

## **Understanding Neighbourhood Revitalization in Toronto**

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over the past few years, a number of cross-sectoral public policy initiatives that focus on alleviating social distress in specific neighborhoods have emerged in Toronto, a city with little previous history of such spatially-targeted regeneration initiatives. This paper is a preliminary report on research in progress, which aims to understand the forces that have driven these initiatives and have shaped their scope and content. It is one study in a broader cross-national research project, the “Regenerating Urban Neighborhoods” (RUN) project. The purpose of the project is to develop our understanding of the politics of neighborhood regeneration through analysis of the development of spatially-focused policy interventions<sup>2</sup> in distressed neighborhoods<sup>3</sup> in various North American and European cities. The research is not designed to evaluate policy outputs, but rather to uncover patterns of causal influence that shape policy responses to neighborhood distress in various cities. Since the research terrain is sparsely mapped to date, the RUN project is primarily exploratory in character. The research design thus posits a large number of possible causal influences on what we call “neighborhood interventions”, ranging from the structure of local government, the severity of neighborhood distress and the strength of intergovernmental support for spatially-targeted intervention, to the legacy of previous policies, the degree of neighborhood political mobilization and the way in which the problem(s) of social distress are constructed in any one case.

At this stage, the Toronto research is a little over half complete and much of the analysis remains to be conducted, so the results reported in this paper are necessarily tentative and preliminary.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the work carried out thus far gives us some fascinating insights into the political dynamics of neighborhood intervention in Canada’s largest city. Given the exploratory character of the research project and the incomplete status of the Toronto research, it is *not* the purpose of this paper to advance a theoretically framed argument regarding causal influences. Rather, the paper reports empirical data gathered thus far, and concludes with some preliminary findings. It is hoped that these can serve as an entrée to a conference discussion about framing our understanding of spatially targeted intervention in contemporary Toronto.

Accordingly, the paper does not begin with a review of literature. Instead, it opens with an overview of the development of neighborhood distress in Toronto since the 1980s, highlighting the striking rise in areas of concentrated poverty in the City’s post-

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments: I would like to acknowledge the outstanding research assistance of Aaron Moore, who compiled much of the statistical data for this work, conducted several of the interviews, and has provided me with many good ideas in conversation.

<sup>2</sup> The project’s focus is on “interventions” that” 1) Involve government; 2) Are targeted to particular neighborhoods, however the term is defined by local agents; 3) Have the explicit intention of alleviating neighborhood distress; 4) Involve new resources; and 5) Are ‘cross-sectoral’ – that is, not limited to a single policy sphere, but attempting to integrate a variety of policy concerns.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, ‘distressed neighborhoods’ are defined primarily by a concentration of poverty, and the terms ‘distressed’ and ‘poor’ are used interchangeably. It should be acknowledged, however, that the concept of ‘distress’ includes more than just poverty, but also a variety of associated social problems, including low education levels, high unemployment and localized violence.

<sup>4</sup> Research for this project involves a number of data sources, including statistical databases, policy documents, and interviews. Much of the key statistical and documentary information has been gathered. About 25 confidential interviews with key actors are planned; 14 have been conducted to date, most in 2008 and early 2009.

war suburbs. The next section reviews historical background to the neighborhood regeneration efforts that have arisen in Toronto in recent years, and identifies two distinct and largely independent trajectories of neighborhood regeneration in contemporary Toronto. One has produced a plan for the physical rebuilding of the inner-city social housing neighborhood of Regent Park, which is now being used as a template for a similar effort in the Lawrence Heights social housing neighborhood; the other trajectory has produced a city-wide Strong Neighborhoods Strategy that targets investment in youth programming, community capacity building, policing and neighborhood services at 13 ‘priority neighborhoods’ in Toronto’s inner suburbs.

The next two sections of the paper examine the detail the evolution of these two trajectories of neighborhood regeneration. The Regent Park project, I argue, has been driven by a combination of resident activism and leadership by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, which manages all of the social housing in the neighborhood. These forces have produced a comprehensive plan to re-build Regent Park as a mixed-income area; the plan is currently well into the implementation phase, and appears to have fairly strong resident support, but the project is vulnerable to housing market cycles and to pressure for gentrification. By contrast, the SNS is the product of activism by non-governmental organizations, combined with a spike in gun violence in the city that drew attention to the plight of poor suburban neighborhoods. The SNS has directed the resources of multiple public sector agents towards 13 inner suburban neighborhoods. However, the resulting programs have a variety of areas of focus and are not always very well coordinated with each other, and comprehensive investment priorities for individual neighborhoods have not yet been developed. The paper concludes with some tentative comparative insights into the forces that have driven these two revitalization trajectories, and introduces the idea of competing discourses of revitalization as an entrée into broader discussion about theorizing neighborhood revitalization in Toronto.

## **2. The Evolution of Neighborhood Distress in Toronto**

Toronto has long had some very poor neighborhoods, but until about 1980 socio-spatial inequalities in what was then Metro Toronto were quite low by international standards. Until the 1960s most of the Metro’s relatively few areas of concentrated poverty were located in the inner city. In the 1960s and 1970s, a major program of provincially and federally supported social housing construction distributed social housing across some of the post-war suburbs within Metro Toronto. While this created pockets of concentrated poverty in the post-war suburbs, these were intentionally distributed widely, so as to prevent the intense geographical concentration of poverty in certain areas of the city (Friskin et al. 1997, 35-55). Steady economic growth throughout much of the post-war period, together with gentrification of the inner city from the 1970s, kept median incomes quite high in Toronto until the severe recession of the early 1990s.

In the wake of the major economic restructuring of the 1990s, today’s Toronto is again a fairly wealthy city, housing some 2.6 million people. Many high income earners live in the City<sup>5</sup>, which contributes to Toronto’s housing values high in regional context (Table 1). Yet median incomes are lower in the City than in the metropolitan area as a

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “City” (capitalized) to denote the municipality of Toronto, and to distinguish it from the “city” as an urban form.

whole, and poverty rates have been rising steadily in recent decades (Table 1).<sup>6</sup> More striking than these changes, however, is the dramatic increase since 1980 in the spatial concentration of poverty in specific neighborhoods in Toronto. The change is well documented in a landmark 2004 report by the United Way of Greater Toronto, *Poverty by Postal Code*. The report analyses changes in the number and spatial distribution of ‘poor’ and ‘very poor’ census tracts in Toronto between 1981 and 2001.<sup>7</sup> As increasing numbers of affluent families moved to the outer suburbs surrounding the City, Toronto’s overall family poverty rate increased from 13.3% to 19.4% (United Way 2004: 17). Yet the geographical concentration of poverty in the City increased much faster than this. In 1981, 7.1% of Toronto census tracts were ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’; by 2001 the percentage had more than tripled, to 23.0% (calculated from United Way 2004: 22). The percentage of poor families that lived in poor neighborhoods rose from 17.8% to 43.2% (United Way 2004: 24). There were equally striking changes in the spatial distribution of poverty. Whereas the family poverty rate in the inner city declined slightly (by 0.9%) between 1981 and 2001, in the post-war ‘inner suburbs’ – which account for three-quarters of Toronto’s population – it went up by 7.4%, and the number of ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ census tracts in the inner suburbs shot up from 16 to 108 (calculated from United Way 2004: 26, 27). Finally, mirroring a broader trend across urban Canada (Kazempur and Halli 2001, Picot and Hou 2003), these poor census tracts were increasingly home to recent immigrants and/or ‘visible minority’ residents (United Way 2004: 49).

*Table 1. Selected Socioeconomic Indicators, 2006*

	<b>City of Toronto</b>	<b>Census Metropolitan Area</b>
Average value of owned dwelling (\$)	413,574	403,112
Median individual income (\$)	24,544	26,754
% of households below low-income cutoff	24.50	18.40

Note: The “Census Metropolitan Area” is a statistical unit used by Census Canada. In 2006, the Toronto CMA had a population of 5,072,075, and was thus slightly smaller than the politically-defined GTA.

Source: Calculated from Statistics Canada 2007.

A full analysis of the causes of these shifts is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is worth briefly mentioning some contributing factors, as discussion of these has helped to shape the contemporary politics of neighborhood regeneration in Toronto. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Toronto transitioned from an industrial to a largely post-industrial economy, a process that involved the loss of 30% of all the manufacturing jobs in Toronto, and an accompanying increase in income polarization (Courchene 1999). In 1995, the same Conservative provincial government that amalgamated Toronto also slashed welfare rates and other social benefits, accentuating income polarization (Ibbitson 1997). The gentrification of large parts of the old inner city, together with the economic

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if we compare the City of Toronto rate to that of the outer suburbs alone, we find that the City has almost double the household poverty rate of the rest of the GTA.

<sup>7</sup> The report classifies census tracts with double to triple the national average family poverty rate (which dropped marginally in these 20 years, from 13% to 12.8%) as “poor”, and those with more than triple the national rate as “very poor” (United Way 2004: 10).

recovery that followed a deep recession in the early 1990s, led to a rapid growth in housing prices and rental rates in the inner city, and poor residents were increasingly pushed into the inner suburbs, where aging post-war housing stock and difficult access to amenities made many neighborhoods unattractive to the more affluent. Finally, although various levels of government have recently begun to work together to respond to the needs of the thousands of new immigrants who arrive in Toronto each year, many barriers to integration remain for those who do not come with significant financial resources of their own. Since most new immigrants are members of visible minorities, these barriers have contributed to a steady racialization of poverty (Good 2006). With this background in mind, let us now examine in some detail the neighborhood regeneration efforts that have emerged in contemporary Toronto.

### **3. Historical context of neighborhood regeneration in Toronto**

Toronto, and indeed Canada as a whole, has little history of neighborhood regeneration policy. In large part this is because Canadian cities have historically been spared the acute socio-spatial segregation seen in large cities in some other western countries. It has been fifty years since a handful of ‘slum clearance’ projects took place in some Canadian cities; the largest of these was in Toronto’s Regent Park, which, as we will see, is now the object of another large-scale redevelopment effort. In the 1960s and 1970s, both the federal government and the Ontario provincial government sponsored significant social housing construction in Toronto, but the vast majority was built on what were then ‘greenfield’ sites in the city’s post-war suburbs, rather than in already existing neighborhoods. In the 1970s, the Neighborhood Improvement Program channeled federal resources into a variety revitalization efforts across Canada, but it was never more than modest in scope, and was cancelled in 1978 (Carter 1991). In recent years, there has been no equivalent in Canada of Britain’s Neighborhood Renewal Strategy or the American federal government’s Empowerment Zone program.<sup>8</sup> And while local government in Toronto has a long history of funding small-scale neighborhood service organizations, until the last five years no cross-sectoral policies targeting specific neighborhoods have existed.

Despite two decades of growth in the number of distressed neighborhoods in Toronto, neighborhood revitalization was not on the citywide policy agenda in the early years after the 1998 provincially-imposed amalgamation that created the current municipality out of the two-tier Metropolitan Toronto federation. Several factors appear to account for this absence. In the first two to three years after amalgamation, City government was in a state of near-chaos as officials grappled with integrating seven municipal units into one while facing a fiscal crisis.<sup>9</sup> During the two terms that Mel Lastman served as Mayor (1998-2000 and 2001-2003), Council was dominated by politicians who were more concerned with keeping taxes in line than with social policy. No intergovernmental support for addressing neighborhood distress was available. In addition, the City lacked neighborhood-level (or indeed, any sub-municipal) structures of

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<sup>8</sup> In recent years, single-neighborhood revitalization initiatives have secured significant federal and provincial support in two cities: Vancouver and Winnipeg. See also section 7.

<sup>9</sup> The lengthy report of the Bellamy Inquiry, commissioned to investigate a major instance of influence-peddling relating to computer leasing that occurred at this time, paints a vivid picture (Bellamy 2005).

political representation. While some City administrators believed that the problems of distressed neighborhoods called for integrated place-based policy, there was, in the words of one administrator interviewed for this project, “zero political appetite” for such an approach (PI).<sup>10</sup>

Over the past five years, however, neighborhood regeneration has emerged as a significant political agenda item in Toronto. The research I have conducted so far suggests that the development of cross-sectoral revitalization strategies in contemporary Toronto has followed one of two distinct trajectories. Each of these trajectories has focused on different neighborhoods, and has produced a different set of neighborhood revitalization initiatives. The first trajectory has led to the physical rebuilding of some of the City’s aging social housing projects. This trajectory has its origins in one inner-city social housing neighborhood, Regent Park. A much smaller analogous project was simultaneously launched in the nearby social housing project of Don Mount Court, and second large project using the Regent Park model is currently in the planning stages in the inner suburban neighborhood of Lawrence Heights. The second trajectory resulted in the adoption in 2005 of a citywide Strong Neighborhoods Strategy (SNS) that identifies 13 distressed inner suburban areas as ‘priority investment’ neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> In the SNS the focus is not on physical reconstruction, but rather on people-centered interventions such as youth programs, community services and community policing. This research project will examine the neighborhood of Black Creek, in the northwest of Toronto, as an example of one neighborhood that has been targeted for investment by the SNS; however, fieldwork for this part of the project has not been completed yet.

#### **4. Revitalizing Regent Park**

Built between 1948 and 1959 of one of Canada’s few large-scale ‘slum clearance’ redevelopment initiatives, the Regent Park social housing project has for decades held the dubious distinction of being Toronto’s poorest area. It is a compact area with some 12,000 residents, located in close proximity to Toronto’s central business district. It is very ethno-racially diverse; as of 2006, almost 80% of the population self-identified as ‘visible minority’. The largest visible minority groups are South Asian (27% of the total population), Black (22%) and Chinese (16%) (calculated from Statistics Canada 2007). Selected social and demographic indicators for the area are presented in Table 2, and are compared to citywide figures for the same indicators.

Regent Park residents lobbied for physical reconstruction of the housing project for many years before the Toronto Community Housing Corporation undertook the total reconstruction that is currently in progress. Not only was the housing complex long in poor repair, but residents blamed its built form – with few through streets and many poorly-lit corners – for fostering criminal behaviour and creating unsafe spaces, and complained about the complete lack of commercial amenities within the complex (Meagher and Boston 2003). In the 1980s and 1990s, Regent Park was the site of two failed attempts at partial reconstruction. The second attempt, spearheaded by a residents’

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<sup>10</sup> Since interviews conducted for this project are confidential, information taken from interviews is cited in this paper with the marker, “PI” (Personal Interview)

<sup>11</sup> Even though it is Toronto’s poorest neighborhood, Regent Park was not included in the 13 priority neighborhoods from the SNS. The reasons for this are discussed more in section 7.

group called the North East Regent Park Redevelopment Working Committee, fell apart when the provincial government – which managed the housing development at the time – refused to commit the necessary resources (Meagher and Boston 2003: 89).

*Table 2. Selected Indicators for Toronto and Regent Park (2006)*

	<b>Toronto</b>	<b>Regent Park</b>
population	2,465,500	11,160
% unemployment	7.63	15.36
% of households below low-income cutoff	24.50	67.96
Median individual income (\$)	24,544	13,206
% visible minority	49.98	78.87
% foreign-born	46.95	78.87
% lone-parent families	20.32	36.07
% of population 15 years+ with incomplete high school	20.36	31.15
% of population 19 years or younger	22.20	36.98
% of dwellings owner-occupied	54.38	10.87
% of dwellings needing major repairs	7.80	21.57

*Source: Calculated from Statistics Canada 2007.*

As we saw earlier, in 1998 the Ontario provincial government handed over responsibility for all social housing to municipalities. At the beginning of 2002, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) was formed out of the merger of the provincially-managed Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority with the Toronto Housing Company, the public housing authority run by the pre-amalgamation municipality of Toronto. With 58,500 housing units in its portfolio, the municipally-owned TCHC is the second largest social housing authority in North America (TCHC 2008). The TCHC's newly appointed director, former Toronto Housing Company chief Derek Ballantyne, saw the creation of the new entity as an opportunity to re-make the reputation of social housing in Toronto, and seized on Regent Park redevelopment as a possible lead project. An initial feasibility study commissioned in spring 2002 found that tearing Regent Park down and building anew would cost only about 20% more than conducting necessary repairs to the existing buildings (PI). Furthermore, Regent Park was located in close proximity to the Central Business District and was immediately adjacent to one of Toronto's most desirable gentrified neighborhoods, Cabbagetown, so demand for any market housing built on the site was likely to be strong. The TCHC thus proposed rebuilding Regent Park at double the current density. The TCHC would replace all 2,087 units of existing social housing on the site and add about 2,400 market housing units. Sale of land to developers of the market housing would help to cover the \$500 million costs of the social housing re-build, and a gradual approach to redevelopment, which would spread the project over 15 years and 9 phases, would help to ensure sufficient demand for emerging market housing and make the temporary relocation of existing residents more feasible (PI; TCHC 2002).

Given active resident interest in rebuilding, TCHC opted for an extensive public engagement process before releasing a full proposed redevelopment plan. Both documentary evidence and interviews suggest that the process used was a model of

public engagement (PI; Meagher and Boston 2003). Between July and December of 2002, TCHC engaged consultants; these consultants in turn hired Regent Park residents as ‘community animators’ who structured and ran a series of broad-ranging public engagement exercises in each of Regent Park’s 12 major linguistic and cultural communities (Meagher and Boston 2003: 11-18). About 2,000 residents, or 30% of the total adult population of Regent Park, participated (5). The engagement process produced results that suggested a remarkable degree of cohesion about neighborhood problems and priorities among Regent Park’s various ethnic and cultural communities. Residents strongly supported a phased re-building that would create a mixed-income community. In addition, residents felt strongly that they should be assured replacement accommodation during the re-build, and have the right to return to a new social housing unit in Regent Park afterwards. They wanted a new Regent Park to have through-streets that connected it to surrounding communities, and ample commercial and community service space. Furthermore, there was a strong feeling that redevelopment should also involve comprehensive planning for human services, ranging from social services to recreational and cultural facilities (Meagher and Boston 2003).

In December 2002 TCHC released a \$1 billion<sup>12</sup> draft redevelopment plan that reflected these priorities, and that received “overwhelming approval” from residents at public meetings (Meagher and Boston 2003: 51; PI). In 2004, over the protests of many social housing advocates (Sewell 2005), TCHC altered its original plan to rebuild all of the existing social housing on-site, and chose instead to build about 1/4 of this housing in other nearby locations, in order to lower the concentration of social housing on the site and enhance its market appeal (TCHC 2004: 5; PI). The altered redevelopment plan passed easily at City Council in 2005 (Gillespie 2005), in part because the short-term financial implications for the City were minor (PI). In March 2006, TCHC secured a developer for the market component of Phase I of the redevelopment. Demolition of 418 existing units of social housing, and their replacement with 302 new social housing units, 400 market units and four commercial spaces then began; the first tenants began moving back into the new units in May of 2009 (TCHC 2006: 1).<sup>13</sup> While there have been news reports of difficulties in the resident relocation process, and residents express some anxiety about their security of tenure, for the most part it appears that resident support for the redevelopment process remains strong (PI).

The physical redevelopment process has gone remarkably smoothly in Regent Park so far, yet the completion of the originally envisioned project is by no means assured. The reliance on private investment to finance the rebuilding of public housing, as well as the location of Regent Park in an area with strong gentrification potential, both make the social housing goals of the project vulnerable to market housing forces. As we saw above, concern about the project’s attractiveness to private developers already led the TCHC to lower the on-site social housing component in 2004. And, while Phase I of the redevelopment is now headed towards completion, the 2009 downturn in the housing market has slowed negotiations with developers over subsequent phases, and puts pressure on the TCHC to once again make the project more attractive to private

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<sup>12</sup> This figure includes planned TCHC investment in new social housing (\$450 million), private investment in market housing (\$500 million), and government investment in infrastructure and community facilities (\$50 million).

<sup>13</sup> The remaining 116 social housing units are being replaced off-site in nearby neighborhoods.

investment by further lowering the social housing component (PI). At the same time, the strong market potential of the site may produce incentives for TCHC officials and the municipal politicians who oversee their activity to ‘cash in’ on the market potential of the site when the housing market recovers. Indeed, some academic have recently argued that the Regent Park redevelopment is little more than a means through which the wealthy and powerful seek to ‘recolonize’ potentially valuable urban space, and that the resident engagement processes developed by TCHC are simply tools used to legitimize this underlying pursuit (Kipfer and Petrunia 2009). The data gathered for the present research do not support this interpretation, but it is clear that fundamental tensions between the social and the market components of the project do exist, and these make the original redevelopment plan highly vulnerable to pressure for change in favor of the interests of various actors who seek to realize more of the market potential of the site.

Other aspects of the project have already faced significant implementation difficulties that reveal tensions among the actors involved. From the outset, TCHC officials suggested that revitalization was about “more than just bricks and mortar”, and needed to include provisions for renewed community space and enhanced resident services (PI). However, developing a strategy for community space and resident services proved to be complicated. Regent Park is served by an array of vibrant Community Based Organizations (CBOs), which are significant agents in the community.<sup>14</sup> Unlike local residents, local CBOs had not been heavily involved in the initial redevelopment planning. Many of them did not (and some still do not trust) TCHC, and saw the rebuilding scheme as threatening to marginalize both them and their client base once increasing numbers of wealthier residents move into the neighborhood (PI). In 2004, TCHC and the City of Toronto launched a “social development planning” process that aimed to bring both residents and CBOs into the process of defining priorities for future community space and services. It took a long time to build trust between TCHC officials and CBO representatives in this process (PI). In order to facilitate resident involvement, TCHC began funding a local resident group, the Regent Park Neighborhood Initiative (RPNI), to act as community liaison in the social planning process. The group found itself overwhelmed by the complexity of the task, and resident engagement proved difficult to sustain as the social planning process dragged out over three years (PI).

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<sup>14</sup> Among these is the Regent Park Community Health Centre, which in 2000 launched a landmark youth mentoring program, Pathways to Education. Although the Pathways story does not fit neatly into the narrative of the Regent Park rebuilding project, it is worth recounting briefly, as it constitutes a significant revitalization initiative in its own right. Pathways to Education is a program for high school students. It offers enrolled students a comprehensive support package for the full four years of high school. The package includes one-on-one tutoring with volunteer tutors four nights a week, group mentoring, coaching and support for parents (many of whom do not speak English well), and transit subsidies<sup>14</sup>, as well as a \$4,000 bursary for post-secondary education upon graduation (Pathways to Education 2010). Unlike most other support programs for underprivileged children, it targets neither ‘delinquents’ nor ‘rising stars’, but is offered to all Regent Park students (PI). Relying at first on corporate and foundation donations, Pathways quickly became a huge success story. By 2007, 95% of Regent Park high school students were enrolled in Pathways, the dropout rate had plummeted from 56% to 10% in 7 years, and the rate of post-secondary enrolment among Regent Park high school graduates had soared from 20% to 80% (Boston Consulting Group 2007: 11). At that point, Pathways secured a \$19 million provincial government grant as well as \$10 million in funding from the United Way of Greater Toronto, and the program is being replicated in several other neighborhoods, both in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada.

In the end, a Social Development Plan (SDP) that provides a long list of some 70 priorities was produced in 2007. However, an implementation plan for financing is still absent. The City has committed to funding the replacement of basic physical infrastructure such as roads and sewers in Regent Park, but, in the hope that other levels of government will at some point agree to help fund new community facilities (which they have not yet done), the City has not committed itself to financing these.<sup>15</sup> The one exception to this generalization involves a new \$11 million indoor pool, which was approved for construction by the City in 2006 after local Councilor Pam McConnell successfully lobbied to secure a \$2 million contribution to the facility from Donald Trump, who is building the Trump International Tower nearby (PI). While welcomed by most local actors, the new pool was not at the top of the list of SDP priorities, and the need to use the money quickly has required TCHC to revise its tenant relocation timeline in order to make way for pool construction (PI).

Whether or not the community infrastructure and programming priorities articulated in the SDP will be realized thus remains an important open question. Nevertheless, the TCHC has already judged the Regent Park trajectory to be successful enough that it has recently launched an analogous effort in another large TCHC housing complex, the 1208-unit Lawrence Heights. Lawrence Heights is situated in one of the inner suburban neighborhoods that are targeted for priority investment under the City's Strong Neighborhoods Strategy (see below). As such, it may not have as much market potential for investment as the centrally-located Regent Park. In addition, one official interviewed for this research noted that Lawrence Heights lacks Regent Park's history of resident activism, and that initial community meetings have been marked by a great deal of resident mistrust towards the housing authority (PI). The experience of Regent Park may thus prove difficult to replicate in the Lawrence Heights context.

## **5. The Strong Neighborhoods Strategy**

As we saw earlier on, during the early years after amalgamation neighborhood regeneration was very much off the citywide policy agenda in Toronto. Nonetheless, within the City's administration the Social Policy Research and Analysis unit (SPAR) was, in the words of one informant, "quietly working away" to develop a spatial perspective on poverty by devising the social planning neighborhoods, and developing a statistical database on neighborhood-level social indicators (PI). In 2003, the issue of spatially concentrated poverty in Toronto began to get public attention when the Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA), a civic coalition of prominent business and community leaders formed in 2002, published a report titled "Enough Talk: An Action Plan for the Toronto Region". Among other pressing local policy problems the report highlighted neighborhood distress in the city, and called for a coordinated intergovernmental response to funding community services in distressed areas (TCSA 2003: 24-25).

Shortly after the TCSA published its report, a series of highly-publicized gun murders, the majority of which involved young black men from poor inner suburban neighborhoods (Fowlie 2004), further brought the issue of neighborhood distress to

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<sup>15</sup> Despite TCHC and City of Toronto lobbying, the provincial and federal governments have thus far not committed any funding to the expansion of community facilities and programming in Regent Park (PI).

prominence.<sup>16</sup> In March 2004, about five months after becoming mayor, David Miller adopted a “Community Safety Plan” (CSP) with enthusiastic support from City Council. While the CSP was rather short on specifics and funding commitments, it was nonetheless an important milestone in the development of a citywide neighborhood revitalization framework. It highlighted the spatial dimension of violence in the city, and identified four inner suburban neighborhoods – Malvern, Jamestown, Kingston-Galloway and Jane-Finch – as ‘at-risk’ neighborhoods that required public investment (see Figure 1 below). In substantive terms, the CSP reflected the conviction of Miller, as well as of a contingent of new City Councilors, that violence must be addressed through preventive social and community programming (PI). The CSP was billed as “a package of prevention initiatives that will act as a catalyst for civic action to improve public safety and will build on existing strengths in our communities” by developing “an effective blend of programs and services - particularly for youth who live in at-risk neighborhoods” (City of Toronto 2004: 5). To that end, it called for the development of youth employment and engagement programs in the three ‘at-risk’ neighborhoods, mandated the community-led development of ‘neighborhood action plans’ for these areas, and established a Community Safety Panel composed of prominent civic and business leaders to leverage private-sector resources. As one administrator interviewed for this research noted, the framing of the CSP allowed Councilors to appear to be ‘tough on crime’, while in fact opening the door to the development of spatially targeted social and community programming in the priority neighborhoods (PI). Although the actual development of such programming was slow during the following year, the CSP paved the way for larger-scale policy initiatives to come.

Just after Council adopted the CSP, the United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) released the landmark *Poverty by Postal Code* report discussed earlier in this paper. Traditionally a policy-neutral charity that distributed funding to local social service agencies, with this report the UWGT moved in the direction of policy advocacy. Since the UWGT is the largest and most influential charity in the Toronto area,<sup>17</sup> this move added considerably to the momentum of the emerging policy concern with distressed neighborhoods in Toronto. In May 2004, the UWGT teamed up with the TCSCA and the City of Toronto to launch the Strong Neighborhoods Task Force (SNTF), a high-profile effort to develop a strategy for revitalizing Toronto’s distressed neighborhoods. In addition to City and United Way members, the Task Force included several representatives from community-based organizations. As well, taking advantage of a new openness to multilevel policy dialogue at the provincial and federal levels,<sup>18</sup> the SNTF included representatives from both these levels of government.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the number of gun murders in 2003 – 31 – was only three higher than the previous year. In addition, the overall murder rate in Toronto in recent years has remained at about the Canadian average, and is well below homicide rates in all major American cities. For example, Baltimore’s homicide rate in 2006 was 24 times as high as Toronto’s (Topping 2008).

<sup>17</sup> In 2007, for example, the UWGT raised \$108.1 million from Toronto-area residents and businesses (UWGT 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Late 2003 had brought a change in government at both of these levels. Provincially, the Conservative government that had amalgamated Toronto and had downloaded new fiscal responsibilities on it was replaced by a Liberal government that promised to address the City’s pressing fiscal concerns; federally, Paul Martin had succeeded Jean Chretien as Prime Minister, and promised a “New Deal” for cities that would include more funding for municipal needs (see Horak 2008 for a detailed discussion).

The SNTF issued its final report in June 2005. The report's first and, as it turned out, most important feature was that it defined nine inner suburban neighborhoods as "priority neighborhoods" for investment. For the most part, these were *not* the same neighborhoods as had been named in the CSP.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the CSP targeted high-violence areas, the SNTF's priority neighborhood selection methodology combined indicators of socioeconomic distress with an assessment of the accessibility of key services, such as libraries, schools, health centers and youth services (SNTF 2005: 18-24).<sup>20</sup> In addition to identifying priority neighborhoods, the SNTF report called for a large-scale, five-year investment agreement among all three levels of government that would channel public money into the priority neighborhoods.<sup>21</sup> The focus was to be primarily on investment in social services, community facilities and funding for community organizations, but the specifics were deliberately left open. Instead, the SNTF recommended that a "Local Neighborhood Investment Partnership" be created in each priority neighborhood in order to develop neighborhood-specific investment priorities in dialogue with local residents, and that an intergovernmental table be set up to commit and coordinate public resources to meet these locally-defined priorities (SNTF 2005: 28-29).

The recommended tri-level investment agreement never materialized. In the spring of 2005 Toronto was already trying to negotiate an Urban Development Agreement (UDA) with other levels of government, focusing on the unfunded components of Regent Park revitalization. After the publication of the SNTF report, these negotiations were expanded to include the 13 priority inner suburban neighborhoods. However, it soon became clear that no level of government was willing to commit resources on a scale envisioned by the SNTF. Focus thus shifted to negotiating a 'framework agreement' for investment, without concrete financial commitments (PI). Intensive work on this took place in the fall of 2005 and, according to one interview subject, an agreement was on the verge of being concluded (PI), but in January 2006 the federal Liberal government was defeated and its Conservative successor rejected the practice of tri-level agreements, effectively killing the initiative.

Notwithstanding this failure of intergovernmental coordination, the SNTF report did have a major impact on the evolution of neighborhood revitalization policy in Toronto. Immediately after the report came out, administrators in Toronto's Social Policy Analysis and Research unit proposed that the CSP priority neighborhoods and the SNTF priority neighborhoods both be included in a citywide Strong Neighborhoods Strategy that would target 13 distressed neighborhoods in total. As if to underline the urgency of neighborhood revitalization action, the summer of 2005 once again brought a spate of gun violence among poor (primarily black) youth. This time, the violence was

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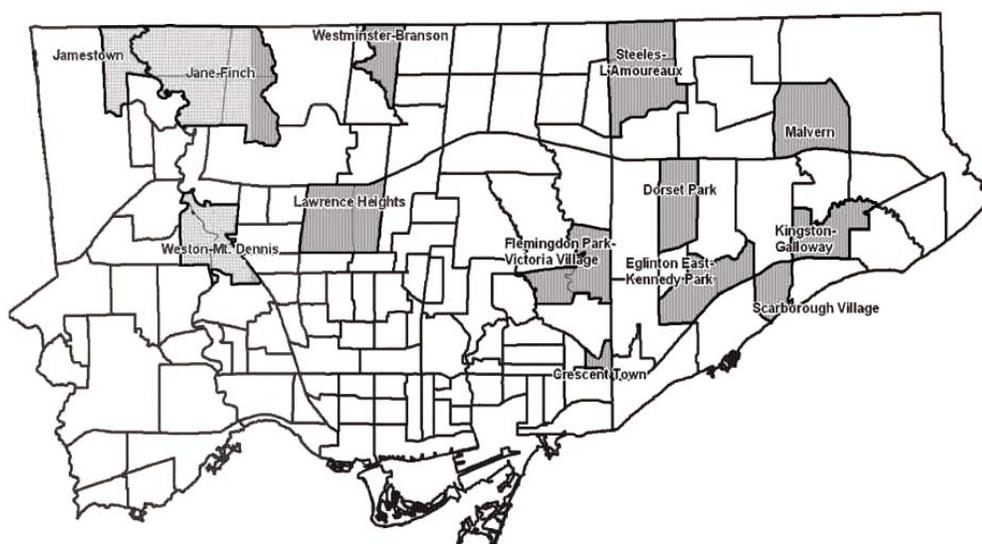
<sup>19</sup> The one neighborhood that was prioritized in both the CSP and the SNTF report is Black Creek (in the CSP, it was part of the larger Jane-Finch priority area).

<sup>20</sup> According to several individuals interviewed, the 'accessibility of services' criterion is the reason why Regent Park was excluded from the priority neighborhoods list, since the high density of CBOs in Regent Park ensured that, according to one City official, "its service coverage is among the best in the city" (PI). This rationale was never accepted by local CBOs in Regent Park, which remain outraged that the neighborhood did not make the priority list, especially in light of the problems in securing funding for new community facilities and programming that were discussed in section 4 of this paper (PI).

<sup>21</sup> In doing so, it drew upon the smaller-scale precedents of tri-level 'urban development agreements' that had recently been signed in Vancouver and Winnipeg as vehicles for coordinating public investment in the poorest neighborhood in each of those cities.

considerably worse than in 2003, with a total of 52 gun murders in the year. In the face of this rise in violence, in October 2005 City Council approved a Strong Neighborhoods Strategy (SNS) focused on 13 priority neighborhoods (City of Toronto 2005). One administrator interviewed for this project commented that this was “a miracle. Here were 30 Councilors saying ‘we don’t need more money in our wards’. It probably wouldn’t have happened without the violence” (PI). Given the intense media coverage of the violence, the provincial and federal governments also felt pressure to act quickly, and they also accepted the 13 neighborhoods as priority areas for their own spatially-targeted investments (PI). The SNS priority neighborhoods are indicated in Figure 1 below.

*Figure 1. Priority Neighborhoods under Toronto’s Strong Neighborhoods Strategy*



*Source: City of Toronto 2008b: 1.*

Like the SNTF report, the City’s SNS did not actually identify specific investment priorities for the 13 neighborhoods. Instead, it reiterated the recommendations of the SNTF report, with its dual focus on establishing Neighborhood Investment Partnerships to identify neighborhood-specific needs in dialogue with local residents, on the one hand, and its call for a tri-level government investment agreement on the other hand. As we have seen, negotiations regarding a tri-level agreement failed soon after the SNS had been adopted. Nevertheless, in the three years since, the Strong Neighborhoods Strategy has provided a framework used by all three level of government, as well as the United Way of Greater Toronto, to develop spatially-targeted initiatives focusing on the 13 priority neighborhoods. While the list of such initiatives is quite long and we will not review all of them here, it is useful to look at a few of the most significant initiatives in brief. As will become clear, while the various initiatives share the same spatial focus,

they are quite diverse both in terms of their substantive area of focus, and in terms of the way in which they relate to neighborhood actors.

Of all three levels of government, the federal level has been the least involved in developing initiatives in the priority neighborhoods. The one significant initiative that it did introduce was the Action for Neighborhood Change (ANC) program. This modest \$4 million program ran between 2005 and 2007 in six distressed neighborhoods in six Canadian cities, including the Toronto priority neighborhood of Scarborough Village. It was implemented through the United Way. ANC had two main goals: To engage residents in a dialogue about what services and facilities are most needed locally; and to develop the capacity of local residents to advocate for their own needs (Gorman 2007). Although ANC was by all accounts well received by local residents (Gorman 2007; PI), the Conservative federal government elected in 2006 chose not to renew it. However, the ANC model has since been picked up by the UWGT, which has spent several million dollars developing ANC projects in most of the other SNS priority neighborhoods (UWGT 2008).

The provincial government has been much more heavily involved in funding programming in the priority neighborhoods. While a variety of programming has been introduced, the provincial government's two most significant funding commitments are to the TAVIS program and the Youth Challenge Fund. TAVIS, the Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy, was launched in the fall of 2005 by the Toronto Police Service. The aim of TAVIS is to reduce gang activity and gun violence in Toronto through targeted policing in some of the 13 priority neighborhoods. The primary mechanism for this has been the development of (thus far) four 18-member "Rapid Response Teams", each focused on one high-violence neighborhood and aimed at increasing police presence and capacity to respond to violence there. This is complemented by a "community mobilization" program that aims to encourage local residents to work with police on crime-related issues (Toronto Police Service 2007). To date, the Ontario provincial government has provided \$17 million in funding for the TAVIS program, which has been touted as a success primarily on the grounds that it has led to increased firearms seizures and arrests in Toronto (Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services 2008).<sup>22</sup>

The other major provincially-funded program, the Youth Challenge Fund (YCF), is very different in character from TAVIS. Established in the summer of 2006, the YCF provides grants to youth-led initiatives in the 13 priority neighborhoods in areas such as arts, safety, peer support and skills training. Since its inception the YCF has funded more than 100 projects in these neighborhoods (see Youth Challenge Fund 2010 for a list). The fund is exclusively focused on black youth who are, according to a senior YCF employee, "out of school and in and out of the justice system – or on the verge" (PI). The YCF, which is housed within the United Way of Greater Toronto, was established with \$15 million in provincial seed money, and the provincial government has matched another \$15 million in private donations to the fund (PI).

Ironically, although the SNS is officially a City of Toronto initiative the City itself has not invested much new money in the priority neighborhoods. Indeed, although some

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<sup>22</sup> Not all interview subjects agreed that TAVIS should be classified as a component program of the SNS, given its focus on law enforcement (PI). I have chosen to classify it as such given the strong relationship between the CSP and the SNS, and given the geographical focus of TAVIS on SNS priority neighborhoods.

official City materials suggest otherwise (see for example Toronto 2008b), City administrators interviewed for this project asserted that virtually no new money has been allocated for SNS neighborhood programming or facilities (PI). Furthermore, administrators noted that while some funding from pre-existing community grants programs and community infrastructure funds is gradually being reallocated to the priority neighborhoods, even this is a slow process (PI). To some extent, this is a reflection of the atmosphere of fiscal constraint that continues to exist at City Hall. However, one City official pointed out that between 2004 and 2007, Toronto's police budget went up by more than \$100 million, and argued that Council, despite its nominally left-of-centre political orientation, is much more concerned with finding "quick fixes" to the problem of social disorder than with addressing its root causes (PI). A review of the sparse attention paid to the SNS in official City documents and at Council meetings over the last three years supports the notion that pursuing integrated neighborhood revitalization efforts remains rather low on the citywide policy agenda.

That said, there are some significant City initiatives related to the SNS. The Community Safety Panel established in 2004 is still operational, and has leveraged significant private-sector investment into youth employment and engagement initiatives in the 13 priority neighborhoods. The City's Social Development Finance and Administration Division, which houses the Social Policy Analysis and Research Unit and also administers neighborhood grants programs, has developed "Neighborhood Action Teams" (NATs) within each of the 13 priority neighborhoods. The NATs bring together administrators from various City divisions in order to "silo-bust" (PI) and coordinate the provision of City services and programming at the neighborhood level. Evaluations of this initiative have thus far been very positive (Corke 2006; PI). In a few neighborhoods, the NATs are now being turned into "Neighborhood Action Partnerships" (NAPs), which bring City administrators, local residents and service agency representatives together to identify neighborhood priorities, somewhat along the lines originally envisioned by the SNTF. While the NAPs have been slow to develop, one administrator interviewed for this project noted that the slow pace is necessary if City officials are not to "impose a structure" on local residents instead of empowering them (PI). A NAP is now in operation in Jane-Finch, the broader priority neighborhood which Black Creek is a part of; however, research into its operation has yet to be carried out.

Given the broad array of organizations and programs investing on Toronto's SNS neighborhoods, it is very difficult to determine how much new money has flowed into these areas since 2005, to say nothing of trying to determine how much money has flowed into any one neighborhood. One City administrator noted that the figure most commonly thrown about for total new investment in the SNS neighborhoods is \$65 million<sup>23</sup> (which seems plausible), but that this figure is contested (PI). Regardless of the precise figure, it is clear that the scale of investment is rather modest, especially if we note that the 13 priority neighborhoods together have a population of some 400,000, whereas Regent Park with less than 12,000 inhabitants is undergoing a \$1 billion revitalization initiative. Perhaps more important than the actual funding invested is the role that the SNS has played in introducing a neighborhood focus into the discourse about social policy in a political environment where this has been largely absent. Almost all of the citywide actors interviewed for this project so far have emphasized that the initiatives

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<sup>23</sup> Not including TAVIS.

that have followed from the SNS have, in the words of one, “begun to change the way government thinks about what it does at the local level” (PI). That said, the research I have conducted so far suggests that there may be significant barriers to translating this changed thinking into coordinated neighborhood intervention.

Despite the extent of neighborhood-focused policy activity in Toronto since 2005, coordination of various initiatives remains loose at best, and mechanisms for setting overall priorities are underdeveloped, both at the citywide level and within individual neighborhoods. While various citywide and provincial agents work together on an ad hoc basis on individual initiatives, there is no coordinating body that brings together representatives of the three major funding and policy-making entities (the provincial government, the municipal government and the UWGT) or their various subunits and funded agencies (such as the Toronto Police Service or the Youth Challenge Fund). This is not all that surprising, since the various actors involved have a range of priorities, and these are not always fully complementary. For example, one City administrator asserted that while, outwardly, City administrators and UWGT officials claim to be developing complementary neighborhood initiatives, in reality there is considerable tension between them, as the United Way “is a fundraising charity so it needs to paint a dire picture of conditions in our neighborhoods, which really undermines our efforts to empower residents in these areas” (PI). Likewise, some interview subjects noted that the strong focus of City Council and the Toronto Police Service on law enforcement is in tension with efforts to engage residents (PI).

Although I have not yet conducted research into the local implementation of SNS initiatives in Black Creek, as is planned, preliminary evidence suggests that the reluctance of various citywide and provincial-level actors to work closely together may in turn make it more difficult to develop neighborhood-level investment priorities in dialogue with residents. The main vehicles for strategic resident engagement to date are the City’s NAP processes and the UWGT’s ANC projects. However, one City administrator complained that the UWGT did not invite City officials to participate in its ANC projects, and that in neighborhoods where both the ANC and NAPs were present, the two initiatives were thus uncoordinated (PI). The research that still remains to be done will give us insight into whether this is an isolated problem, or whether the unwillingness of key citywide and provincial agents to let go of their agendas threatens to undermine the possibility for resident-led priority definition at the neighborhood level.

## **6. Concluding Reflections**

At this point, with the research for this project not yet complete, any conclusions drawn are necessarily preliminary and subject to change in the face of new evidence. Nonetheless, the outlines of some interesting conclusions are already emerging. Relatively speaking, Toronto has experienced a surge in policy activity relating to neighborhood revitalization in recent years. The research has identified two distinct trajectories of revitalization, which have produced quite different policy outputs. The main policy output of the first trajectory, pioneered in the Regent Park case, has been the comprehensive physical redevelopment of a large social housing project into a mixed-income housing area. This redevelopment was grounded in extensive resident engagement, and retains solid resident support. While the primary focus of this initiative

is physical, it also attempts to incorporate the development of community services and programming into the revitalization process. The Regent Park project has emerged from a constellation of factors that appear to be unique to the neighborhood, including the dominance of a single housing agency (TCHC), a history of resident mobilization in favor of physical redevelopment, and a physical setting with strong market potential. As we have noted, however, this very market potential and TCHC's reliance on it makes the project vulnerable to market forces; furthermore, the implementation of the social and economic development components of the project remains an open question.

The policy output of the second trajectory is essentially two-fold. The first aspect is the Strong Neighborhoods Strategy, which identifies 13 inner suburban neighborhoods for priority investment. The second aspect involves a variety of loosely coordinated revitalization initiatives undertaken in these neighborhoods by various actors; the initiatives differ substantially in terms of focus and method of delivery, although there are particular emphases on youth programming, crime control and crime prevention, and community capacity building. These policy outputs are the product of a constellation of factors that includes policy advocacy by non-governmental organizations, a change in government at all three levels in 2003, and – perhaps most importantly – a key ‘triggering event’ in the form of a rise in gun violence that added a sense of urgency to the problem of neighborhood distress.

The causal factors and policy outputs in these revitalization trajectories are thus quite different. That said, a preliminary comparison of the two also reveals some common challenges faced by agents engaged in revitalization interventions. First, both of these trajectories emerged in a context where resources for neighborhood revitalization are scarce, and both have faced funding constraints. In the Regent Park case, the institutional assets of the TCHC and the market potential of the site allowed the TCHC to finance the cost of housing redevelopment, but government money for accompanying community infrastructure and programming has been hard to come by, and it remains unclear how this part of the project will be financed. As for the SNS, while it has acted as a framework that has funneled new investment into the priority neighborhoods, the amount of this investment is very modest in relation to the population base being addressed. It seems unlikely that, barring another ‘triggering event’ such as a spike in gun violence, the total invested amount will increase dramatically in the near future. However, if the SNS interventions begin to show results that policy-makers value, we may see an incremental ramping-up of revitalization funding.

A second key challenge faced in both of these revitalization trajectories is that of reconciling the differing substantive revitalization priorities of various policy agents. This challenge is most clearly evident in the case of the SNS, which has thus far produced a series of loosely coordinated neighborhood interventions, not all of which sit well with each other. Although many of the SNS-related initiatives do appear to be complementary, at times agents work at cross-purposes, which has in turn contributed to a reluctance to formally coordinate intervention strategies. In Regent Park, we saw that relatively homogenous resident preferences regarding revitalization, the dominance of a single housing authority, and extensive consultation have led to an unusual degree of priority-convergence. Even here, however, we found priority differences among various agents, including local CBOs, City politicians and TCHC officials.

To an extent, such priority differences are a reflection of the different positions that agents occupy in the neighborhood revitalization policy landscape. For example, local politicians tend to face pressure to respond quickly to perceived threats to public security; managers of local social service organizations tend to focus on people-centered, rather than place-centered revitalization strategies, and so on. However, these differing priorities also reflect the existence of multiple, and fundamentally differing, understandings of the nature of the problem of neighborhood distress.

*Table 3. Understandings of the Problem of Neighborhood Distress*

<b>Underlying problem</b>	<b>Solution(s) to problem</b>
Powerlessness	Empower residents to define their priorities
Material inequality	Provide better services, built environment, amenities
Social disorder	Impose order through coercion

The information I have gathered so far on the politics of neighborhood revitalization in Toronto suggests that there are at least three distinct understandings of the nature of neighborhood distress present in the policy discourse (Table 3). These understandings are not entirely mutually exclusive, and some agents simultaneously hold more than one of them. However, particular agents tend to be more likely to hold some understandings than others. For example, community activists and municipal social planners in Toronto tend to understand neighborhood distress in terms of the powerlessness of residents. Those who work in the United Way and local social service delivery organizations tend to understand neighborhood distress as a problem of material inequality. Many local politicians and – it appears – members of the broader public tend to understand neighborhood distress as a problem of social disorder. While these are gross generalizations, the evidence suggests that such tendencies are present. As Table 3 notes, different problem understandings are in turn associated with different priority solution sets. And each of these solution sets in turn implies a different relationship between residents of a deprived neighborhood and the process of designing and implementing neighborhood-level policy interventions. If the problem is one of powerlessness, residents of a distressed neighborhood must be allowed to shape the content of an intervention themselves if it is to be successful. If neighborhood distress is a problem of material inequality, residents must be provided with better material conditions and services through the redistribution of public resources to distressed neighborhoods; the extent to which residents participate in setting priorities in the redistribution process is of secondary importance. If neighborhood distress is a problem of social disorder, residents need to be ordered, disciplined and contained through coercive action. In contemporary Toronto, all three of these understandings are present in the neighborhood revitalization sphere, and the tensions among them remain very much unresolved. Whether one or another of these understandings comes to dominate the politics of neighborhood revitalization in Toronto is likely to have a major impact on future revitalization trajectories in the city.

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