

Urban study will look at changes in neighbourhoods University, community agency partner on gentrification research

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by Janice Walls

How do you keep community in a neighbourhood when the neighbourhood is changing?

It's a question that needs an answer - and quickly – according to Professor David Hulchanski, because many of the neighbourhoods just west of the University of Toronto are under pressure from gentrification.

These older, established neighbourhoods are between the suburbs, from which people commute, and the downtown, where people want to be. So it doesn't take much of a leap to see why neighbourhoods such as Parkdale and Little Portugal are becoming increasingly attractive, says Hulchanski, director of U of T's Centre for Urban and Community Studies and a professor in the Faculty of Social Work.

"But how do we welcome investment and improvement and yet not have it cause displacement of poor people, and elderly people who want to stay in their neighbourhoods? Nobody has a good answer to that," says Hulchanski.

Researchers from the centre will work hand-in-hand with St. Christopher House to study the social, economic and physical changes occurring in seven neighbourhoods west of downtown Toronto where the community-based agency offers services ranging from drop-in centres to support for immigrants.

Much of the research effort, funded by a \$1-million grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, will involve original data collection: interviews, focus groups and surveys of important features of the neighbourhoods.

The initiative will take in the area between Bloor Street and Lake Ontario, bounded by Bathurst Street on the east side and Roncesvalles Avenue on the west, an area with a population of 107,000 and a median income 13 per cent lower than the city average.

A team of about 30 researchers based in Canada, the U.S., Britain and New Zealand will work together on the study, along with U of T students and research partners at many community organizations. The research will be relevant to policy-making, Hulchanski said, and will help residents influence development decisions in their own backyard.

"Right now, people are talking about the importance of cities, especially in a global economy," said Hulchanski. "But city life happens at the neighbourhood level. This is where we live, work and shop and it is where our sense of identity and responsibility toward others begins."

Maureen Fair, director of community response and advocacy for St. Christopher House, said it is necessary to understand the changes that are occurring in order to be able to influence them.

"We want the community we work with – including very diverse and sometimes marginalized

people – to be able to shape their communities,” said Fair. “We’ll be looking at tools and best practices from other jurisdictions to help them do that.”

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