

**Connected Communities in a time of Physical Distancing:
Community-led responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in City of Toronto**

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ABSTRACT: Previous pandemics have demonstrated that while the mobilization of biomedical interventions and health infrastructure are critical, the social infrastructure of community-led responses play equally crucial roles in both “flattening the curve” (CDC 2007) of communicable illnesses and mitigating the psycho-social and socio-economic impact of a wide spread pandemic. We are seeing top-down, City and Provincial led responses bumping-up against locally organized community responses. Much of the response thus far has been aimed at individuals and households, with limited attention being paid, on an ad-hoc basis, to mutual aid undertaken by the grassroots within communities.

Connected Communities In A Time of Physical Distancing (CCPD) will explore the ways that 6 Toronto communities have responded to the health, psycho-social and economic stresses that are exacerbated, amplified or created by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is little understanding of how community-based resilience is a) effectively fostered in ways that are truly inclusive and address issues of marginalization and racial injustice and b) are connected to formal response systems in ways that reinforce community efforts rather than, as has been seen so often, run roughshod over local grassroots mutual aid and on the ground community strategies, so that communities can be active agents in preparing for, responding to, recovering from, and regrouping after shocks and disruptions.

Utilizing a realist evaluation approach, and drawing on interviews with grassroots leaders, social service agencies, NGOs, and City staff engaged in each of 6 Neighbourhood Improvement Areas in Toronto, CCPD will explore the social infrastructure that was in place prior to COVID-19 that has enabled some communities to act together during and subsequent to the pandemic, and what communities identify as a lack of social infrastructure that made community-led responses difficult or impossible during and post COVID-19.