School of Cities
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Building Community Resilience: A Connected Community Approach to Crises

Researchers at the University of Toronto's <u>Dalla Lana School of Public Health</u> have been investigating ways of nurturing the connections between communities and formal institutions when emergencies and shock events arise, and public services fall short.

With the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival in March 2020, <u>Professor Blake Poland</u> and his team had an opportunity to look at how formal crisis responders, like public health departments, are able to strengthen their relationships with communities before, during, and after an emergency response. What they found is that a Connected Communities Approach (CCA), an innovative model that grew out of the experience of the <u>East Scarborough Storefront</u> (located in a marginalized inner suburban community in Toronto), has tremendous potential to support community resilience in the face of a crisis. This joint research project, with the <u>Centre for Connected Communities</u> (C3), is helping us to understand how communities can prepare for, respond to, recover from, and "bounce forward" after a crisis.

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A CCA creates new opportunities for policymakers and practitioners to learn to design and implement strategies that are nimble and resilient, and at the same time respect and build on local knowledge, expertise, relationships, needs, and aspirations.

As Professor Poland describes, "… practitioners can begin to apply a CCA by listening, learning, and valuing community perspectives, and committing to doing what it takes to ensure that formal systems are responsive to communities".

What is community resilience?

With climate change and its impacts – from major power outages to devastating floods – on top of long-term stressors and other types of emergencies, resilience refers to the ability of communities to respond, recover, adapt, and transform. As described by the Centre for Community Resilience in 2000, a resilient community is one that takes intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to, and influence, the course of social and economic change.

How can a CCA enhance urban resilience?

A CCA is a set of principles and practices for community development that suggest a community organization can be a catalyst for community-based social and economic improvement, and in new ways (see the Ten Keys on page 10). It intentionally strengthens connections and social networks among people and organizations, inside and outside the community, without prescribing an outcome. It focuses on strengthening the social fabric of a community so it is prepared, able to respond, and can move past a crisis. While CCA looks different in each community, the approach is strengths-based, intentional, and inclusive, building on who and what is already there. Its application encourages people and organizations to collaborate and co-create innovative solutions, rather than fall back on a traditionally top-down approach led by a formal institution.

Roles for communities and formal institutions:

While it is often at the grassroots that we see the most nimble, adaptable, and resilient solutions, the formal response to a crisis is also critical. Government agencies and other organizations are not only able to respond to the immediate needs of communities, but have a role to play in changing systems and intervening to ensure communities can "bounce forward" to a new, more equitable future. For this to be achieved, grassroots leaders have been clear: their voices need to be heard and understood by formal institutions. It also requires that policymakers view social infrastructure – the network of local individuals and organizations – as being as important as a community's physical infrastructure (without downloading responsibilities onto communities). A CCA can function as a bridge between the best elements of communities and formal institutions.

When formal institutions fall short:

Community leaders and formal institutions – from local non-profits, to private sector partners, to government agencies, and beyond – each have critical roles to play in a crisis. For instance, governments have a broad mandate to ensure public health and safety, as they have the large-scale reach, research capacity, authority, and resources to enact measures that keep everyone safe during a crisis and create much needed order and structure. However, their size and internal bureaucracy make them slow to react and prone to "one size fits all" responses. They tend to prioritize individual, household, and city-wide physical infrastructure, while neglecting crucial

community-centred social infrastructure and grassroots leaders in racialized and low income communities.

How often are these local community voices and solutions translated into institutional change? For a community to be truly resilient, it's the formal systems that need to adapt.

Where CCA started:

A CCA is a novel solution that can help to bridge the distance between community and formal approaches to a crisis. This is best exemplified by the East Scarborough Storefront, a "community backbone organization" that has been active for over two decades and developed the CCA.

Social infrastructure refers to the facilities and services that bring people together, build social capital, support needs, celebrate culture, and build community.

Listen to the Signal Boost Podcast
This season is devoted to the *Connected Communities in a Time of Physical Distancing* project, a DLSPH C3 collaboration. Hear what researchers learned, why it matters, and how we can design systems that better support a community centred approach to resilience.

East Scarborough Storefront, 2021

The Storefront shows us how a return to "normal" after a crisis is less than ideal. Instead, "bouncing forward" can create a new order that respects and builds on local knowledge, expertise, relationships, needs, and aspirations.

WATCH THE WEBINAR

How can government support and amplify the work of existing and informal resilience building initiatives in civil society? In this webinar, the panel discusses how a CCA approach to the work of two grassroots neighbourhood champions are building community resilience through resident led changemaking, as well as through wider systems.

City Research Insights: **Building Community Resilience: A Connected Community Approach to Crises**

Interview with Anne Gloger

What interested you in working with U of T researchers on this project?

Synergy … Our shared interest in community development practices, equity, and systems change made designing this particular project exciting. We all felt that introducing CCA could have a profound impact on the things each of us is passionate about.

What are the most important things you want communities to know about this work?

This work introduces the Connected Community Approach, which sees government, organization, and institutional roles in investing in the supports that communities need to address both ongoing stresses and acute shocks. It also:

Provides a framework for people, organizations, and institutions to work together toward a more equitable society;

→ Supports "by the community, for the community" decision making and action;

→ Is context-specific and adaptable to address community-specific priorities;

→ Is a long-term strategy that builds on strengths over time; and

→ Does not download responsibility to the community.

Read the full text of the interview
Contact Anne: agloger@connectedcommunities.ca

Anne Gloger is founding Principal of the Centre for Connected Communities and former Executive Director of the Storefront.

A CCA addresses gun violence in East Scarborough

As the Storefront matured, it was functioning as a community integrator, facilitator, and network weaver, strengthening the social fabric of the local community, and at the same time intentionally connecting the community to public policy, capital investment, and extended social networks. This was the genesis of what became the first CCA, and it was quickly put to the test when, in 2012, a mass shooting shocked the community and the country. Dozens of people and organizations from within and outside the community responded quickly with a coordinated response that placed grassroots leaders at the forefront. Local government and other formal institutions worked with, and alongside, community efforts.

This coordinated, community-led response was possible because the community was prepared – and connected – with multiple networks and mechanisms for communication that had been nurtured long before the crisis. Within days about 70 groups had responded, and in the process, the voices of marginalized people, including Black and Indigenous people, were able to surface. In the weeks and months that followed, the community was able to "bounce forward", raising funds to support youth, enabling people to lead their own grassroots initiatives, and building a social infrastructure that it identified as critical to reducing violence. In this way, the Storefront was able to help bring together the best of community-based planning and action with a formal, centralized crisis response.

Qualities of a Connected Community Approach That Support Community Resilience:
→ **Decrease duplication**
→ **Allow for more effective use of funds**

Increase:
→ **Capacity to develop innovative solutions**
→ **Nimbleness and agility**
→ **Resident participation**
→ **Cross-sector collaboration**
→ **Opportunities to learn from one another**
→ **Social and economic opportunities**

Learn more:
connectedcommunities.ca

Interview with Dr. Blake Poland

How does this work help advance our understanding of communities and their relationships with formal institutions, particularly in light of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic?

One aspect addresses the lack of guidance in the literature on how institutions and formal crisis response systems could work more effectively with citizens to build community resilience before, during, and after shock events. The literature is replete with examples of how formal response systems swoop in many hours or days after an event in which citizens themselves have mobilized to respond, and in a way that runs roughshod over these local efforts as if they're invisible, irrelevant, or inconsequential. Most such retrospectives call for better ongoing collaborative planning and working relationships between community and formal institutions, but none offer much in the way of guidance on how to do this.

The second prong of this work is our work (funded by the School of Cities) on the ways in which community-level grassroots responses to the pandemic in six racialized neighbourhoods was impacted by pre-existing webs of relations within and between community and formal institutions. This provides tangible evidence in support of CCA, showing how relationships are key and must ideally be cultivated and nurtured well before they become essential in moments of crisis. We stress that these relationships, at the core of CCA, are not cast as between service providers and service recipients, or in terms of mutual aid as an alternative to the role of the state, but rather in terms of community-centred development that puts the lived experience and aspirations of marginalized communities at the centre of collaborative efforts, and that works to build capacity within formal systems for a level of responsiveness to community that is all too often missing.

Read the full text of the interview
Contact Blake: blake.poland@utoronto.ca

We argue that the CCA, developed over 20 years (and demonstrated during the Danzig shooting crisis) provides the guidance the field has been calling for.

Dr. Blake Poland is Associate Professor in the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and Director of the Collaborative Specialization in Community Development, as well as co Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre in Health Promotion and co lead of the DLSPH Healthier Cities and Communities Hub.

TYPES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Many community organizations play a role in community-centred resilience. A CCA is a new way for government and other formal institutions to invest in the supports that communities need to address both ongoing stresses and acute shocks.

Organization Type	Examples	Governance and Decision Making Structure and Focus	Role in Community Centred Resilience
Community backbone	• East Scarborough Storefront (Toronto)	• Have community-driven structures • Focus on facilitating connections, strategies, and actions among those engaged in community building	• Suited to bridging grassroots, civil society, and formal organizations • Facilitate processes that allow various actors to collectively plan for, respond to, recover from, and bounce forward after major shock events
Community-based	• Public libraries • Public health departments • Disaster relief	• Based outside of the community • Have multiple branches and centralized decision-making, often off site • Focus on service provision	• Often provide their facilities for planning and response activities • Facilitate relationships between larger systems and communities (but may not have autonomy)
Social service	• Foodbanks • Employment centres • Legal aid	• Based locally or off site • Focus primarily on individual needs created by stressors and shocks	• Play a critical role in helping people with needs • Provide support through individual/professional relationships rather than collective action
Interest-focused	• Arts organizations • Recreational sports leagues • After school programs	• Based locally or off site • Focus on convening around shared interests (e.g., music, sports)	• Play specific roles in the event of a crisis • Not usually designed to facilitate community-wide processes
Grassroots	• Mutual aid networks • Peer to peer support • Residents' associations	• Deeply rooted in local communities • May or may not have formalized structures • Focus on service delivery, advocacy, or community development	• Critical players in community-centred resilience • Often hold knowledge and relationships with community members that formal institutions cannot
Community development	• Community Development Corporations	• Firmly based in local communities • Have community-driven structures • Have significant grassroots and resident participation • Focus on fostering processes and building capacity to generate community-led solutions to local issues	• Critical to ensuring resilience efforts are truly community-centred • Planning and execution of strategies are based on local context, lived experience, and local knowledge • May or may not hold or foster relationships with formalized structures outside of the community

10 Keys to Using a Connected Community Approach to Strengthen Community Resilience

1 **BUILDING ON EVERYONE'S STRENGTHS**
A CCA nurtures local strengths (in people, organizations, physical, and natural resources) and connects them to opportunities inside and outside the community. People are ready to act in the event of a crisis.

2 **CREATING CONNECTED COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT**
A CCA recognizes there are key actors in a community who can intentionally focus on strengthening and connecting the actions and initiatives taken on by a diversity of local actors, to address entrenched stressors and respond in a crisis.

3 **FACILITATING COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES**
A CCA is built on relationships, with a multitude of individual actions interacting with each other to strengthen the overall social fabric of the community in agile and adaptable ways, particularly in a crisis.

4 **LEARNING TOGETHER**
A CCA embeds learning feedback loops and knowledge mobilization to strengthen a community on an ongoing basis over time. In a crisis, accumulated collective experience from intentional and collective learning can help everyone (e.g., grassroots groups, institutions, organizations, funders).

5 **EMBRACING THE MESSINESS**
A CCA likens the community to a natural ecosystem, evolving and adapting over time. In a crisis, a community can respond and adapt much more nimbly than a response led by formal institutions.

6 **PRIORITIZING EQUITY AND POWER SHARING**
A CCA sees shifting power and the locus of knowledge, action and decision making as fundamental. In a crisis, people in marginalized communities have agency to change the status quo and address systemic inequities.

10 Keys to Using a Connected Community Approach to Strengthen Community Resilience

7 LETTING VALUES LEAD
A CCA is a values-driven approach that bridges differences. In a crisis, success is measured by the degree to which diverse sets of players share a common purpose and values; draw on their own experiences, passions and talents; and co-design solutions that allow for creativity, innovation, and agility.

9 MAKING COMMUNITY-BUILDING VISUAL
A CCA focuses on using creative and visual ways to mobilize knowledge and facilitate effective local communication channels within a community, and between a community and institutions, which can influence the success of local response and recovery efforts.

8 WORKING AT MULTIPLE SCALES
A CCA uniquely focuses on both building strong local social fabric and on connecting community-led initiatives to larger systems. It thereby simultaneously centres community and takes full advantage of the knowledge, resources, and opportunities afforded by the scale of larger systems.

10 BUILDING CREATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE
A CCA seeks to invest in the kinds of social infrastructure that strengthen local decision making, agency, and influence on broader systems. It places as much emphasis on investing in the supports, facilitative roles, and connective tissue that centre community priorities and actions as on the buildings and structures where those activities take place.

What's next for this project?

Professor Poland's team will be taking this work in several new directions in the coming months:

Partnering with colleagues at the University of Toronto Mississauga to bring a CCA lens to research on vaccine uptake in Peel Region.

Members of the team are also leading a new Climate Resilience Lab at DLSPH focused on the development of a racial justice lens for community resilience work.

→ C3 is also a key community partner in the Towers in the Park initiative, led by the University's Fadi Masoud, Director of the Centre for Landscape Research (and the subject of the School's next City Research Insight).

→ The team has been in discussion with the City of Toronto about piloting CCA to implement the Toronto Resilience Strategy in three neighbourhoods.

→ It also has aspirations to develop a SSHRC partnership grant to expand the reach and scope of CCA, and develop a more robust evidence base for its deployment in a range of urban, suburban, and rural settings.

About the School of Cities

The School of Cities is a solutions incubator for urban-focused researchers, educators, students, practitioners, and the general public to explore and address the complex global challenges facing urban centres. A living laboratory, the School leverages urban data and lived experience to improve policy and decision making and collaborates with city leaders around the world to make local decisions that make cities and urban regions more sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, and just.

About City Research Insights

Building Community Resilience: A Connected Community Approach to Crises is the first in our series of City Research Insights, designed to link the urban research being conducted at the University of Toronto with the public, other institutions, and decision makers.

With this series, the School of Cities seeks to leverage our extraordinary community of urbanists and urban-oriented researchers to create a rich, multidisciplinary community of urban faculty, researchers, and students across disciplines and perspectives. In addition to facilitating interdisciplinary research projects, partnerships, and funding opportunities, we provide a hub for urban-focused interdisciplinary and collaborative learning.