

CHANGE MAKERS:

**BUILDING
NEIGHBOURHOODS
THAT THRIVE:
IMPROVING
NEIGHBOURHOOD
SETTINGS TO PROMOTE
CHILD AND FAMILY
WELL-BEING**

CANDICE
ODGERS

MARIO LUIS
SMALL

DANIELE
ZANOTTI

ABOUT CHANGE MAKERS

Change Makers convenes CIFAR fellows and leaders across government, business, education, civil society and the creative sector, through both in-person engagements and virtual experiences, to share new insights into addressing complex issues at a systems level. By creating meaningful opportunities for productive, multi-directional learning and networking, the Change Makers series aims to catalyze new ways of thinking and acting that can drive change in communities that matter most.

Supported by:



In Partnership with:



CIFAR
CANADIAN
INSTITUTE
FOR
ADVANCED
RESEARCH

On March 9, 2017, CIFAR, in partnership with the Toronto Child & Family Network, held a Change Makers dialogue that explored how social inequalities within and between neighbourhoods can impact social capital networks and in turn neighbourhood outcomes. With this understanding, participants also discussed what neighbourhood settings can best support the well-being of children and families and how to work collectively to improve outcomes.

Moderated by Robin Cory, Colbeck Strategic Advisors, the event included presentations from: Candice Odgers, Fellow in CIFAR's Child & Brain Development program and Professor at Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy; Mario Luis Small, Senior Fellow in CIFAR's Social Interactions, Identity & Well-Being program and Professor at Harvard University's Department of Sociology; and Daniele Zanotti, President and CEO, United Way Toronto & York Region. Elaine Baxter-Trahair, Co-chair of the Toronto Child & Family Network (TC&FN) and General Manager of Children's Service of the City of Toronto, opened the event and gave an overview of the TC&FN work. This report provides a summary of the key research-informed insights presented by CIFAR's Fellows and the group discussions that followed.

CANDICE ODGERS

- **Income inequality influences emotional, educational, and behavioural outcomes of children with low-socioeconomic status.**

Research examining the relationships between children and poverty has shown that children experience different emotional, educational, and economic outcomes depending on the income level of the area in which they live. For example, studies have shown that children from low-income areas tend to exhibit worse outcomes than those from more affluent neighbourhoods.

- **Unequal resource distribution negatively affects child well-being.**

Research at international, regional, and local levels has explored the relationship between income inequality and child well-being, examining the impact of the economic gap between children from low-income settings and their affluent peers. These studies have shown that children living in countries with high income inequality tend to have worse well-being outcomes than children living in countries with more equal distribution of resources. This effect is also seen within countries where level of income inequality differs by region.

- **In low-income neighbourhoods, community cohesion and supportive parenting can protect children against potential negative outcomes.**

Neighbourhood factors that contribute to child outcomes have been explored through studies in the UK and the US. For example, a UK study found that some

of the neighbourhoods with the highest rates of poverty also exhibited high levels of community closeness and supportive parenting, which helped to mediate harmful effects on children of socioeconomic disparity, such as aggressive behaviour at school.

- **In mixed-income neighbourhoods, the effects of income inequality can leave low-income children worse off than their peers in low-income neighbourhoods.**

A desire to close the opportunity gap for low-income children has led to a trend of moving low-income families into affluent neighbourhoods. Studying such mixed-income communities provides one way to explore the impact of income inequality on child outcomes. Compared to low-income children in concentrated poverty, those living in mixed-income settings have exhibited negative effects including increased antisocial behaviour and poorer educational performance for boys and children of colour, in particular. These findings translate across UK and US communities.

- **The "shadow of wealth" present in mixed-income neighbourhoods may create a double disadvantage for low-income children.**

Contributing factors to the negative outcomes for children in mixed-income neighborhoods include the threat of stereotypes and a child's subjective self-perception. These children may be at risk of conforming to negative socioeconomic stereotypes held by others who perceive them to be a potential

threat and who are less likely to fully accept them into the community. Further, they may perceive themselves to be of a lower social ranking relative to others, resulting in depression, anxiety and conduct disorder. In these ways, the mixed-neighbourhood economic gap between low-income children and their high-income neighbours could be creating a double disadvantage: the adverse effects of limited resources, objectively measured, as well as the adverse effects of negative subjective social self-perceptions.

- **To ensure the potential benefits of mixed-income settings for low-income children are realized, policy and practice measures**

MARIO LUIS SMALL

- **Neighbourhood-level institutions can serve as important avenues for improving the well-being of children and their parents. It is important to better understand the potential roles these institutions can play in community well-being.** In the US in the past 40 years, there has been an increase in the number of women participating in the workforce as well as the number of young children entering childcare institutions including nursery school, preschool, and kindergarten. Recent research has focused on the role of community-level institutions, such as childcare centres, in improving neighbourhood outcomes. By expanding our conception of what a childcare centre is, as well as who it serves, we can develop a much richer understanding of how we can use these institutions to improve children's mental and material hardship.
- **Social capital provides direct and indirect benefits.** Social capital is made up of the core resources we derive from our social networks. Primarily, these include: information, social support (such as close friends who buffer emotional and material hardship), and reinforcement of norms (such as normalizing a child's consistent attendance at school). Different networks provide different levels of each resource.

must support continuous data analysis that checks hoped-for outcomes against children's actual experience and informs positive change. Mixed-income schools and communities can be built in ways that are isolating and reinforce economic distance, but many can and do support positive outcomes for low-income children. We need to better understand how mixed-income communities are affecting children's outcomes and how to ensure more positive effects. This requires continuous data collection and analysis to determine how low-income children are actually doing in mixed-income settings and to enact changes that build their sense of belonging and inclusivity.

- **There is a positive relationship between childcare centre enrollment, social capital, and mothers' well-being.** A study of US parents and their children from birth to age five found that mothers with a child enrolled in a childcare centre increased the number of friends the child's mother made compared to mothers without a child in childcare centres. This friendship formation had positive effects on mothers' well-being such as lowering depression rates.
- **Strategically mobilizing the power of social capital can improve the lives of children and mothers. It is a resource that neighbourhoods can mobilize at the institutional level in low-cost, high-impact ways.** Social capital is often taken as informal in nature and difficult to influence structurally. However, research in the context of childcare centres has shown that structuring social capital into childcare institution operating models improves outcomes for children and mothers — without the use of costly additional incentives. A pilot study comparing models of childcare classes found that when classes were grouped by neighbourhood and parents encouraged to pair up as "attendance buddies," mothers reported higher numbers of close friends (along with lower rates of mental and material hardship) and childcare attendance over the winter months improved.

DANIELE ZANOTTI

- **Community is the solution to social challenges.** To address complex social challenges, United Way takes a community-focused approach that can be captured by a quote from one community member: “We are who we are with and where we are with them.” United Way has developed a model that takes community itself to be the solution to social challenges.
- **To change the continuum for support and achieve lasting change requires a holistic understanding of community and research-informed investments that follow community data.** United Way’s approach to working with communities is upheld by six pillars: research, investment, evaluation, strategy, partnerships, and advocacy. United Way uses research to identify how and in which communities to invest, measures the effectiveness of investments, monitors partnership networks, and brings the research into communities to connect residents around key issues.
- **Research provides the evidence needed to make responsive investments.** Research has informed much of United Way’s work over the past years connecting geography and poverty. For example, the United Way report Poverty by Postal Code (2004) examined the impact on vulnerable groups of increasing poverty across Toronto in the previous two decades. Informed by their findings, the United Way shifted funding from Toronto’s

downtown core, where the majority of agencies in the network were centred, to the city’s suburbs. The United Way report Poverty by Postal Code 2: Vertical Poverty (2011) examined the growing number of high-poverty neighbourhoods in Toronto’s inner suburbs and the further concentration of poverty in high-rise rental towers in these neighbourhoods. This report informed the 2012 Tower Neighbourhood Renewal Initiative convening stakeholders to revitalize tower communities. Currently, the United Way is examining whether intensification in the city’s core means increased services are now required there.

- **While direct investment in children is still needed, holistic investment in communities will help to deepen community service.** Currently, United Way is exploring increasingly holistic investment into communities, such as their 2017 \$87M commitment to programs and agencies across the Toronto region that will deepen their work in poverty and geography. This commitment brings together a partnership network of 62 anchor agencies working together over the next 5 years to create an inner core across the region. To best serve communities across the region, United Way is also opening funding for new programming for the first time in a decade to connect existing and new partner agencies through nine program streams.

INSIGHTS FROM GROUP DISCUSSION

- **Community-level targeting could be similar to precision medicine, as “precision public health.”** However, it is not clear whether this idea is effective in practice due to cyclical approaches to funding. Funding institutions typically do not sustain such strategies long enough to see the long-term impacts that require 15 years or more to emerge.
- **“Social Capital is something that happens when you’re doing something else.”** Efforts to build social capital intentionally (such as through social parties) were not very effective across the 24 New York City childcare centres participating in Dr. Small’s work. However, childcare centres that engaged parents through volunteer activities that benefit the centres’ mission (e.g. helping with field trips, fundraising, extracurricular activities) effectively built social capital and a sense of belonging.

- **Leaders from beyond a community could be leveraged to expand expertise and provide mutual benefit.** Through their time, expertise, financial resources, and leadership, retired adult leaders can support strong neighbourhoods and build capacity. This is mutually beneficial: engaging in meaningful volunteer activities over the long term is an effective strategy for developing social networks, and strong social capital is important for the well-being of retired adults. When engaging volunteers, community organizations could consider expanding their reach beyond their own neighbourhoods to ensure such a range of capabilities are brought in.
- **We need to more deeply understand the contributing factors to child self-perception.** Developmental evolution of child self-perception spikes in mid-adolescence, when their self-perception contributes to their well-being outcomes. Through her research, Dr. Odgers used children's mobile phones to geo-stamp them, tracking where they go and what they do every day and plotting this information against their feelings of belonging. Her aim is to understand children's daily experiences in fine detail (the positive and negative interactions they have, where they do and do not spend their time, etc.) and whether their self-perception is stable over time or changes based on experiences.
- **We need to design studies and collect data that will help us to understand how children are actually faring in mixed-income settings. We can use this evidence base to apply what works and mitigate what does not work in communities.** Mixed-income neighbourhoods have been a growing trend over the last 15 years in Toronto and other cities. However, objective and comprehensive data has not been collected to assess whether families and children are thriving in these communities. There are some indications that, along with positive outcomes such as benefits to children's test scores, many low-income families are still experiencing social isolation, exclusion and cultural conflict and that as people stay within their same social and economic circles, the benefits of income integration are not always seen. More and better data will help to test our hopeful assumptions about mixed-income neighbourhoods and to identify successful communities from which we can learn.
- **Poverty impacts individuals and communities in profound ways, from technology use to bullying.** Exposure to technology, particularly for low-income children, is having various impacts on health — including on mental health, obesity, and bullying — some of which further amplify negative educational outcomes. In contexts where violence is a concern for children, poverty is also showing its impact on how children develop friendships. For example, Dr. Small has seen evidence in Chicago that by 11 years of age, some children have adopted strategic friendship formation, seeking out physically bigger kids who can protect them and employing trust-tests to determine who is trustworthy. This is opposed to more typical friendship formation where children make friends based on who they like and who is like-minded in terms of hobbies or behaviour. Children taking a strategic approach to friendship formation is problematic, as childhood is a key period of interpersonal emotional development. Using strategic approaches to relationships during this time means children do not learn how to form and maintain healthy relationships, which can produce lifelong negative effects.

INSIGHTS FROM PARTICIPANT-LED BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- **We need to shift from a deficit- to an asset-based model that leverages social capital to build successful neighbourhoods.** This is particularly true for low-income communities, where addressing community needs requires a deeper understanding of existing community assets and more engagement of the resources of community members. There is a lot of support for this idea in theory, but it does not always translate into practice change. Shifting this model is particularly difficult in the social service sector because the sector can be inherently deficit-based.

- **Services that connect families may indirectly lead to the creation of social capital.** An excellent program that has shifted to an asset-based model is the *Family Independence Initiative* in Oakland. The initiative does not specifically help individuals but rather helps people to identify the network in their community that has the assets to best serve their needs. This initiative redefines the concept of service delivery from the perspective of assets. Many systems and programs that are providing a service to connect families may also be indirectly creating the opportunity to build social capital. Service organizations need to ensure they understand a neighbourhood's needs (rather than focusing on the service they wish to provide) and consider how social capital could fit into their service delivery model to better support the needs.
- **An integrated system of services is essential to support families to access services.** Our current system is built within silos (such as primary health, education, childcare, mental health, recreation, etc.) that require individuals, families, and service providers to undertake complex and challenging service system navigation. This creates a burden for individuals and families trying to access services that are within disconnected systems. Easing system navigation requires common language across different services that is used by both service users and service providers. Longer term, the goal is not to improve system navigation but to design self-navigating systems for users. Ideal systems would be seamless, interconnected and integrated.
- **The injustice of children living in poverty cannot be overlooked.** Implementing “light touch” interventions that focus on children as individuals — for example, seeking to bolster a child’s self-esteem – as opposed to targeting the network- or community-level — ignores the context of gross inequality and barriers that low-income children experience regardless of their self-perception. These individualistic approaches do not change the greater context and can therefore create in children unrealistic perceptions of the community around them.
- **We can learn about social capital strategies from countries with fewer resources and greater happiness as well as from people in Toronto who grew up in such places.** International rankings of many countries labelled as “developed” or “developing” show reversed rankings when GDP is replaced with happiness and community indicators as the primary measures of development. Developing countries showing strong happiness rankings may be the result of effective strategies to build social capital. Given the number of people in Toronto from these regions, Toronto has an opportunity to learn from their knowledge and experiences about building social capital to meet their community needs.
- **Social capital could be a good indicator to layer into system planning and program implementation, but we don’t know how to measure it yet.** Social capital data could be layered onto maps for community services (e.g. Early Years Centres locations). However, it is not clear how social capital can be measured or how to make sure it is moveable.
- **When mapping social capital, we need to consider the privacy rights of individuals and communities and ensure community members see these features as “movable metrics.”** When we’re mapping, we tend to map the negative features. The public sharing of such information from specific neighbourhoods should be carefully considered as this can become a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” creating and perpetuating negative perceptions both within and outside of the community. We need to ensure we also identify, map and communicate the assets of a given community such as social capital and community involvement. Further, we need to ensure members of the community perceive this information as “movable metrics” that they can strive towards changing.

- **The systems-level need to reallocate resources underlies the tension between universal versus targeted services.** A balance is needed between universal access to services and targeted access for families most in need. City of Toronto recreation services incorporate universal programs, which include free community centers, and targeted programs, which include the “welcome policy” that has an income threshold to qualify. In Toronto’s Regent Park redevelopment, the City of Toronto takes a community-level approach rather than targeting individual families. Universal services mean low-income families do not need to self-identify as being in need, reducing stigmatization and the need for system navigation. However, by default, the universal model provides affluent families with access to services with limited resources. Affluent families skilled at systems navigation may more easily access these universal services. One such example is navigating the City of Toronto’s first-come-first-serve online registration for child recreation. Adopting or changing these models comes with challenging conversations around resource allocation. These discussions should consider the whole system and should be evidence-based.
- **We should never be satisfied with “up and running” as a program outcome; collecting the right data from ongoing programs is essential to achieving policy change.** Once a community-level intervention is active, we often stop documenting and developing the evidence base. Therefore, we do not have the data to advocate for more resources and achieve greater impact. There are also positive stories about the outcomes of low-income children in mixed-income neighbourhoods; however, by not collecting the data, these success stories are lost. Toronto and other cities need to consider the long-term impacts of the interventions rather than focusing on and being satisfied with getting the intervention up and running.