SPECIAL REPORT

FOR INTERACTIVE MAPS, NEIGHBOURHOOD RANKINGS AND SLIDE SHOWS, VISIT CODE RED AT THESPEC.COM

GARY YOKOYAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Neighbours on Roxborough Street in the east end enjoy the warmth of early March. This neighbourhood, or census tract, has the highest rate of cardiovascular ER visits in Hamilton.

CODE RED: Drift to the suburbs leaves inner-city impoverished

Continued from WR4

Now those same neighbourhoods are blighted.

The 10 neighbourhoods with the lowest average house value in Hamilton all ring the former Stelco and Dofasco.

In fact, of the 25 neighbourhoods with the lowest average house values, all are located in the lower part of the former City of Hamilton.

In one neighbourhood that fronts the city's two steelmakers, more than one in five homes requires major repairs, according to the 2006 census.

It's the same neighbourhood where the average value of a home is the same as the sticker price of a high-end Mercedes-Benz SUV.

"The decline in the industrial strength of the city certainly has a role to play," said Eisenberger.

"There was kind of a drift into the suburban communities for anybody who was affluent, and a reverse drift into the inner city for those who were not. It was really a recipe for a Detroit or Buffalo scenario where you have great suburban communities and an inner city downtown that's just fallen apart and been left to go to ruin.

"And that spills into the social determinants of health."

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Meet Dr. Dale Guenter, a physician and an associate professor in the department of family medicine at McMaster University.

Guenter is also president of the Shelter Health Network, which operates a rotating series of medical clinics in Hamilton's homeless shelters to help those who are "precariously housed," as he puts it.

"That is to say sometimes they're housed, sometimes they're not," Guenter noted.

The clinics employ a team approach that includes nurses, nurse practitioners, family doctors and specialists. Interestingly, the clinics are using an electronic health record system, something the province hasn't figured out how to do yet.

"In a sense we're running a virtual clinic," said Guenter. "We know exactly what kind of issues they had at the last shelter. We know what kind of tests were ordered."

The concept is simple: The network improves the health of the homeless and it ultimately reduces the use of health care resources, which makes it cheaper for everyone.

"It was our feeling that a lot of people were landing in emergency departments and hospitals who really did not need to be there," said Guenter. "But either the people watching over them in the shelters or the people themselves could see no option when something came up.

"The reflex was to call an ambulance and send them to emergency."

Guenter is soft-spoken and thoughtful. He has worked in the North End, worked with HIV/AIDS patients, and now in Hamilton's homeless shelters, and he knows he has to guard himself from burning out.

"Every single person breaks my heart," said Guenter. "The vast majority have had bad breaks from the time they were in their mother's womb, from a time when they had absolutely no say in what was going to happen to them.

"From the day that they were conceived through to the time I meet them, they have been up against some circumstances that are completely foreign to me, circumstances that I cannot imagine growing up in.

"But I have to say there are many joys around this work, and the joy is to see when people can actually surmount that set of circumstances," Guenter added. "Sometimes just a little bit and sometimes a lot."

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On a brisk winter morning, kids in pyjama bottoms are pushing babies in strollers along Wentworth Street North. Three blocks over, a scruffy young man walks a menacing-looking pit bull, the dog's muzzle absent.

Bits of garbage kicked up by a stiff wind dance and spin in front of the grimy stores on King Street East, where some of the street-level fronts have been converted to residential units, one of Hamilton's peculiarities.

This is census tract 5370050, as it's known by Statistics Canada. We'll call it CT0050, for short.

The neighbourhood, bounded by Wellington Street North, Cannon Street East, Wentworth Avenue North and Main Street East, is a tiny square measuring just 0.6 square kilometres, and 4,440 people are jammed inside its borders.

Take the 12 health-related variables measured by The Spectator and the 12 social and economic variables, add them all together, create a new overall ranking from top to bottom and CT0050 finishes 130th out of Hamilton's 130 neighbourhoods.

CT0050 finished among the bottom 10 neighbourhoods in 14 of the 24 categories measured, including eight of the 12 health categories.

It had the highest rate of urgent hospital admissions, the second-highest dropout rate from high school, and the third-highest rates of emergency room visits and overall hospital admissions.

More than 40 per cent of the children in CT0050 live below the poverty line.

A staggering one-third of all income for the neighbourhood comes not from wages but from government money, such as Ontario Works or old age pensions.

None of this comes as any great surprise to David Christopherson.

Christopherson, the MP for Hamilton Centre, grew up in this neighbourhood.

His constituency office on Tisdale Street South sits smack dab in the heart of CT0050, across the street from the parking lot of the No Frills store on Main Street East.

"I look out my office window and I can see where I rode my bike as a kid," Christopherson said. "My mom was a cashier at the No Frills when it was a Loblaws back in the '60s. But I'm also here because this is where there is a need.

"There are a lot of tears in this office," said Christopherson. "People don't know where to turn.

"People come in here and tell us they can't afford to buy food for their families. It hits you like a two-by-four right in the face."

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SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

1. Income and social status

These two factors seem to be the most important determinants of health. Health status improves at each step up the income and social hierarchy. High income determines living conditions such as safe housing and ability to buy sufficient good food. The healthiest populations are those in societies that are prosperous and have an equitable distribution of wealth.

2. Social support networks

Support from families, friends and communities is associated with better health. These networks can be important in helping people solve problems and deal with adversity, as well as in maintaining a sense of control over life circumstances. The caring and respect that occurs in social relationships and the resulting sense of well-being, seem to act as a buffer against health problems.

3. Education and literacy

Education contributes to health and prosperity by equipping people with knowledge and skills for problem solving, and helps provide a sense of control and mastery over life circumstances. It increases opportunities for job and income security, and job satisfaction, and it improves people's ability to access and understand information to help keep them healthy.

4. Employment and working conditions

Unemployment, underemployment, stressful or unsafe work are associated with poorer health. People who have more control over their work circumstances and fewer stress-related demands of the job are healthier and often live longer than those in more stressful or riskier work and activities.

5. Social environments

The importance of social support also extends to the broader community. Civic vitality refers to the strength of social networks within a community, region, province or country. The array of values and norms of a society influence in varying ways the health and well-being of individuals and populations.

6. Physical environments

The physical environment is an important determinant of health. At certain levels of exposure, contaminants in our air, water, food and soil can cause a variety of adverse health effects, including cancer, birth defects, respiratory illness and gastrointestinal ailments.

7. Personal health practices and coping skills

This refers to those actions by which individuals can prevent diseases and promote self-care, cope with challenges, and develop self-reliance, solve problems and make choices that enhance health.

8. Healthy child development

The effects of early experiences on brain development, school readiness and health in later life shows early-child development is a powerful determinant of health. A young person's development is greatly affected by housing and neighbourhood, family income, level of parents' education, access to nutritious foods and physical recreation, genetic makeup and access to health care.

9. Biology and genetic endowment

The basic biology and organic makeup of the human body are a fundamental determinant of health. Genetic endowment provides an inherited predisposition to a wide range of individual responses that affect health status.

10. Health services

Health services — particularly those designed to maintain and promote health, to prevent disease and to restore health — contribute to population health.

11. Gender

Gender refers to the array of society-determined roles, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Many health issues are a function of gender-based social status or roles.

12. Culture

Some people may face additional health risks due to an environment that is largely determined by dominant cultural values that contribute to the perpetuation of conditions such as marginalization, stigmatization, loss of language and culture and lack of access to culturally appropriate health care and services.

— What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy? by the Public Health Agency of Canada

HAMILTON'S TOP FIVE HEALTH DETERMINANTS

These are Hamilton's five most important determinants of health, according to Dr. Chris Mackie, an associate medical officer of health for the city:

1. Smoking
"We still have a rate of smoking in Hamilton that's above the provincial and national averages," said Mackie. "Smoking is something we've really tried to take on."
His message: "Smoking is not a normal part of life."
2. Poverty
3. Early-childhood development
"If you can help a child begin on the right trajectory then that's going to impact them for their whole life," said Mackie. "It's a really cost-effective way of making a difference."
4. Injuries and trauma, especially in the two-to-40 age range, and particularly due to motor vehicle collisions
5. Obesity and lack of physical activity