative leaning, older homeowners**. This cluster has the highest number of seniors (about 50% are over 65), 80% of whom are homeowners, and about 60% white residents. This cluster is the most evenly spread across all our study areas and has on average been living in their neighbourhoods the longest. They stand out most as **the most likely to identify as Christians, as Conservative Party supporters (about 50%), and to espouse old fashioned/traditional social values**. They are very dissatisfied with Justin Trudeau and relatively satisfied with Doug Ford. They show **relatively less confidence in institutions, especially in city hall and unions, but are most trusting of the police**. They rarely use public transit (nearly 60% do so “hardly ever”) and are the most likely to prioritise road maintenance as a policy priority. They are the least likely to support raising taxes to increase government investment in their top ranked policy priority areas.

Altogether, identifying these clusters provides a window into the range and basis of inner suburban residents’ outlooks about their city and communities. There is no single voice of these communities, but a range of voices, and policy makers must take care to seek out and acknowledge all of them.

# New Approaches to Considering Policy for Inner Suburbs: Towards Equality of Neighbourhood Standing

Community Voices helps us think differently about how we support Toronto's inner suburbs.

## Key points

- Inequality of standing refers to which voices and interests are taken into consideration in routine policy discussions. This is a central dimension of urban inequality, which Community Voices seeks to address.
- Residents' amenity preferences are central to their definition of a successful neighbourhood, rather than an abstract notion of "community."
- Resident perceptions of their neighbourhoods and government matter a great deal in shaping their overall satisfaction and sense of wellbeing.
- Taking inner-suburban experience seriously means moving beyond the urban-suburban dichotomy.

## Hierarchies of neighbourhood standing and urban policy

Community Voices is an effort to speak to core problems of urban inequality facing Toronto in the 21st century. **Urban inequality is complex**, however, and involves multiple overlapping dimensions. While unequal material resources are a common thread across forms of social hierarchy, social theorists often identify **three core dimensions of inequality** in social relations: power, esteem, and standing (Anderson, 2012). Hierarchies of power give some groups authority to control or command others; hierarchies of esteem subject some groups to negative stereotypes or stigma; hierarchies of standing give individuals or groups occupying superior social positions special weight in the deliberations of others and in the routine functions of societal institutions. **This third form of inequality occurs, for example, when policy-makers privilege the interests or views of groups such as homeowners or downtown residents over those of renters or inner-suburban residents.**

Community Voices speaks to all three dimensions, but most directly it suggests an agenda for addressing this third form of social inequality in Toronto, inequality in standing. In particular, **our study reveals ways for policy-makers to incorporate the voices, interests, views, and aspirations of the City's inner suburban communities as part of their routine deliberations.** To this end, Community Voices shows how Toronto's inner suburban residents understand their neighbourhoods — what they value in their neighbourhoods, what they think could be improved, what policies they support, how they perceive local government. More specifically, in this report we have emphasised areas especially relevant to advancing our collective understanding of Toronto's inner suburbs and formulating policies potentially conducive to their health and well-being. While the specific findings provide valuable information, perhaps the most fundamental contribution of our study is to provide tools by which policy-makers can work towards reducing inequality of standing between Toronto's neighbourhoods, with a view toward combating tendencies to privilege the views and interests of downtown or upper status suburban communities.



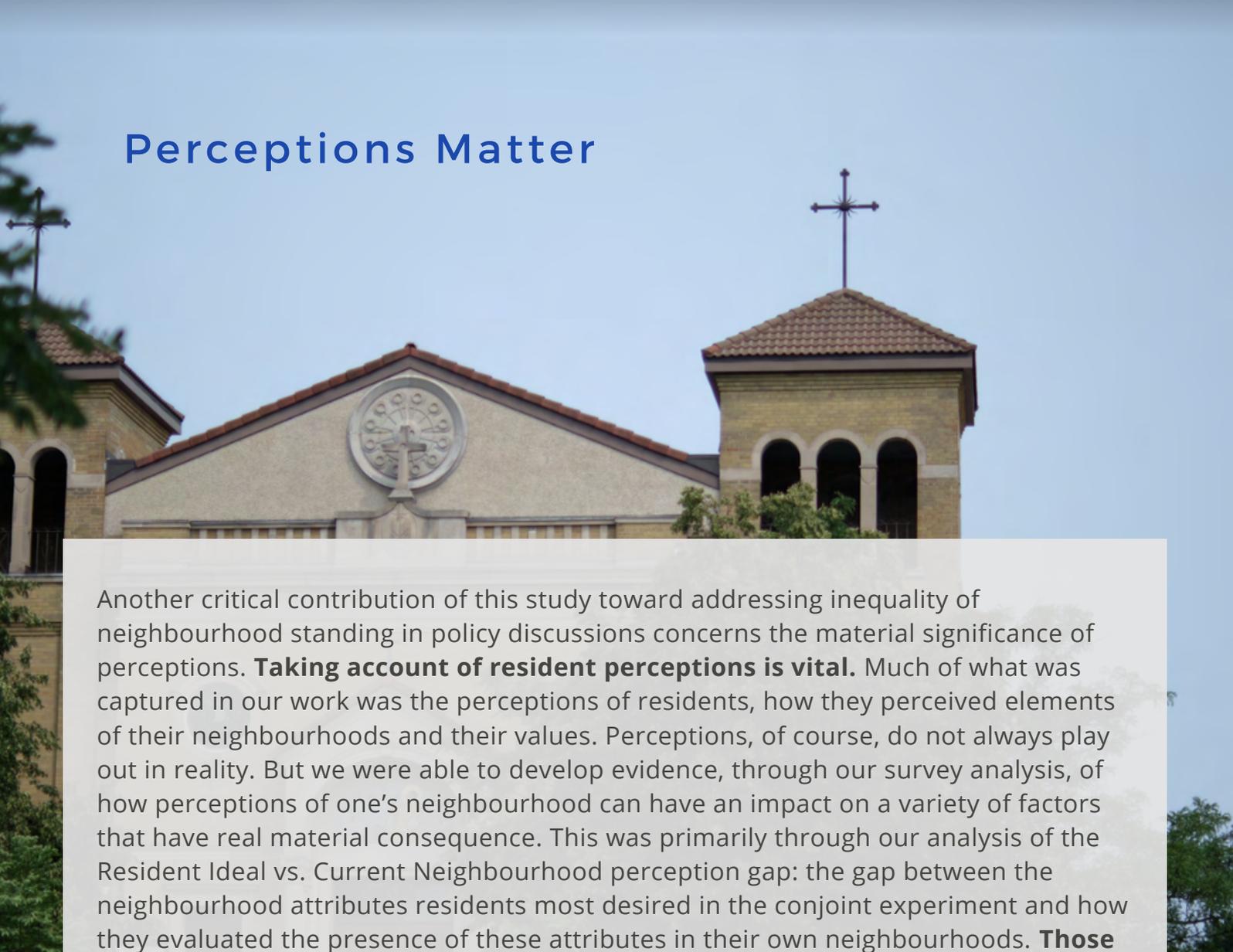
## Understanding Toronto's Inner Suburbs

Toronto's inner suburbs are home to some of Canada's most dynamic communities. Perhaps the most general contribution of Community Voices is to **highlight and codify the great diversity of lifestyles, experiences, and aspirations these communities contain.** Far from bland homogeny, Toronto's inner suburbs are not one community with a singular voice, but an array of overlapping voices and communities. **Recognizing this range of voices** and taking their needs and aspirations seriously, rather than lumping together all those who live "beyond the core," would be an ideal outcome of this study for policy-makers.

Community Voices reaffirms some existing knowledge about Toronto's inner suburban communities that is too easily forgotten or ignored. For example, in line with findings dating back at least to the 1960s (Fonberg and Schellenberg, 2019; Michelson, 1968), residents displayed a clear preference for single family dwellings and home ownership, though they also preferred neighbourhoods that mix multiple types of built form. Similarly, as in past research, we found low levels of confidence in City Hall and City Councillors and the highest levels of trust in police (Toronto Foundation, 2018). While these attitudes are certainly not set in stone, they offer an important reminder to policy-makers and advocates about the existing experiences, priorities and attitudes of local residents.

Just as important is the value our respondents placed on local amenities and services, such as parks and green spaces, community centres, libraries, restaurants, and grocery stores. **Many residents held these sorts of amenities and services — rather than an abstract notion of "community" or government-created administrative boundaries — at the centre of their very definition of their neighbourhoods.** They served both as a point of pride (especially parks, nearby shops and restaurants, and libraries), and as a target for improvement, especially community and youth centres and mental health services. While much policy discourse has highlighted the amenity preferences of highly educated technology, media, and cultural professionals (Florida, 2003; Glaeser, Kolko, and Saez, 2001), **working class and immigrant communities benefit from rich and distinctive amenities.** They too value opportunities for interaction, and the experiences and supports an amenity rich scene provides, which, as some research suggests, can generate local economic growth, neighbourhood identity, and increased political efficacy (Small, 2004; Wherry, 2011; Silver and Clark, 2019).

# Perceptions Matter



Another critical contribution of this study toward addressing inequality of neighbourhood standing in policy discussions concerns the material significance of perceptions. **Taking account of resident perceptions is vital.** Much of what was captured in our work was the perceptions of residents, how they perceived elements of their neighbourhoods and their values. Perceptions, of course, do not always play out in reality. But we were able to develop evidence, through our survey analysis, of how perceptions of one's neighbourhood can have an impact on a variety of factors that have real material consequence. This was primarily through our analysis of the Resident Ideal vs. Current Neighbourhood perception gap: the gap between the neighbourhood attributes residents most desired in the conjoint experiment and how they evaluated the presence of these attributes in their own neighbourhoods. **Those with a large gap between ideal and current neighbourhood were more likely to have lower self-reported physical and mental health, believe their neighbourhood was going in the wrong direction, have low trust in government and were less likely to believe people helped each other out in their neighbourhood.** While the causal links are difficult to determine from this survey alone, the power of the association was higher than for other variables like race, class or income.

What we take from this is support for the idea that good policy design is community informed. **When residents do not feel their neighbourhood matches their ideal, it may have a number of negative knock-on effects around health and civic engagement.** Accordingly, policy makers should spend more time clearly documenting and understanding what the priorities are for communities they are supporting and crafting policies that close the perceived gaps between ideal and reality. This work provides strong evidence that doing this successfully will increase the legitimacy of government, civic engagement, and overall resident satisfaction and health.

## Healthy neighbourhoods

Community Voices can help improve the standing of inner-suburban communities in policy discussions by attending to residents' priorities around identifying and enhancing local determinants of improved health. As noted throughout the report, all of the major priority areas that we identified played a role in impacting residents' health. And overall, **our respondents displayed a strong awareness of the importance of their local neighbourhoods in supporting healthy communities, even though we did not explicitly ask 'what do you think is important to creating a healthy neighbourhood?'** As we saw, respondents saw issues around violence and traffic safety as not only a justice but also a public health issue. Likewise, **when residents spoke about their desire for investment in public transit, they spoke not only of convenience, but of an ability to live healthier lives.** Moreover, the concerns residents voiced about the need for government action around the maintenance of buildings and public spaces have important health implications, as do feelings expressed in interviews around a desire for more direct connections and attention from political leaders. In these and other ways we can conclude that paying attention to the voices of inner suburban communities would have strong public health benefits for Toronto residents.



## Beyond the urban-suburban dichotomy



Our study reveals an inner suburban region that is in many ways a hybrid of urban and suburban lifestyles, forms, and aspirations. Giving due standing to this hybrid is difficult, since it does not fit neatly into traditional images that sharply contrast dense, walkable urban areas with car-centric suburbs where single family homes predominate. **Improving the standing of inner suburban communities means learning to recognise emerging hybrid forms that contain elements of both combined in new and different configurations.** Community Voices may encourage the policy community to chart out a middle path, built around residents' own preferences about what these hybrid forms can be.

To appreciate this direction, it is important to recognise that essentializing Toronto’s inner suburbs as classic suburban built forms is not entirely true. For example, the Toronto region has consistently developed suburbs in “compact, concurrent, and contiguous patterns” (Hess and Sorensen, 2015) consistent with “smart growth” principles. Owing to this, Toronto is one of the most densely populated metropolitan regions in North America, considerably denser than Vancouver or New York (Relph, 2013).

Our interviews articulated the reality of this idea in residents own experience. **Many spoke of their neighbourhoods as being walkable, of there being many nearby local amenities (e.g. parks, nature trails, grocery stores, and shops), and commending the frequency of public transit.** This is the “urban” side of their “suburban” neighbourhoods.



At the same time, **residents’ understanding of government at the neighbourhood level shared many aspects of the “suburban” point of view.** They tended to see government primarily as a purveyor of essential services with a focus on the importance of building maintenance, road improvement, and personally responsive city councillors. Yet, at the same time, **residents made it clear they valued not only private goods but also government-supported public goods such as community centres, parks, and schools.** In fact, the majority were willing to see increased taxation to improve these core services, in opposition to the low tax, light touch populist rhetoric. **Toronto’s inner suburbs resist reduction to any simple caricature or stereotype.**

# Limitations

Despite the considerable insights Community Voices has generated, the study is not without its limitations. First, language proved to be a considerable limitation, in that we were not able to provide full translations of the survey for the different language groups in our study areas. Surveyors with appropriate language competency did provide some translation support where they could, but this was not consistent. Moreover, our interviews were conducted in English. Given the high proportion of residents for whom English is their second language, future iterations of this research would benefit from a greater attention to this issue.

Second, while we achieved a sample of survey respondents that was largely similar to our overall survey population, we also were not able to achieve gender parity in our West-end interviews. This was due to COVID-19, which forced us to end in-person interviews in April 2020. This limited us to only 2 male interviewees out of 11 interviews. We faced similar issues around representation in the East-end but were able to do more targeted recruitment to expand the pool, which the realities of public health measures prevented.

Third, our survey is not representative of the entire inner suburbs. While our aspiration is to better understand the views of Toronto's inner suburbs, and we developed themes that can forward this understanding, our survey and interviews can only represent with a high degree of accuracy seven neighbourhoods, not the entire former cities of Scarborough and Etobicoke (and certainly not North York). Even so, the consistency in responses across neighbourhoods and control groups may suggest that they capture larger trends in opinions from wider geographic spaces.

Finally, our study would have benefited from including a downtown control group. Given time and budget constraints, we were not able to replicate this study within neighbourhoods in the Old City of Toronto/downtown core. This means we cannot say with confidence what views are distinctive to the inner-suburbs in particular, compared to residents of other parts of Toronto.

# Limitations



## 5 Policy Perspectives

**Reducing hierarchies of neighbourhood standing is primarily about a state of mind or set of habits.** In the course of routine discussions about urban policy, to what extent does one overlook or take into consideration the perspectives and interests that characterise inner-suburban communities? Our study primarily aims to cultivate intellectual habits for recognizing these perspectives.

Faced with this complex challenge, there can be no one-size-fits-all solution or policy approach. Complexity cautions pragmatism. More specifically, we suggest

1. responding to the diversity within inner suburban neighbourhoods by seeking to consult as widely as possible on policy decisions. Pay particular attention to those who would fall in our most vulnerable clusters: younger, racialized, apartment dwellers, and racialized newcomers;
2. focusing on the assets that exist within these communities;
3. respecting the lifestyle choices and different understandings of concepts like walkability that local residents may have (instead of chasing an idealised downtown Toronto centric vision of a healthy community);
4. prioritizing short-term, tangible, attainable improvements to buildings, roads and the public realm;
5. taking a long-term focus on making these communities more complete neighbourhoods by increasing access to core local services and amenities neighbours prioritise, rather than re-engineering them from scratch.

In some ways this focus on building on neighbourhoods existing assets fits with the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy, if the strategy was given the financial support and coherent vision needed to re-energise it.

Translating this perspective into concrete policies requires an ongoing dialogue among residents, politicians, policy-makers, researchers, and more. Our goal is not to provide specific operational guidance. However, we believe our research yields a set of priorities that leaders can refer to orient discussions around the interests of local inner suburban communities in a way that grants their interests the equal standing it merits as Toronto continues to chart its course forward.



## 9 General Policy Directions



*By way of conclusion, below are nine key policy directions that flow from Community Voices. While these are not all new or unprecedented, gathering them together into an overall agenda and grounding them in the voices and interests of community residents gives them critical coherence and credibility.*

1. **Safety first. Prioritize measures to make residents feel safe in their communities with a focus on pedestrian safety and traffic control, and reducing gun violence.** Our work also shows that a resident-driven approach to safety would acknowledge that youth, particularly those who are lower income and/or newcomers who feel the least safe within neighbourhoods. For the issue of gun-violence our research points to the need for investments in preventative programming (youth and employment programs), innovative initiatives like FOCUS Rexdale which have coordination between law-enforcement and social service agencies, and also an “eyes on the streets” approach to safety. This includes consideration of both police presence, lighting and getting more residents walking and enjoying public spaces in daytime and evening hours.
2. **Maintenance matters. Maintenance of roads, buildings and public spaces is a condition for almost any other successful policy initiative.** Street cleaning, upkeep of public and privately owned towers (TCHC maintenance and tower renewal), improvements in public landscaping and architecture, the aesthetics of public space, public art. These are not peripheral issues; they are critical to neighbourhood health and also social inclusion. From the perspective of residents, they signal that their communities are as important as any other neighbourhood in Toronto.

3. Palaces of the people. Invest in libraries and community centres. Community hubs are highly valued by participants, with libraries in some cases serving this function as well. Residents in Rexdale made a strong case for the need for expanding recreation facilities locally and the need to maintain and expand the role of the Albion Library as a neighbourhood resource. These also help to create local landmarks that can define a shared neighbourhood identity. Our survey revealed that residents of lower SES areas were less likely to name their neighbourhoods in the same way, compared to higher SES areas, who were more likely to use official city neighbourhood names. A common identity, especially one that aligns with official definitions, can be an important platform for neighbourhood advocacy.
4. Mental health support as core local service. Consider urgent investments in locally accessible mental health services. While residents seemed to accept that travel would be required for specialised medical care and even family doctors, locally accessible mental health services were seen as an area in need of urgent investment and expansion.
5. Increase awareness of available services. Support increased investment in connecting newcomers to services. Our survey made it clear that newcomers to Canada are some of the strongest supporters of our institutions and government. Yet, they are also the most unaware of locally accessible services. Increased focus on supporting newcomers to navigate the system and increase awareness of services is needed and may be a key piece in maintaining this trust and connection with Canadian institutions over time.
6. Increase frequency and quality of buses. Our respondents did not express a strong desire for new subway construction. But many rely on TTC buses for daily routines and commuting to work. Long wait times, poor wait time messaging systems, and crowding were common complaints.
7. Increase investment in social services and upkeep within Toronto Community Housing. The stigmatization of community housing communities and the concerns from our interviewees who live in those communities about maintenance and safety both show critical need for significant investment in capital improvements in TCHC communities. Increased support for wrap-around services delivered locally within the communities would support residents who face social barriers.
8. Show you care. New investments need to be made to open more accessible lines of communication with the city and elected leaders, especially in light of the reduction of councillors. Residents strongly valued responsive city leaders who were present in their local communities, promptly returned calls and messages, and were perceived as advocates in city hall — and not only in the election season.
9. Political boundaries are largely invisible to ordinary citizens. Recognise that residents travel not just within Toronto but across the 905 to access diverse services and amenities not present in their communities. For many inner suburban residents, suburban 905 communities are their primary reference point and comparison in defining a successful community. Include these reference points in definitions of problems and solutions.

# Acknowledgements

Community Voices was a true collaborative process involving two institutions (The Wellesley Institute and the University of Toronto) and a multitude of researchers, advisors and community partners. We would like to thank and acknowledge everyone who contributed to this work.

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## Community Supporters

Rexdale Community Health Centre, Ujima House, Coalition of Agencies Serving South Asians, East Scarborough Storefront

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## Organisational Sponsors



## Special Thanks

Jacob Silver, Soli Dubash, Wellesley Staff Team Survey Testers, Shauna Brail and Lara Muldoon

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