

10th National Metropolis Conference - Halifax, NS. April 3-6, 2008.

Roundtable Discussion: Providing Services for Vulnerable Populations in Canadian Suburbs

Organizer: Lucia Lo, York University

Participants:

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Ted Richmond, Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration

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Purpose:

The purpose of the Roundtable discussion is to assess and discuss the uneven geographies of public infrastructure particularly in the provision of human services in the newer Canadian suburbs. Participants are encouraged to discuss innovative human service strategies and policy plans that promote social sustainability particularly around the settlement needs of newcomers.

YISP (Valerie Preston)

An introduction of the York Region Infrastructure Project (YISP)

The project is made up of 5 researchers (from York University: Lucia Lo, Valerie Preston, Ranu Basu and Paul Anisef; and Shuguang Wang from Ryerson University) and a partner (Human Services Planning Coalition, York Region (HSPC)). Funders include Infrastructure Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), and York University.

A snapshot of the project:

- The YISP examines the changing geography of human services and the availability of the services to vulnerable groups in York Region (YR), Ontario.
- There is an increasing trend of immigrant settlement into the suburbs. This creates a geography of disadvantage since many human services are still concentrated in the city. Are the suburbs as welcoming as the city in terms of their human infrastructure?
- We are interested in a broad definition of human infrastructure, which often translates into social infrastructure. For the purposes of this project, we have included in our analysis the following forms of services: housing, education, employment, small business and settlement. Health services have been excluded, given their complexities that warrant a separate study.
- We have focused on the demand for these services from three vulnerable groups: recent immigrants, seniors and low-income populations

YISP Methods:

The project uses multiple methods to examine the mismatch between the demand and supply of human services.

1. The first part of the project is a survey with two stages.
 - a) The first stage examines the three groups and their awareness and satisfaction with these services.
 - b) The second stage of the survey looks at the users of these services and how their perceptions of the services differ from those of the first group of participants.
2. The second part of the project maps out the supply and demand of the services. This section is designed to assess the gaps in types of services and the geographical availability of these services.
 - a) We are mapping out the residential locations of the three vulnerable populations.
 - b) We have created a database using CIVIC, which includes all of the services in York Region. We have coded them based on the specific services they offer and have also mapped out the locations of these services.

What have we found?

Part 1- The Survey

With the first section of the project we have found that among immigrants, in particular, there is little awareness of services. The service that is most used by these groups is employment services. In order to better assess what is happening, the second stage, which looks at service users, is currently underway.

Part 2- Supply and Demand of Services

1. Vulnerability is increasing - This is particularly the case in recent years, between 1991-2001 and more rapidly since 2001. The senior and immigrant populations are growing at a fast pace.
2. There is an uneven geography of vulnerability – There are pockets of low-income residents in wealthy neighbourhoods. For example Markham has seen an increase in people whose incomes are below LICO and yet ranks as one of the municipalities in Canada with the highest incomes. Seniors have generally been quite dispersed in their residential patterns, but we are seeing increasing concentration in Markham, King and on the north edge of Lake Simcoe where you can find retirement communities.
3. There is an intersection of vulnerability in YR - For example, of the low-income population in YR, 32% are recent immigrants.
4. There is a fine geography of vulnerability- Vulnerability is often hidden and dispersed. Vulnerability in YR is not as obvious as it has appeared to be in some inner city locations in American cities. Suburban vulnerability is often hidden because it is so widely dispersed. There are little pockets of vulnerability that we think are associated with the housing stock, particularly the availability of rental housing.

5. There exists an uneven geography of services based on the demand and concentration of groups in YR – Housing for seniors and low-income residents is available, but all other services are targeted for immigrants. There are few services for seniors especially around employment assistance. There are language services for immigrants and refugees, but few cater explicitly to senior immigrants and low-income newcomers. When settlement and other services do not target low-income residents, supports such as bus tickets and childcare that enable people to use services are also not provided. The greatest underservicing occurs in the most populated regions, which counters the assumption that there are unmet needs in the northern part of the region. Unmet need is in the southern portion of YR. The most obvious example is Markham, where the immigrant population has almost reached 50%, however a much smaller share of settlement services are available.

Questions and Discussion around YISP:

- The increasing levels of vulnerability are also occurring in other suburban municipalities around the Toronto CMA. This is particularly the case in Peel region where there is a consistent overlap among the three vulnerable groups (Norm McLeod)
- What is the situation with housing and secondary suites? Currently secondary suites and basement apartments are illegal in YR but there is a push to legalize them. This is also most clearly the case in other CMAs such as Vancouver (Sherman Chan).
- How are (housing) strategies associated with specific ethnic groups? In YR there is no dominant ethnic group. Most residents are buying outright and so there is a need for research about financial literacy. Many newcomers fall into 'buy now, pay later' schemes that can indebt them over the long term. In Peel Region there is a trend towards multiple family households as a strategy for some immigrants to get access to housing (Norm McLeod).
- What are the benefits of dispersion of vulnerable groups for social integration? For children of low-income parents dispersion in the schools seems to help (Norm McLeod). Academic performance does not decrease with ethnic concentration, but it does go down when ethnic concentration is combined with poverty in a given school neighbourhood. (Ted Richmond). Levels of dispersion are required at the DA level. If there is dispersion at this scale then it seems positive.

Policy implications from the YISP:

1. There is a need to raise awareness amongst policy makers that poverty is not just limited to the downtown area of the city.
2. The suburban region's share of human service spending is too low. In YR between 1991-2001, federal and provincial funding for services declined even though the funding is required to cover an ever-increasing population. This situation is only getting more intense.
3. There is a clear mismatch between the need for services and the capacity of those servicing.
4. There is a severe need for social housing.

5. Services should be better coordinated – The Welcome center is a good example of a location that has taken on multiple areas of human services. Each service has its own niche but clients can obtain a number of services at one location. The Welcome Centre is also strategically placed based on the transportation network.

MOSAIC Initiative (Sherman Chan)

We are currently focusing on settlement and services in Burnaby, BC. The town of Burnaby is located east of the city of Vancouver. Approximately fifty percent of its population is immigrants which is higher than the city Vancouver but just under Richmond (56%). There has been discussion with the BC government that immigrants and refugees are continually moving to historically “white” neighbourhoods located in the East end of the GVRD. The city of Vancouver agrees that suburban areas such as Burnaby, New Westminster and Richmond are becoming more popular settlement hubs for newcomers. The YISP seems like a very good case study, but as of yet we do not have a concrete plan.

What is needed?

There is a need to find out exact numbers of immigrants settling in specific locations. This is required so we can understand the need for services in these areas outside the city. Currently residents of places like Burnaby are being served by locations elsewhere. Settlement agencies want to coordinate with local services in these areas. We are therefore looking to use information about settlement in specific locations to better meet the needs of immigrants. The lack of funding makes it difficult to operationalize this sort of project. The city is supportive and has plans to build services in these locations, however this has not yet happened. As a result we are looking to align new locations with these settlement locations.

What is the Plan?

We do not want to have existing agencies parachuted. Instead we are hoping to work in collaboration with existing local agencies and the city. The Burnaby Immigrant Planning Table invited a number of actors to work together to form a planning committee, which is funded through the United Way (Lower Mainland of Greater Vancouver). This two-year project is concentrated on a survey of immigrant needs, which focuses on how services can be improved.

How do we move forward?

We are working with two immigrant services, ISS, and long established services in the GVRD (schools, ministry of health, levels of government). Our plan is to work closely with the chambers of commerce as well. We need to consider issues of homelessness among the immigrant population. In the GVRD, absolute homelessness was approximately 2300 (counted 3 weeks ago). In the homelessness count there were no questions regarding immigrant status, which is key information. The survey only refers to what language one speaks. Immigrant status has been shown to affect settlement and housing needs especially with respect to refugee status. So, we are pushing that this kind of information be collected in the next count. In Burnaby, we know that there are pockets of poverty and hidden homelessness and these issues need to be followed up.

Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (Ted Richmond)

1. There is no overarching strategy in the Ontario government in terms of immigrant dispersion and related service planning. There is a concern around those issues and there exist initiatives that relate to them under COIA. There is recognition that there is a role for the provincial government to play in the dispersion of immigrants to smaller cities. There is a push to fund municipalities to get them to start developing these initiatives. And there are local immigrant partnerships designed to help municipalities foster these partnerships.
2. The ON government is concerned about poverty and has made it a priority. The coordination of funding, however, is complex.
3. What is interesting about the YISP is that it highlights the difficulty of evaluating services. So far, there has often been an agency-centred approach, which is why these sorts of projects often get nowhere. YISP looks at bringing together the actors to develop capacity by monitoring the changes in populations. Once we know how the needs are being met then we can start having discussions about these issues. This, therefore, does not threaten the stakeholders (education). The YISP assesses the actual level of need for human services by identifying the needs of vulnerable groups. This approach helps negotiate funding better and does not offend various actors. It brings a good approach to assessing needs. This project is exciting and brings about something substantial to talk about.

Regional Municipality of Peel (Norm McLeod)

Peel region is seeing the same trends in immigration as YR. As well, the region is also experiencing similar rates of under-servicing of newcomers particularly in the areas of Springdale and East Brampton.

Response:

There was a project in 2005 that examined poverty in Peel region. This research (assisted by the school board) looked at housing needs by assessing the stock and distribution of social housing. From this study, there arose an initiative to tackle poverty. The partners included the United Way of Peel Region and the Board of Education. There is a need to share vital information in the community. And there was also a need for collaboration around immigrant issues. The Peel Newcomer Strategy Group was started in order to address the needs of the growing immigrant population. This group is made up of key stakeholders including 160 agencies that work together to address newcomer needs (as opposed to an RFP model of competitive agencies, which is not conducive to community planning).

What can we do at the community level?

With the assistance of CIC and local immigrant agencies we need to build a table around these issues. We require a staff person to gather existing research and map out the gaps. We have a staff person that has access to the info but there needs to be more sharing. This leads to a supportive system that can contribute to a coherent community plan. We need to keep funding and support tied to the change in population in Peel.

General Discussion:

The support for collaborative planning is not as extensive in Vancouver. Since BC is divided into regions there is always a gap in funding which does not always meet the changing needs of specific communities (Sherman Chan).

There is growing awareness of the growing immigrant populations in various regions. How does this knowledge influence the capacity of agencies to deal with demographic changes? (Valerie Preston)

There is a need to be sensitive to the housing/settlement needs of refugee claimants in particular. For example when there is a massive influx of claimants then there is always a panic and overflow in the shelters. Settlement agencies need to raise awareness in order to get assistance. There is a need for a collaborative approach. (Carolina- COSTI)

Settlement workers are always the first to help but there is no anchor of support. Since housing is so key to settlement and encompasses so many different aspects of settlement, it makes sense to have housing services be the anchor for a settlement services. This is an excellent model since it helps move people through the system. We should use housing as a core service in helping vulnerable groups. (Sherman Chan)

In YR, the provision of housing is so limited and ancillary services are weak as well. There is 1 service for nearly a million people, 5 shelters, 1 shelter for youth built just two years ago. (Valerie Preston)

There is a need in Peel region for more housing, since there is a 20 year wait. There needs to be a proactive and collaborative model for shelters. The region faces a re-organization where health and social services are being amalgamated as a single service, united as a single entry point. But the housing stock is not adequate, however there is a positive shift away from building aggregate social housing (like Jane and Finch), to ensure a wide distribution of social housing (Norm McLeod).

Unfortunately the trends, at least in Vancouver, are that municipal involvement is related to economic development and not social planning. (Sherman Chan)