

POVERTY: Breaking the cycle is everybody's responsibility

Continued from the cover

"It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and it tends to add to the sense of both disenfranchisement and despair that people feel in distressed neighbourhoods.

"If democracy is going to work, we have to figure out a way to make you believe you have some ownership and you have a vested interest in being part of the process," Cooke added.

Tom Cooper, director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, calls the connection between poverty and low voter turnout "an issue of critical importance" for the city.

"We often see that people don't recognize the important role that municipal government plays in their lives, everything from responsibility over housing policies now and social services policies and recreation as well as the more traditional stuff around filling potholes and collecting garbage," Cooper said.

"The municipality is responsible for much more of a human services component than existed in the past," he added.

"It probably has the biggest impact on their daily lives and yet we don't always see that reflected in terms of the numbers of people who go out and vote, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods."

For some, voting is far down the list of

priorities.

"Sometimes people are just trying to do their best to survive," Cooper said.

"Partly, they don't see their political representatives speaking to the issues they care about," he added. "A place can get duplexed in Ward 3 or 4 and nobody really cares, whereas if it happens up in Ancaster, it will cause quite a stir."

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From Queen Street in the west to the Red Hill valley in the east, from the water's edge to the foot of the Mountain, just three out of every 10 registered voters cast ballots in the last municipal election.

Within that wide swath of the lower inner city, there are five neighbourhoods where more than 40 per cent of the adult population lives below the poverty line.

Even more discouragingly, there are eight neighbourhoods within those three wards where more than half of all children under 18 live in poverty.

A closer look at the numbers shows there's even stratification within a ward.

Take Ward 2, for example, which extends from the waterfront to the foot of the Mountain between Queen and Wellington streets, jutting over to Wentworth Street south of Main.

More than 40 per cent of the ward lives below the poverty line.

In the middle part of Ward 2, between Main and Barton streets where poverty rates are the highest, voter turnout in the 2006 election was 21 per cent, the lowest level in the ward.

But at the north end of the ward, where redevelopment of the waterfront has raised property values and attracted homeowners with higher incomes, the voter turnout rate in 2006 was just over 31 per cent.

At the other end of the ward, which includes the city's fourth-wealthiest neighbourhood in the area south of Aberdeen Avenue, voter turnout rose to almost 37 per cent.

In addition to those voters who don't cast ballots, it's important to remember there's also a significant chunk of lower inner-city residents who aren't even eligible to vote because they aren't Canadian citizens.

Most of Hamilton's new immigrants start out in Wards 2, 3 and 4. Based on 2006 census data, there is one downtown neighbourhood where nearly one in four residents had arrived in Canada within the preceding five years.

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All of this is troubling — but not surprising — to Cooke, a former politician who was a Ward 1 councillor and then Hamil-

ton-Wentworth regional chairperson.

Political candidates, he noted, will fish where the fish are.

"Any political candidate at any level of office that I've talked to in the last 25 years will tell you that you prioritize based on turnout simply because you have a limited amount of time and resources to be effective," Cooke said.

"Historically, it skews heavily to homeowners as opposed to renters, to older people as opposed to younger people, to people who are stable as opposed to transient.

"If given the choice, you would canvass the high-turnout polls twice as opposed to doing the lower-turnout neighbourhoods once," Cooke added. "The math is simple."

Breaking this chicken-and-egg cycle is the responsibility of both political candidates and voters, according to Cooper.

"It's important that residents do take an active role," he said. "But if candidates aren't reaching out to the low-income neighbourhoods, it's very hard for them to get engaged.

"They do have a civic responsibility, as well," Cooper said.

"They're representing all residents of their wards and not just the select few."

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Citizens group working for voter education, engagement

Improving the rate of voter turnout across all wards of the city is one of the goals of the fledgling Hamilton Civic League.

"The city of Hamilton and the citizens of Hamilton would be well served by a community political culture where engagement is the norm," said David Van Beveren, one of the organizers of the group, which describes itself simply as a non-partisan collection of "citizens who feel that municipal government is important."

The Hamilton Civic League has identified four segments of the population that vote in disproportionately low numbers: renters, people living in poverty, students and young people, and new Canadians, even after they've obtained citizenship.

"Of course, there's a lot of overlap here," Van Beveren added. "People can be in several of these categories at the same time."

A decline in voter turnout was a problem across the city in the last municipal elec-

tion.

Dundas's Ward 13 had the highest rate at just over 43 per cent of registered voters, and the rate for the city as a whole was about 37 per cent. Only one of Hamilton's 150 non-institutional polls had a voter turnout rate higher than 50 per cent.

The Hamilton Civic League has developed a three-pronged approach to improve public awareness, which consists of monthly public forums, a city-wide survey being conducted by volunteers and an educational component, including a voter guide to municipal government.

"The idea is that we'll create these resources and eliminate one of the barriers to voting, which could be a lack of understanding of how everything works," Van Beveren said.

The Hamilton Civic League meets Monday evenings at 7:30 p.m. at the Volunteer Hamilton office, located at 267 King St. E.

HL: Voter turnout and poverty rates

2006 Hamilton voter turnout, by ward

	WARD	%TURNOUT	%POVERTY
1.	Ward 13	43.44%	11.3%
2.	Ward 8	43.01%	14.0%
3.	Ward 10	41.32%	9.3%
4.	Ward 11	40.26%	6.6%
5.	Ward 6	39.38%	16.7%
6.	Ward 12	39.12%	6.2%
7.	Ward 1	38.41%	22.9%
8.	Ward 5	37.87%	22.7%
9.	Ward 9	37.14%	12.8%
10.	Ward 7	36.93%	17.3%
11.	Ward 14	36.59%	5.1%
12.	Ward 15	35.79%	6.0%
13.	Ward 4	34.48%	24.6%
14.	Ward 2	31.25%	41.4%
15.	Ward 3	26.63%	33.6%

Heeding Code Red's call to action

Call it Code Red's baby steps of hope. Since the original Code Red series was published in April, a number of initiatives have sprung up — some small, some less so — to help address the issues raised by The Spectator's landmark neighbourhood mapping project.

A June followup feature that highlighted the effects of poverty on students at inner-city Parkview Secondary School near Ivor Wynne Stadium struck a particular chord in the community.

One anonymous donor handed the principal a cheque for \$20,000 to help fund the school's breakfast and lunch program. The Sisters of Notre Dame religious order also decided to triple its financial support for Parkview's meal programs to \$15,000 for this school year.

Parkview principal Paul Beattie said enrolment is up noticeably this year — a direct response, he said, to the article.

"Parents want to bring their kids here and the kids want to be here," Beattie said.

In fact, he added, attendance for Grade 9 students was 100 per cent through the first six days of the school year.

The Parkview story also spurred Jen Baker to take action.

Baker, an official with the Hamilton Naturalists' Club, helps run an Eco Art program in partnership with non-profit The Print Studio on James Street North. The program helps bring art and nature to inner-city schools.

"We read the Parkview article and thought this could be a great match for those students," Baker said.

She contacted Beattie, who thought it was a great idea, and the six-week program will now be offered to Grade 9 students.

The Red Hill valley will be the focus of the program, giving students an easily accessible location. They'll learn about the history of the valley since the retreat of the last ice age.

"I talk about local wildlife, our watersheds, our local natural areas, some endangered species," Baker explained. "The artists from The Print Studio work with the students to make art based on the species I talked about."

"This kind of program is a great equalizer," she added.

"I think you could have kids from Parkview and kids from Hillfield Strathallan and they would all get the same experience."

Other signs of the series' impact include:

■ The city is working on a new initiative to help strengthen the health of Hamilton's neighbourhoods.

"Is this tied to Code Red? Absolutely," said city manager Chris Murray.

Murray said the city has been in discussions with other agencies, and in particular, officials hope to strike a formal relationship with McMaster University to conduct research on Hamilton's neighbourhoods and monitor the city's progress.

Code Red, Murray added, "is a call for action, and we need to respond."

■ On Oct. 4, Today's Family and the Hamilton Jewish Federation was to screen the film Inside Hana's Suitcase at Hamilton Place as a fundraiser to help children in the community in response to the Code Red series.

■ Mohawk College announced a new project to help improve access to college for students who might not otherwise have the opportunity. The project sprung directly from Code Red's findings.

"Our access project is about putting a post-secondary education within the reach of every Hamiltonian in every neighbourhood," said Mohawk president Rob MacIsaac, in a speech made Sept. 1.

"Postal codes should not determine who gets a college education."

■ At least four university courses being taught this year at McMaster are to use the findings of the Code Red series as part of the course curriculum.

■ The findings of the Code Red series are being cited in a grant application made to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for a neighbourhood maternal health study being proposed by McMaster researchers.

The grant application notes the Code Red series has sparked action within the city: "Maternal child health has been identified as a priority by the City of Hamilton through a community planning process in response to the Code Red series."

■ Some of the Code Red findings are also going to be presented at the ninth International Conference on Urban Health, which will be held later this month in New York City.

The two Code Red presentations are titled Low birthweight babies and social determinants of health: A Canadian example, and Connections between health, poverty and social determinants at the neighbourhood level: A case study of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.



Within the city's Ward 2, the wealthier south end votes in much larger proportions than the poorer centre part of the inner-city ward.

CATHIE COWARD, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR