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Neighbourhood, Discrimination and Health: Critical Perspectives of Racialized Residents from the Black Creek Area

Research Bulletin
3

Income Security, Race and Health Project

This bulletin is the third in a four-part Research Bulletin series based on a study conducted by the Income Security, Race and Health working group. The study investigated relationships between employment, income and health insecurities faced by precariously employed racialized groups in the Black Creek area of Toronto.

This bulletin discusses the relationship between neighbourhood, racialized inequalities and health by examining economic and

health issues faced by racialized residents in the Black Creek area. Study findings indicate that negative public perceptions and stigma about the Black Creek area undercut access to stable jobs for racialized Black Creek residents. Several participants from all focus groups perceived that having a Black Creek address has negatively impacted their search for jobs. Participants also questioned the limited number of stable jobs available in the Black Creek area and discussed challenges of having to travel far to work in other parts of the city. Residents expressed concern about the growth of temporary employment recruitment agencies (temp agencies) and temporary, unstable jobs in the neighbourhood.

Study results suggest that limited jobs, high levels of precarious employment and poverty, and a depressed local economy in the Black Creek area have damaging impacts on the overall health of the community including decreasing safety, security and community cohesion. At the same time, most participants firmly believed that the increase in police presence, surveillance and security cameras in the community have not resulted in more safety and security. Participants also criticized the substandard quality of public services in the neighbourhood, including substandard public housing and unkempt public parks and playgrounds that negatively impacted the community aesthetics and quality of life.

Residents were particularly concerned about the systemic racial profiling and criminalization of racialized youth in the community (especially Black youth). Study results indicate that this practice has long-term negative impacts on the employment security and health of these youth and their families. Further, participants spoke about the exploitation and discrimination that racialized youth tend to experience in the workplace, and how such negative experiences systematically push these youth towards non-formal income generating activities.

Study evidence show that in spite of the multiple problems in the neighbourhood, most Black Creek residents have a positive view of the Black Creek area. The current literature on neighbourhood and health indicate that living in a marginalized neighbourhood can have multiple health-damaging impacts and that overall health of low-income families living in marginalized neighbourhoods tends to be far worse than low-income families living in wealthier neighbourhoods. Studies have also shown that residents' perception of their neighbourhood is also an important determinant of health. According to a study conducted by Wilson et al (2004, p197), "perceptions about the neighbourhood in which people live are just as important for health as the neighbourhoods themselves." On the one hand Black Creek residents were deeply affected by place-based stigma and discrimination (perceived and actual). At the same time, study results illustrate that residents have critical awareness about the root causes of the place-based stigma and discrimination. As a result, residents generally seem able to resist internalizing negative perceptions of the community; instead, many Black Creek residents exhibit firm political will to collectively challenge the increasing spatial marginalization of the Black Creek area by strengthening their sense of community and activism. >

KEY FINDINGS

FINDING 1 Negative public perceptions and stigma about the Black Creek area undercut opportunities and access to stable jobs for racialized Black Creek residents.

FINDING 2 Limited jobs, increasing precarious employment and poverty, and the depressed local economy in the Black Creek area have detrimental impacts on the health of the community, including decreasing safety, security and community cohesion. At the same time, increasing police presence and security cameras in the community does not lead to more safety and security.

FINDING 3 Systemic racial profiling and criminalization of racialized youth in the Black Creek area has long-term negative impacts on the employment security and health of these youth and their families.

FINDING 4 In spite of multiple problems in the neighbourhood, most racialized Black Creek residents have positive views of their community and many are actively involved in local community-building activities.

ABOUT THE STUDY METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

In line with community-based research principles, we recruited and trained several residents from the Black Creek area to collaborate with us as research partners (peer researchers) in this project. Peer researchers were actively involved in all phases of the project including developing the research questions, data collection, analysis and writing.

We conducted eight focus groups with different racialized groups living in the Black Creek area (n=105). Focus group participants completed a survey at the beginning of the focus group. The sample size for the survey is 78. All participants self identified as being precariously employed. Focus groups were organized by language and ethno-specific groups and were facilitated by peer researchers from these backgrounds (Vietnamese-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Hindi/Urdu-speaking, Arabic-speaking, Black community, Canadian-born community, an all-male focus group, and one mixed focus group). We also conducted three focus groups with service providers working in the employment, settlement and community services sector in the Black Creek area (two with front line staff and one with management staff). The Black Creek area was selected for the study because it has one of the highest proportions of racialized residents in Toronto, and high levels of poverty, unemployment and sub-standard housing and services. This community was also selected because of the rich history of resident-led social activism in the area.

By "racialized groups" we refer to non-dominant ethno-racial communities who experience race as a key factor in their identity through racialization (Galabuzi, 2001). Racialization is the process whereby racial categories are constructed as different and unequal in ways that lead to regressive social, economic and political impacts (Galabuzi, 2001). While Statistics Canada uses the term "visible minorities", Access Alliance and many other organizations including the Ontario Human Rights Commission use the term "racialized groups", as the former term is more static and relates primarily to number and colour while the latter recognizes the dynamic and complex process by which racial categories are socially produced by dominant groups in ways that entrench social inequalities.

Profile of the Black Creek Area

The Black Creek area is a composite of four neighbourhoods (Humber Summit, Humbermede, Black Creek and Glenfield-Jane Heights) located in the northwest inner suburbs of Toronto. While "Jane and Finch" is a common reference used by media and non-residents to refer to this area, most residents and service providers prefer the name Black Creek.

The City of Toronto identifies all four neighbourhoods in Black Creek as "priority neighbourhoods". Priority neighbourhood designation is based on a set of indicators developed by several city-wide audits including the Poverty by Postal Code report (2004) and the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force (2004). The 13 neighbourhoods in Toronto that have been designated as priority neighbourhoods are those with high levels of social and economic disadvantage, poor access to services, and high violence and crime (Janhevich, Bania, and Hastings, 2008). The priority neighbourhood label can be a double-edged sword. While meant to boost investment and development in the community, it may create negative perceptions and stigmatization of residents as being deficient.

Based on Census 2006, the Black Creek area has one of the highest percentages of immigrants and racialized people in the city: 78.1% of residents are visible minorities (compared to 47.4% for the city of Toronto) and 63% of residents are immigrants. The percentage of children and youth 15 years of age or younger is more than double the city average (22.5% for the Black Creek area compared to 10.8% percent for Toronto). The Black Creek area has one of the highest percentage of racialized youth (79.9%) in the city. Lone-parent families comprise 28.2% of Black Creek residents compared to 20.3% for the city.

The unemployment and low-income rate for Black Creek residents is markedly higher than the city average. According to Census 2006, the unemployment rate in the Black Creek area was 9.2% while the city average was 7.6%. Similarly, the percentage of low-income households (before tax) in the Black Creek area was 31.9% – almost one-quarter higher than the city average. Almost two thirds of residents of Black Creek spend 30% to 99% of their income on housing.

Black Creek is known for its rich history of citizen-driven community activism. Residents and service providers have collaborated in mobilizing a number of successful public campaigns that are exemplary of active citizenry.

▲ Photo by Safy Abouzaid

FINDING 1

PLACE-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Negative public perceptions and stigma about the Black Creek area undercut opportunities and access to stable jobs for racialized Black Creek residents.

Study participants were asked to discuss how living in the Black Creek area affects their search for stable jobs. Focus group narratives provide insights about negative place-dependent pathways in the labour market resulting from place-based stigma and discrimination faced by Black Creek residents. In particular, participants raised concern about the negative stereotypes about Black Creek residents as being uneducated, untrustworthy, irresponsible and inclined to criminal activities:

> *"Overall if you mention you are from the Jane and Finch area they think you are criminal people… You mention the Jane and Finch area and everybody gets alarmed. Professional people get alarmed. 'You live Jane area?' I say 'Ya, I live Jane and Finch area.' They talk such a way, such a negative way and they think you are nobody there."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

> *"So if you live in the Black Creek neighbourhood first of all [they think] you are part of a low-income family so you are looked at [as if] as soon as you don't have as much income you [will] do whatever you have to survive. You rob, steal or whatever and that is not really true. Just that sometimes the media portrays that."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

Participants discussed that these negative stereotypes about the Black Creek area can prevent residents from getting stable jobs and can deter local economic investments by potential investors and employers. One youth participant reflected the impact of this on youth:

> *"They [managers] are not willing to hire youth and they go through many steps of the interview when hiring youth. That is what I realize personally. Some of the managers frankly told me that they are not willing to hire youth in this area."* —Participant from Black Community focus group

Many Black Creek residents perceived that potential employers view Black Creek residents as "not well educated" and uncivilized and thus don't value them in the same way as other people:

> *"I believe that for people in this area the employer doesn't value the employees the same way… they [employers] think is a very low-educated people. Not very bright… because they live in this area and can't afford a better place of living. So they are not well educated and well civilized and so they don't value them the same as somebody living in Mississauga or somewhere else."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

Several participants mentioned that this undervaluation of Black Creek residents can result in lower wages for residents. As one participant explained:

> *"Because we live in this area and go and look for a job they like to pay us a little bit less. They think that we do not live in very expensive area so they could get away with that. Maybe instead of paying $30 an hour they pay $12 or $13 because I come here and they think they can get away with it because we are not well educated because we live in this area."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

Service providers confirmed that Black Creek residents indeed face a lot of place-based discrimination in the labour market. One service provider highlighted that many Black Creek residents are pressed to put a different address in their resumes when applying for jobs:

> *"And the other problem usually they see is even the address problem. When they hear you live in Jane and Finch, Shoreham, Driftwood sometimes they become shy, I don't know why… Some of the employers they don't hire people from the Jane and Finch area. So you will see a lot of clients*

who want to put [on] their resume a different address. 'I live in Scarborough, downtown…' while they're living here. Or they want to go, you know, telephone their cell phone because they, they might figure out you know the area code of the phone, like you know the area. So it's kind of a stigma, Jane and Finch, you know, lack of a lot of employers, you know, who want to hire people in this area." —Participant from Front Line Service Provider focus group

Service providers and community participants also spoke about lack of jobs in Black Creek and that many employers and investors are reluctant to invest in the community. Service providers working in the employment sector shared their frustration at not being able to find jobs for their clients because of the overall lack of jobs in the neighbourhood:

"*Yeah the other problem we're facing in this area is we don't have a lot of employers in Jane and Finch area... You cannot bring employers in here actually. I am an employment consultant and I help people – how to write their resume, cover letter – all these are things that I have but if I cannot take my clients to exactly to get employment, what can I do? And we don't have a lot of job developers and employment consultants in the area actually to place our clients into specific jobs that they need to do. So those are the challenges facing me every day."* —Participant from Front Line Service Provider focus group

"*Sometimes our clients will come up to our resource centre and they stay maybe six months, and are still looking for a job. I cannot place them. I don't have any place to take them. If I tell them take your resume and go outside of your Toronto area, GTA area, they cannot drive and they don't have money to go there so something, you know, beyond my control."* —Participant from Front Line Service Provider focus group

Several participants mentioned that they are pressed to find work outside of the Black Creek area (Mississauga, Oshawa, Milton were mentioned) and have to bear the burden of the high cost of public transportation and the stress of commuting long hours to and from work everyday.

Participants from across all focus groups raised concern about the growing number of temp agencies in the Black Creek area. They pointed out that temp agencies are playing a dominant role in shaping labour market entry and outcomes for many Black Creek residents often pushing them towards precarious types of jobs. As captured in the following quotes, study evidence indicate that many employers prefer to hire through temp agencies:

"*I went to three companies and they said, 'No, you should come through [temporary] employment agency.'"* —Participant from All-Male focus group

"*Because it would benefit them [employers] if you go through [temporary employment] agencies, it is easier for them to let you go."* —Participant from Vietnamese-speaking focus group

See Research Bulletin #1 for additional discussion about the role of temp agencies in Black Creek.

We also found that the low-income and high-risk perception of the Black Creek area led to other negative "place-based economic penalties" on residents, including being charged high insurance costs for their homes, cars, etc. Participants who had moved to Black Creek from other parts of Toronto were surprised to find that insurance premiums are sometime three times higher in the Black Creek area.

Study results suggest that negative stereotypes and stigma about a place can have salient negative impacts on labour market and economic conditions for residents of that place. Place-based discriminations associated with the Black Creek area exacerbate the multiple inequalities that racialized residents face. Promoting employment and income security for Black Creek residents will require proactive interventions (by government, media and community agencies) to get rid of the widespread negative stereotypes about the Black Creek area.

FINDING 2 IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

Limited jobs, increasing precarious employment and poverty, and the depressed local economy in the Black Creek area have detrimental impacts on the health of the community, including decreasing safety, security and community cohesion. At the same time, increasing police presence and security cameras in the community does not lead to more safety and security.

Participants identified a number of negative consequences on the health of the Black Creek community due to its depressed local economy and high rates of poverty, unemployment and precarious employment. In particular, participants stressed how employment and income insecurities (combined with substandard housing conditions) can push people into crime, violence and illegal activities to make ends meet:

▲ The No Fun Park
"You can see the garbage everywhere on the road and school yard. Is not very good and they go outside and play [in] that, breathe and smell. Another corner there is a lot of papers. Luckily we have a person there that collect these things and hope to have more people do his job to improve the health in the community." *—Photo-researcher: Brian*

> *"The point is that there are no jobs. So it's like once you live in that community and you can't find a job and you are surrounded by crime and you are in this trapped box thing that just looks like a Lego set or something like that, then you turn to crime. Ontario housing isn't decent housing. There is more money to be made on the street. It may not be ethical work or whatever, might not be considered decent in everybody else's mind, but it is going to pay the bills the same way right?"* —Participant from Canadian-born focus group

Community and service provider participants were very concerned about decreasing safety and security in the community. Many participants noted that they don't feel safe living in the Black Creek area. At the same time, several argued that increasing police presence and security cameras does not produce more safety and security as these measures fail to address the root causes of declining safety and security. In fact, these measures may worsen interactions between police and community and reinforce negative stereotypes. One participant described how the presence of "panoptican" style surveillance system (in the words of Michel Foucault) in the Black Creek area by authorities makes residents feel like they are being watched all the time, but that they don't necessarily feel more secure:

> *"It is insane, honestly. Like I don't feel safe in the neighbourhood and I might be from it, yah, but I'm like, damn, some of the things that go on in the building and the systems and how they have cameras. What are they doing, are they watching us, are they setting us up? It's the way it is designed. They got a camera in every angle but there's no security."* —Participant from Canadian-born focus group

Participants pointed out how economic insecurities can result in tensions within the community and leave people with little "time to come together":

> *"We fight against each other like that because we don't have time to come together. They don't give us no time and no space to do it. I mean you got to work and you got to go do this and that and go to school. They make life so separate and they make individuals out of everybody. And it is good to be an individual but at the same time you need to come together too at some point if you want to make a change and if you want to make a difference."* —Participant from Canadian-Born focus group

Economic disinvestment in a neighbourhood can undermine the safety, security and overall health of a community. These, in turn, contribute to perpetuating negative stereotypes about a community. Black Creek residents strongly feel that the key to promoting safety and security in the community lies in promoting employment and income security for its residents, and not increasing police presence.

FINDING 3
SYSTEMIC RACIAL PROFILING AND ITS IMPACT ON RACIALIZED YOUTH

Systemic racial profiling and criminalization of racialized youth in the Black Creek area has long-term negative impacts on the employment security and health of these youth and their families.

During focus group discussions about barriers to achieving income security, some participants, particularly those from the Canadian-born focus group, drew links between high incidence of racial profiling of youth in the Black Creek area and their inability to find stable employment. Community members exposed the mutually reinforcing cycle in this relationship: systemic racial profiling produces high rates of criminalization of racialized youth from an early age, which in turn results in systemic displacement of these youth from the formal labour market, thereby pushing them towards high-risk activities. As one service provider poignantly put it:

> *"That a lot of young Black males when they first initially, maybe when they're 15, 16, and they go out and they attempt to get a job maybe at No Frills or some sort of grocery store, and they feel sort of used maybe at times, abused at times, and so that's discouraging. And so then when people take away their pride or you take away their esteem that people still need to make money but they don't want to do it at the expense of constantly being disrespected in the workplace. So you're going to participate in alternative economies. So you know you could start to participate in drugs, dealing drugs, that sort of thing and we know that doesn't work because that will lead to other consequences."* —Participant from Front Line Service Provider focus group

▲ Normal Speed Traps
"The police set up speed traps where cars are most likely to be speeding. This is regular for police while crime is being committed across the next street. Real crimes go unsolved and criminals get away with crime while police idle their time trapping normal hard working people into the system. What can we do about it? Nothing!" *—Photo-researcher: Ann-Marie*

Several young Black participants shared unpleasant experiences of being racially profiled by police:

> *"Police are always targeting. We had a basketball tournament in my place on the street in a little basketball court. The police came and they didn't know about it. They came and drove up and next thing you know there are four more police cars and they all just stand there watching guys having a basketball tournament. We aren't doing nothing – just BBQing and having a basketball tournament. And targeting us you know what I mean. Someone will get a call in the community and say this happened and next thing you know they are sending the police like 5, 10 people out just to catch one person and bring in for a line up and have someone come and identify them. So really and truly you may not even be involved and you can get caught up."* —Participant from Canadian-born focus group

> *"When we get stopped by police officers, all the human rights is out the window. It is a different story – community policing? The cops are supposed to reflect the community they work in. I feel like we have hired oppressors, the dictators in the neighbourhoods. Just the other day the cops I got pulled over and they were like, 'Oh, do you have anything in your car that you shouldn't have in your car?' What kind of question is that? I told them, 'What kind of question is that?' Ya, I have a couple of guns in my car. I would love to express my mind but I feel like they are going to pull a Rodney King on me next time."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

Participants noted that once you get a criminal record then it can be extremely difficult to enter the mainstream labour market. Discussion from participants indicate that there is a long history of systemic racial profiling and criminalization of racialized youth in the Black Creek area. The inability to find decent work with a criminal record in turn forces many young racialized adults into a lifetime of precarious work, illegal work, and income insecurity.

> *"I have a lot of friends that went through this, and it fills every category. Once you do get a criminal record, when you are 18 you are not getting a job anywhere and what does that push you to do?… It happens, things happen, but what I am just concerned about is why do you have to be pushed away from finding a decent job? Ya, you were young, you were dumb and you committed a crime, alright, that was the past you know. But it is… okay, go to jail whatever for a month, for a year but you can't tell nobody that you can't get a decent job. That is just taking your life, you know, right out of you. That is just wrong. You can punish them for doing whatever but I just believe that is one thing that should change."* —Participant from Canadian-born focus group

Participants highlighted that there is an urgent need to break this vicious cycle. Service providers shared some innovative programs to enable youth with criminal records to re-enter the labour market. However, participants stressed that the root causes of this trend can only be overcome by eliminating racial profiling.

FINDING 4 POSITIVE SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In spite of multiple problems in the neighbourhood, most racialized Black Creek residents have positive views of their community and many are actively involved in local community-building activities.

While participants were aware of the many problems in their community, most had positive views about their community. This positive sense of community appears to be a source of strength for residents. Many participants appear to be actively involved in local

▲ Ethnicity in Harmony
"The paintings basically represent all the different types of people who live in that building and neighbourhood. People who are from different ethnic backgrounds, living together in one loving neighbourhood. Basically someone saw the multiculturalism in the neighbourhood and decided to gather a group of people to make the painting and make it visible for everyone." *—Photo-researcher: Dorigen*

community building activities. In contrast to the negative media representation and general perceptions of the community, Black Creek residents view themselves as hard working and positive people and take pride in being a resident of this community. The following quotes capture the positive sense of community that many participants expressed:

> *"Being in that area takes so much from us and we are looked at as, I don't know, people when you say, 'I am from the Jane and Finch,' they are skeptical of you. They don't trust you and it is just like that. I like to be there because that is my identity and that is where I belong. I can't go live downtown because I don't feel that place."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

> *"We who live in this area, it is not what they put it out to be. You walk around this area and people are taking their kids to day care, people rushing off to the TTC to go get to work. May not be the best job, but whatever the case may be. It is honest, hardworking people. I am not saying there are no incidents and so on, but it is not the proportion that they actually highlight on the media. I know it is crap."* —Participant from All-Male focus group

The Black Creek community is known for its rich history of citizen-driven activism. The strong sense of community activism contributes to social cohesion and collaboration in spite of the many barriers and divisive forces that impact Black Creek residents. Study results show that many participants were supportive of or actively involved in community activism geared at contesting systemic discriminations and inequalities. One participant highlighted in the following way the power of collective activism to bring positive change including reforming Ontario Works and temp agencies:

> *"We need to come together as a community, Black Creek community, come together and do something for ourselves. If we were to all boycott the temp agencies everybody, get everyone to say forget temp agencies. Boycott now and we all lined up at Ontario Works they would do something like this, no problem. Because they don't want everybody on Ontario Works like that. They don't want that many people on Ontario Works when there are jobs out there we could be doing. But we can organize ourselves in the way where we can boycott a temp agency."* —Participant from Canadian-born focus group ■

CONCLUSION

Study findings indicate that negative stereotypes and stigma about the Black Creek area (often reinforced by media) have adverse impacts on labour market and economic conditions for its residents. High levels of unemployment, poverty and economic disinvestment in the Black Creek area result in negative community health impacts, including a decrease in safety and security. Participants stressed that increasing police presence and surveillance contribute minimally to increasing safety in the community. Participants pointed out that lack of stable jobs in the community and discrimination in the labour market are the key factors that push people into alternative and illegal income-generating activities to make ends meet.

Participants were very concerned about the systemic racial profiling and criminalization of racialized youth in the Black Creek area. Study evidence highlights that such practices have long-term negative impact on career and income security of racialized youth and their families.

The message from the participants is clear. They see a lot of police the in Black Creek area but not enough jobs. They feel the impact of stigma in the job market. They see the damage that multiple forms of oppression cause in the lives of young residents. They have complex insights into the relationship between this oppression and participation in criminal activity. These insights could become an important contribution in shaping policy.

ABOUT THE INCOME SECURITY, RACE AND HEALTH PROJECT

The Income Security, Race and Health (ISRH) Working Group is a multi-stakeholder collaborative research group comprising academic, community agency, and peer researchers established in 2006 in Toronto under the leadership of Access Alliance. Using community-based research (CBR) principles, the key goal of the working group is to investigate the systemic causes of growing racialized inequities in employment and income, and to document the health impact. The ISRH working group intends to use evidence from this study to mobilize progressive policy changes to overcome the systemic income and health inequalities that racialized groups in Toronto face.

In 2007, we used photovoice methodology to document the impact of poverty on racialized residents of Black Creek. For the second phase (2008-2009), we conducted eight focus groups with different racialized groups in Black Creek. Focus group participants also completed a survey about employment and health status. We also conducted three focus groups with service providers (management and frontline). In line with CBR principles, we trained and engaged low-income racialized community members as research collaborators (peer researchers) at all phases of the project.

This study has generated rich evidence about the types of systemic barriers and challenges that racialized groups experience in the labour market and the multiple, compounding negative effects these have on their health (at individual, family and community levels). Study findings about labour market barriers are discussed in this research bulletin. The remaining three research bulletins and other reports from this study can be obtained from: http://accessalliance.ca/research/activities/isrh

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