

Infrastructure in York Region: A GIS Analysis of Human Services

Context: 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 use is strictly separated and infrastructure is limited, accentuates accessibility problems for many *newcomers, seniors, and the poor*. This project investigates the availability of essential infrastructure to these rapidly increasing vulnerable populations in York Region. Situated north of Toronto, York Region has been undergoing rapid transition from a low-density, ethnically and socially homogeneous suburban region to a diverse, rapidly intensifying suburb.

Infrastructure: By infrastructure, we refer to critical *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". Guided by the growing literature that recognizes the crucial influence of infrastructure on social well-being and economic growth, this concept of infrastructure evolves 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, which is essential to ensuring social inclusion for all groups. The study covers *employment, housing, education/development, and settlement services*.

Objectives: *Immediate* objectives consist of assessing awareness, use and satisfaction of human services in York Region among the designated groups, and examining the match between demand and supply of human services. The purpose is to identify factors that encourage or discourage the use of human services, and gaps in infrastructure provision. *Long term* objectives are to facilitate participation, reduce social inequalities and ultimately lead to greater social inclusion. Successful completion of the immediate objectives will contribute to the broader long term objectives.

Methodology: A blending of geomatics and social science methodologies will be employed to achieve the immediate objectives. A *social survey* will tap into the awareness, use and satisfaction of human services in York Region. *GIS* will be employed to develop an inventory of human services in York Region, assess their availability to our vulnerable populations, and identify gaps in service provision that could be addressed by improvements in public transportation and public service infrastructure.

Partnership: The partnership between a multidisciplinary research team from York University and Ryerson University, York Region Human Services Planning Coalition (a consortium of public sector and private agencies), Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Institute for Research and Innovation on Sustainability, Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement, and the Laidlaw Foundation, unites academic expertise with practical knowledge of service needs and service delivery challenges under a governance structure that allows for equitable and effective participation by all members. *Knowledge transfer* is the driving force behind the partnership.

Progress: A *workshop*, organized for the purpose of 'knowledge mobilization', and attended by 33 representatives from governmental and non-governmental sectors in York Region, provided invaluable inputs to the development of a survey to explore the vulnerable groups' awareness, use and satisfaction with services in York Region. The *survey* is scheduled for early 2007. Meanwhile, a *human service database* is being constructed and the team is negotiating with Statistics Canada on some *customized census data*.

From Research to Action: Analysis will expand knowledge of and access to services among the targeted groups, and reveal the needed types of service and their best locations in York Region. This study will enhance decision-making with respect to human services development and contribute to *knowledge-based infrastructure as a tool for policy and planning* purposes. It is hoped that this research will generate similar research projects towards the overall objective of a more *inclusive society*.