



Community Health and Safety

2024 Parkdale Community Planning Study

Assets (2)

1. Responsive community health programming and supports
2. City of Toronto – funded crisis response

Needs (3)

1. Culturally relevant resources, especially around mental health
2. Supervised consumption sites staffed 24/7 with onsite social service support for harm reduction workers
3. Alternatives to policing and the incarceration system

Directions (5)

1. Improve existing mental health programs to ensure that they are culturally relevant, responsive, support independence, and do not have extensive wait lists
2. Support the expansion of harm reduction supports and street outreach workers to address the

rise in overdoses

3. Create a co-ordinated neighbourhood-wide strategy aimed at defunding the police and building alternative networks of community care, such as crisis response units and trained mental health teams

4. Expand community-based training and education to support navigating crisis and conflict in areas such as mental health support, crisis intervention, de-escalation, suicide prevention, transformative justice, mindfulness, psychotherapy, and social work aimed at helping the people in the neighbourhood

5. Establish community healing and transformative justice circles to support community members in navigating grief, trauma, and crisis

The Parkdale community has continuously worked to fill gaps in harm reduction, crisis response, and mental health supports that policy and public institutions fail to address. The neighbourhood is home to a number of community health agencies, grassroots and mutual aid organizations, and social housing that provides vital support to residents. Despite the networks of solidarity and care that exist in the neighbourhood, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a need to envision how we can build more resilient and community-centred systems to support Parkdale residents' health and safety. In particular, community members shared priorities related to mental health, culturally-relevant supports, and harm reduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to the systematic gaps that Parkdale residents face when it comes to accessing basic forms of healthcare and feeling safe in their neighbourhood. In Parkdale, 11.67% of people are on social assistance which is inadequate in covering essential needs or protecting health and well-being. Seeking care in Ontario has become more challenging in recent years as the provincial government introduced cuts to public healthcare that continue to deplete an already overworked

and understaffed system. To enhance access to social services, community members pointed to the need to reduce waitlists, increase provision of translation services, and expand programs to be offered in languages community members speak. There is also a need to enhance protections against discrimination and ensure confidentiality when accessing translation.

The pandemic increased experiences of social isolation, which can heighten substance use and further prevent individuals from engaging in social connection. In 2022, South Parkdale had the fifth highest number of suspected opioid overdose 911 calls out of every neighbourhood in Toronto with 118 calls. Engagements with Parkdale residents highlighted the necessity to increase social service funding to hire peer, outreach, and onsite harm reduction workers, keep supervised consumption sites open 24/7, and increase capacity to serve clientele. It is also imperative that community agencies are given resources to provide harm reduction workers with healthcare benefits and access to onsite counselling and mental health supports. Increased opportunities for social connection and mutual care in the neighbourhood would simultaneously help community members navigating grief, trauma, crisis, and social isolation. This includes community health and transformative justice circles, sharing circles designed and led by Indigenous peoples, and accessible social events focused on wellness, music, spiritual practices, and children's activities.

There are strong concerns of policing in Parkdale. Black and Indigenous residents are constantly under threat of surveillance and among those who are over-represented in Toronto's reportable use of force incidents. Not only does the police system contribute to the criminalization and harm of individuals who are in distress,

but it also fails to address the root cause of crime – that certain communities are underserved, and thus lacking supports to tend to their basic needs. Parkdale community members demand that the City of Toronto defunds the police and uses that funding to invest in social services that address poverty, food insecurity, high rents, underemployment, and more. Alternative networks of community care also need to be fostered in Parkdale. We can achieve this through creating a coordinated neighbourhood-wide strategy aimed at defunding the police and building residents' capacity to support neighbours in crisis.

Many issues related to community health and safety are rooted in a lack of communication – including effective translation and communication between different segments of community care and crisis response efforts. Moving forward, approaching community health and safety from a transformative justice lens will mean prioritizing adding resources to harm reduction and community wellbeing strategies and approaches.

