



## WALKABILITY IN TORONTO'S HIGH-RISE NEIGHBOURHOODS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Walkability is a quantitative and qualitative measurement of how inviting or un-inviting an area is to pedestrians. Walking matters more and more to towns and cities and the connection between walking and the social vibrancy of neighbourhoods is becoming clear. Built environments that promote and facilitate walking — to stores, work, school and amenities — are better places to live, have higher real estate values, promote healthier lifestyles, have lower greenhouse gas emission rates and show higher levels of social cohesion.

This walkability study examines eight Toronto high-rise neighbourhoods – seven in the inner suburbs and one in the core. They include: Chalkfarm, Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park, North Kipling, The Peanut, St James Town, Scarborough Village, Steeles L'Amoreaux, and Thorncliffe Park. Group discussions, surveys and mapping exercises took place in these neighbourhoods between the fall of 2009 and 2010. In each neighbourhood, a small sample of residents (25 to 40) were asked to share their opinions of the walking environment, highlighting safety concerns, traffic and connectivity problems, how they access shopping, work or school,

where they like to walk and other issues. The results were compiled and discussed in preliminary reports. This overview report brings together the cross-tabulated data gathered from all eight high-rise study areas and presents a summary of findings.

Our findings are the result of community-led examinations of walking conditions in Toronto's high-rise neighbourhoods. These walkability studies are the first of their kind in North America. They were jointly funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Toronto Community Foundation (TCF).

Principal investigator, Paul Hess, Professor of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto, brings his expertise in pedestrian environments, urban policy and design to this project. Community walking advocate, Jane Farrow, co-authored this report and several of the preliminary reports on behalf of Jane's Walk, the walkability studies' partner organization.

PDF copies of this Executive Summary and the full report are available at:

[http://faculty.geog.utoronto.ca/Hess/hess\\_home.html](http://faculty.geog.utoronto.ca/Hess/hess_home.html)  
[www.janeswalk.net/walkability](http://www.janeswalk.net/walkability)  
[www.citiescentre.utoronto.ca](http://www.citiescentre.utoronto.ca)



*Walkability workshop participants in Chalkfarm*

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**FINDING #1: Many residents of high-rise neighbourhoods do not have cars and are dependent on walking and transit to perform their daily activities.**

Most discussions about the suburbs assume car ownership is universal. This was not true among our study participants. The majority (56%) reported that they do not have a driver's licence and 42% reported their household does not own a car. Another 43% of respondents rely on one vehicle shared among several adults in their household. Among participants aged 25 or over, 84% of households have fewer vehicles than potential drivers. For single-parent households, 67% have no car.

With low rates of auto-ownership, study participants rely heavily on walking and transit. For women in particular, of whom only 36% reported holding a licence, walking is extremely important to their daily lives. In general, walking was the most important mode for grocery shopping, doing general errands and helping children to school. To grocery shop, for example, 32% of participants normally walked and 21% used multiple modes. In most cases, this entails people walking to the store in one direction and taking transit or a taxi with their groceries on the return trip.

Residents are also highly dependent on walking to get to work. Among participants, 16% report walking to work as their principal mode and 41% use transit, which includes walking to and from the transit stop. This compares to only 21% who drive or are driven to work.

In sum, these suburban neighbourhoods are busy with pedestrians and do not conform to stereotypical images of empty suburban streets.

*“The whole community's not [designed] for walking, and all immigrants, they don't have cars.”*

*- Scarborough Village Participant*

**FINDING #2: Residents of high-rise neighbourhoods face hostile environments that were not designed for walking.**

High-rise neighbourhoods are a product of a post-war planning model that assumed apartment dwellers would have cars. As a result, current residents face hostile walking environments both within their apartment complex and in the area that surrounds it.

Within high-rise complexes, pedestrians face poor connections to their surroundings and lack basic infrastructure. Residents must often force pedestrian connections across property boundaries and through and around fences to access essential destinations like grocery stores and bus stops. Post-war planning ensured that local schools were accessible from single-family areas, but did not forge connections to apartments where many children now live. Pedestrian facilities, including walkways and basic lighting, are often missing, are in the wrong locations or are of very low quality.

Once pedestrians leave their high-rise areas, they find themselves on large arterial roadways. Although these roads were conceived as facilities for moving vehicles as efficiently as possible, they now act as de facto local main streets for high-rise residents and must be traversed to access most destinations. Sidewalks are often narrow and directly abut roadways with fast-moving traffic. There are few crosswalks and traffic lights. When crossing signals are present, participants report that crossing times were too short to cross safely. Albeit designed for cars, these roadways are used every day by hundreds of thousands of pedestrians across Toronto.

**FINDING #3: Most people see car ownership as the solution to their mobility challenges.**

Many study participants live in ways lauded by planners and policy makers: they shop locally, walk and use transit instead of driving. They do so, however, in very difficult conditions and not by choice.

Although many study participants yearn for improvements to their walking environment, they see car ownership as a clear means of improving their lives. Our data suggest income is the chief barrier to car ownership. When asked if they wanted a car, almost every person in the focus groups raised their hand. This was also reflected in the survey data; more than half (52%) of respondents said that they were hoping or planning to get a car in the future.

In other words, these are not places to “get people out of their cars,” but are instead, places to support people who are not yet in them. This requires sustained and substantial efforts to improve walking environments and transit service.

Interestingly, the amount of time a participant has lived in Canada is not related to the likelihood of car ownership. Our data reveal that newer immigrants own cars at the same rates as longer-term residents with similar household incomes. In other words, there is no adjustment period to Canada’s automobile-oriented culture.

**FINDING #4: Different groups perceive walking conditions differently.**

Despite challenges, on the whole, study participants were consistently positive about their walking environments; 61% agreed or strongly agreed that their neighbourhood “is a good place for walking.” This positive overall assessment weakened for different groups with regard to specific issues.

Parents, and single parents in particular, were fearful for their children. Their evaluations of the overall walking conditions, traffic safety and regularity of crossings were more negative than non-parents. Overall, only 24% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable letting their children walk unaccompanied in their neighbourhood.

Young people, who are exceedingly reliant on walking for travel, reported anxiety over personal security when walking in their neighbourhood and concern about “scary people” or places with “too few people.” They were also more likely to cross streets without traffic lights or crosswalks and to use shortcuts.

Men were less likely than women to adapt their behaviour over security concerns. In survey results, 56% of women and 73% of people 65 years and older reported avoiding walking at night due to security concerns. Both groups kept to well-lit areas if they needed to walk at night.



*Pedestrians exposed to traffic on Markham Road in Scarborough Village*

**FINDING #5:** There are substantial variations in the walking conditions of high-rise neighbourhoods.

Although most high-rise neighbourhoods have design and infrastructure shortcomings typical of urban environments built for cars, each high-rise community's walking environment is distinct. For instance, the layout and planning of Thorncliffe Park is advantageous to pedestrian movement and connectivity. Thorncliffe Park's relatively slow-moving, three-lane road encircles a densely-populated central core with community amenities, schools and shops, augmenting connectivity and fostering social cohesion. Residents in this community reported the highest levels of satisfaction with the walking environment among all eight study areas.

Conversely, road conditions in other high-rise neighbourhoods are more hostile and may constrain pedestrian movement and produce un-walkable conditions. For instance, in The Peanut, Don Mills Road behaves like a racetrack encircling the central core of schools and shops. This road creates a major threat to the safety and security of pedestrians getting to and from schools or services.

In North Kipling, the community's linear layout —with several high-rises extending along one wide arterial road, almost one kilometre from shops — contributes to residents' sense of isolation and dependency on transit, which is perceived as unreliable, crowded and costly.

Scarborough Village faces a different challenge. The community has services, schools and shops nearby, but very few direct or formal routes to access them. This forces people to take risky, unmaintained shortcuts, or cross six lanes of traffic at mid-block, often with the burden of children and groceries.

In Chalkfarm, the amenities are also relatively nearby, but high levels of anxiety and fear about personal security appear to substantially constrain people's mobility.

**FINDING # 6:** A poorly maintained walking environment contributes to residents' disenfranchisement and feelings of resignation, which, in turn, makes maintenance and repairs less likely.

In most neighbourhoods, residents expressed feelings of despair and hopelessness about their living conditions, their mobility and the prospects for improvement. Persistent issues of concern include litter, pooling water, broken benches, poor lighting, missing curb cuts, slushy and icy sidewalks and overflowing garbage bins.

Walking environments are not simply routes from A to B, they are connective tissue where critical social interactions can occur that knit people together. Poor walking environments destabilize communities; they increase the likelihood that people avoid walking and interacting with each other in favour of staying inside, using cars where possible or simply moving away.



*Residents stop to chat in Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park*



**FINDING #7: In spite of the shortcomings, people enjoy walking in their communities because it connects them with their neighbours and their neighbourhood.**

In every community we studied, people spoke glowingly of particular places and things in their neighbourhood — the parks, the people, the shops, the front steps of their buildings, the community gardens, the ravines, the playgrounds, the trees and flowers and the places to sit and chat. Our respondents were highly aware of the positive correlations between sitting and walking, prompting one resident to coin the term “sitability”. Many people, especially youth and seniors, said they felt safer with people around. They wanted places on their paths to sit, rest and socialize.

Residents understand that outsiders view their neighbourhoods with suspicion and unease. For many, this was a source of discontent, frustration and embarrassment. Despite these external perceptions, most study

participants stated they liked where they live and wanted to stay to make it better. This extraordinary neighbourhood commitment testifies to a resilience and desire for community stability. These community sentiments would be validated and enhanced by investments in the walking environment on public and private property.

*Walking environments are not simply routes from A to B, they are connective tissue where critical social interactions can occur that knit people together. Poor walking environments destabilize communities; they increase the likelihood that people avoid walking and interacting with each other in favour of staying inside, using cars where possible or simply moving away.*



*A busy sidewalk in North Kipling*

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Action for Neighbourhood Change — Steeles L'Amoreaux  
Action for Neighbourhood Change — Scarborough Village  
Action for Neighbourhood Change — North Kipling  
Banyan Tree  
Bengali Social Club — East Scarborough  
Bleecker/Wellesley Activity Network  
Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services — Chalkfarm  
East Scarborough Storefront  
Fairview Community Health  
Mayor's Tower Renewal Office, City of Toronto  
Safe City Safer  
Scarborough Village Neighbourhood Association  
St James Town Youth Council  
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These images of high-rise neighbourhood walking conditions provide a representative sample of our study area documentation. They are available for publication with the consent of Katherine Childs (khchilds@gmail.com).



*Mid-block crossing on Eglinton East*



*Sign in The Peanut*



*A muddy, blocked path in St James Town*



*A narrow walkway in Thorncliffe Park*



*Pedestrians chat on the path from the Mall to R.V. Burgess Park*



*The hole in the Goodview path fence in The Peanut*



*A busy, narrow sidewalk in Scarborough Village*



*Path from Sheridan Mall to high-rise tower in Chalkfarm*



*Residents in Scarborough Village clean up a local walkway*



*Difficult winter conditions in Thorncliffe Park*



*Pedestrians cross to a busy bus stop in Chalkfarm*





*Pedestrians in a St James Town driveway*



*Pedestrians cross Eglinton Avenue mid-block in Scarborough Village*

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PDF copies of the Executive Summary and the full report are available online at [www.citiescentre.utoronto.ca](http://www.citiescentre.utoronto.ca)



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