

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Canadian population growth is concentrated in the suburban areas of large cities that are often poorly equipped to serve their rapidly increasing and diversifying populations. A low density and car-oriented environment in which residential and nonresidential land uses are strictly separated and infrastructure is limited accentuates accessibility problems for many newcomers, seniors, and the poor. This study investigates the availability of essential infrastructure, human services, to rapidly increasing vulnerable populations in Canadian suburbs by completing a case study of York Region. Situated north of Toronto, York Region is an archetypal suburban area where the population increased from 169,000 in 1971 to 867,000 today and is estimated to grow to 1,280,000 by 2026. Immigration propels this growth and seniors and low-income households are growing proportions of the population.

The research addresses the infrastructure needs that have arisen during the region's rapid transition from a low-density, ethnically and socially homogeneous suburban region to a diverse, rapidly intensifying suburb. We are using geographic information systems (GIS) to develop an inventory of human services in York Region, assess their availability to selected vulnerable populations, and identify gaps in service provision that could be addressed by improvements in transportation and service infrastructure. Our analysis includes all *human services* defined in York Region's Human Services Strategy as "those services and programs that support a safe, healthy community and maintain and promote its quality of life"¹. This definition is broad and inclusive – recognizing the interdependent nature of human services.

Our approach to this research is guided by the growing literature that recognizes the crucial influence of infrastructure, services and facilities that have public benefits, on social wellbeing and economic growth. Equitable access to infrastructure is essential to ensure social inclusion for all groups in Canadian society, particularly the most vulnerable; recent immigrants, seniors, and the poor. Our concept of infrastructure has evolved beyond the traditional categories of physical infrastructure public health infrastructure, and amenities to include knowledge-based infrastructure – the tangible and intangible facilities and services that promote the distribution and dissemination of knowledge. This GIS will contribute to knowledge-based infrastructure as a tool for policy and planning purposes that can be used to examine the social impacts of changes in infrastructure intended to respond to the rapidly evolving social and economic geography of suburban areas.

Four key topics have been identified: economic participation and employment, education, housing, and settlement services. These areas will be examined by compiling a database of relevant services, estimating demand for services by completing an analysis of census information and a survey of immigrants, seniors and the poor, and evaluating the accessibility of services for each population.

The research will facilitate development of services that will enhance the wellbeing of vulnerable groups in York Region and it will provide badly needed and valuable information for local governments and service providers in other suburban locations.

¹ Human Services Planning Coalition Charter, Glossary of Terms, as approved May 9, 2001