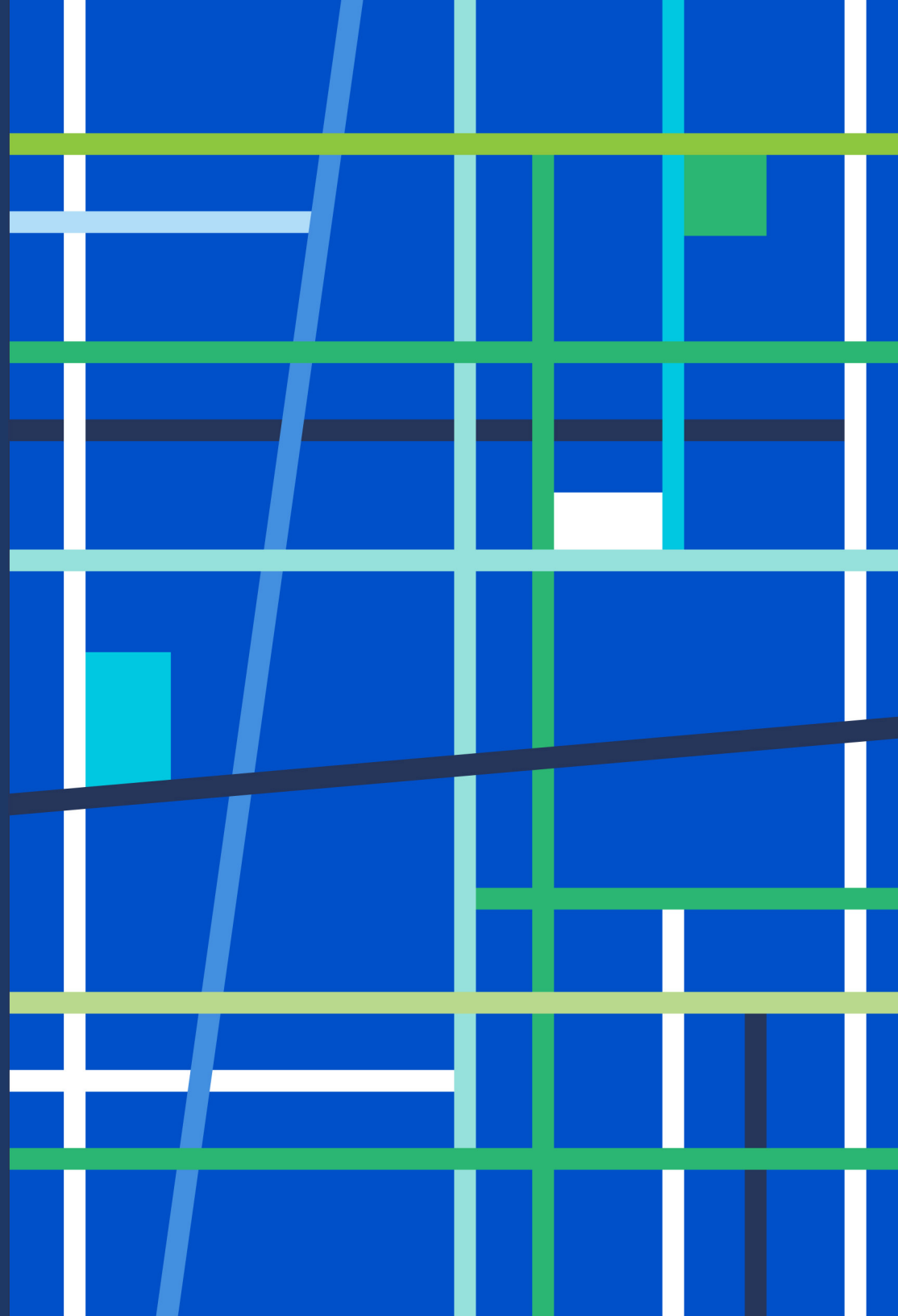


The Community Voices Project:

A study into what residents value
in Toronto's inner suburbs

City Research Insights
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There is a social, economic, and political divide between Toronto's downtown core and its inner suburbs. While downtown undergoes considerable economic and political investment, the inner suburbs experience lower income levels, access to transit, and levels of city services. As a central site of immigrant settlement, however, the inner suburbs of Toronto anchor unique social innovation that so far hasn't been well-reflected in the City's policy priorities.

In a partnership between the School of Cities and the Wellesley Institute, researchers in Toronto are investigating the local priorities of Toronto's inner suburban neighbourhoods in hopes of developing insights about how to address the unequal treatment of these neighbourhoods in political decision-making processes at City Hall.

Aptly named the Community Voices project, researchers (Box 1) used innovative methods, outlined in Box 2, to capture the voices of local residents in several of Toronto's lower income East and West end inner suburban communities – including Dorset Park, Eglinton East, Jamestown-Mount Olive, Elms-Old Rexdale and Thistletown. The goal of the project was to gather the perspectives of residents in these neighbourhoods with a focus on traditionally underrepresented voices in urban policymaking, including low-income and racialized persons, youth, and recent immigrants. Two additional higher income neighbourhoods were studied as controls (Cliffcrest in the east and Edenbridge in the west). The study and control neighbourhoods are highlighted in the map on page 5.



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In their recently published report authored by **Kofi Hope**, **Dan Silver**, **Nahomi Amberber**, **Adwoa Afful**, **Yvonne Daoleuxay** and **Umair Majid**, the Community Voices team outline the key issues of priority for inner suburban community residents in Toronto, and explore the ways in which different forms of inequality impact policymaking in inner suburban areas of the city (see Box 2). You can find the Community Voices report online at <https://community-voices.report/>

In this issue of City Research Insights, we explore the key policy recommendations that surfaced from the Community Voices report, summarized below, followed by an exploration of some key findings from this innovative research. We also present a snapshot of an event held in June 2022 at the University of Toronto Scarborough campus that brought together local leaders, community members, and researchers from the Community Voices team to discuss key issues salient to residents of Scarborough.



Community Voices Project Research Team

BOX 1

3

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Photo: wyliepoon, 2019

Research methods

BOX 2

The Community Voices project used a mixed methods approach, meaning that they drew on both qualitative and quantitative data in their study. The researchers randomly sampled 688 households across five neighbourhoods using a door-to-door survey; two comparable neighbourhoods were chosen as controls, one in the east and one in the west. The research team then completed 24 qualitative interviews with a subsample of residents who had taken the survey. Local residents and academic communities acted in an advisory capacity at several points during the study to ensure that the research instruments were culturally appropriate and scientifically effective. Survey questions were additionally refined based on feedback from two focus groups in Scarborough and Weston-Mount Dennis. The seven neighbourhoods were chosen because they were felt to be representative of both common concerns and local distinctiveness.



Photo: Sean Marshall

Three core dimensions of inequality

BOX 3

Inequality of power gives some groups authority to control or command others.

Inequality of esteem subjects some groups to negative stereotypes or stigma.

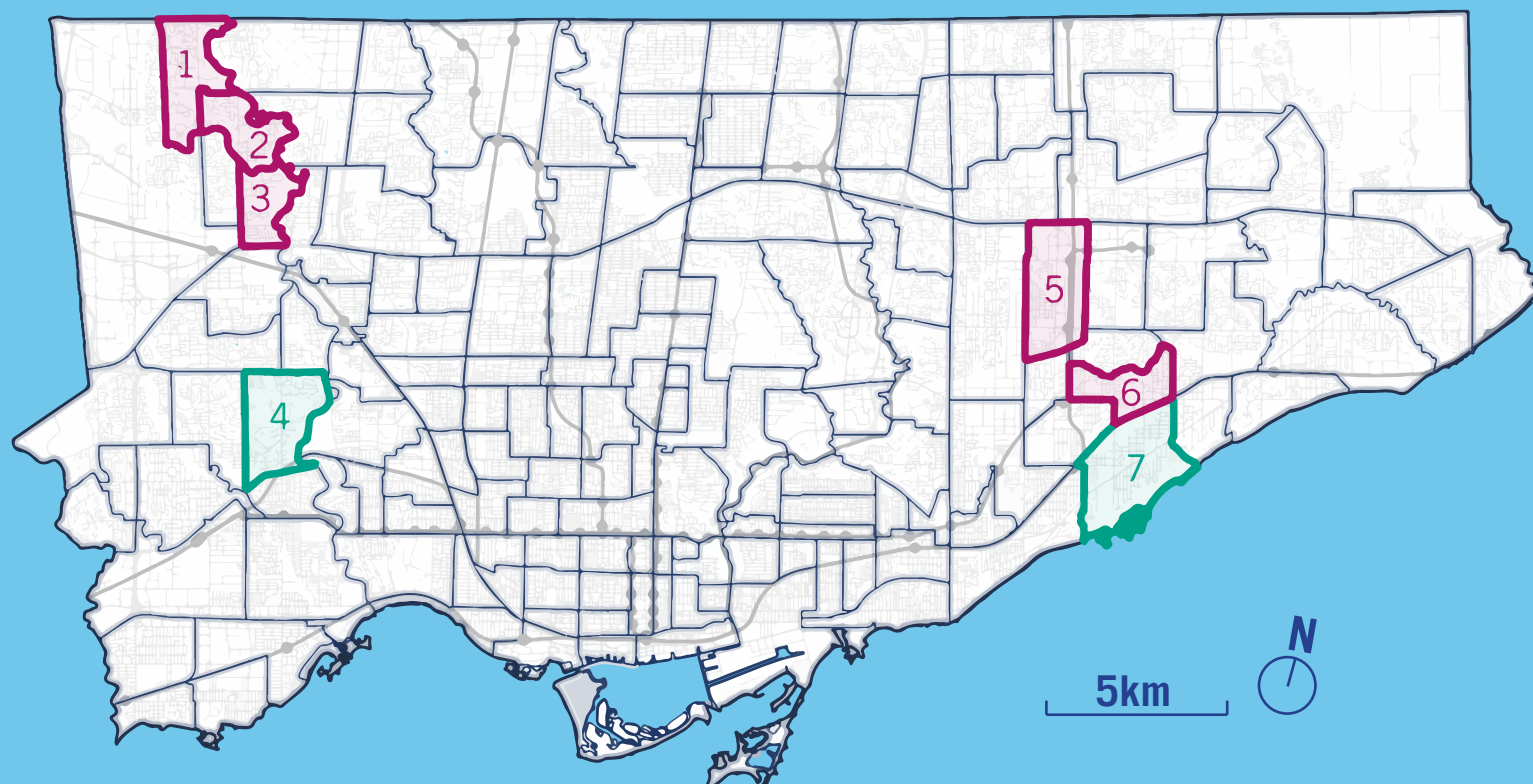
Inequality of standing refers to which voices and interests are taken into consideration in routine policy discussions. This third form of inequality occurs when policymakers privilege the interests and views of groups such as homeowners or downtown residents over those of renters or inner suburban residents.

“When residents do not feel their neighbourhood matches their ideal, it may have a number of negative knock-on effects around health and civic engagement.”

– from the
Community Voices Report

Map of Community Voices study areas

The Community Voices research project focused on these seven neighbourhoods.



WEST

- 1. Jamestown-Mount Olive
- 2. Thistletown
- 3. Elms-Old Rexdale
- 4. **Edenbridge (Control)**

EAST

- 5. Dorset Park
- 6. Eglinton East
- 7. **Cliffcrest (Control)**

Policy For Inner Suburbs

The Community Voices report outlines ways in which policymakers can more successfully integrate the voices of Toronto's inner suburban communities as they weigh options and make policy decisions.

1 **Work to reduce inequality of standing between Toronto's urban and inner suburban neighbourhoods.**

Research like Community Voices demonstrates a clear and common tendency amongst policymakers to privilege the views and priorities of downtown residents or those who live in wealthier suburban communities. However, Community Voices also highlights the large impact that policymakers can have on reducing inequality of standing – a central facet of urban inequality – by understanding, considering and integrating the views and priorities of all residents, including those of lower income inner suburban communities.

2 **Engage in participatory consultations, rather than extractive information gathering, to understand priorities voiced by residents of inner suburban communities.**

Utilizing community-led research techniques – like those of the Community Voices project – to investigate the views and priorities of inner suburban communities can lead to better and more relevant insights for policymaking than more traditional methods. It can also help to boost response rates on surveys and increase trust of local residents in researchers and government institutions, especially when the research feels participatory rather than extractive.

3 **Successful policy implementation depends on the confidence of residents in government and societal institutions.**

To that end, direct personal engagement from leaders and politicians is often seen as a sign of care and concern, as are physical signs of financial investment such as local service provision and upkeep of public infrastructure. To grow confidence of inner suburban residents in government institutions, policymakers should engage personally with residents of urban suburban communities, and support local financial investment in infrastructure and public safety.

“Taking the inner suburban experience seriously means moving beyond the urban-suburban dichotomy”

– from the *Community Voices Report*

Key Findings of the *Community Voices Report*

Toronto's inner suburbs are dynamic communities filled with diverse and ambitious persons.

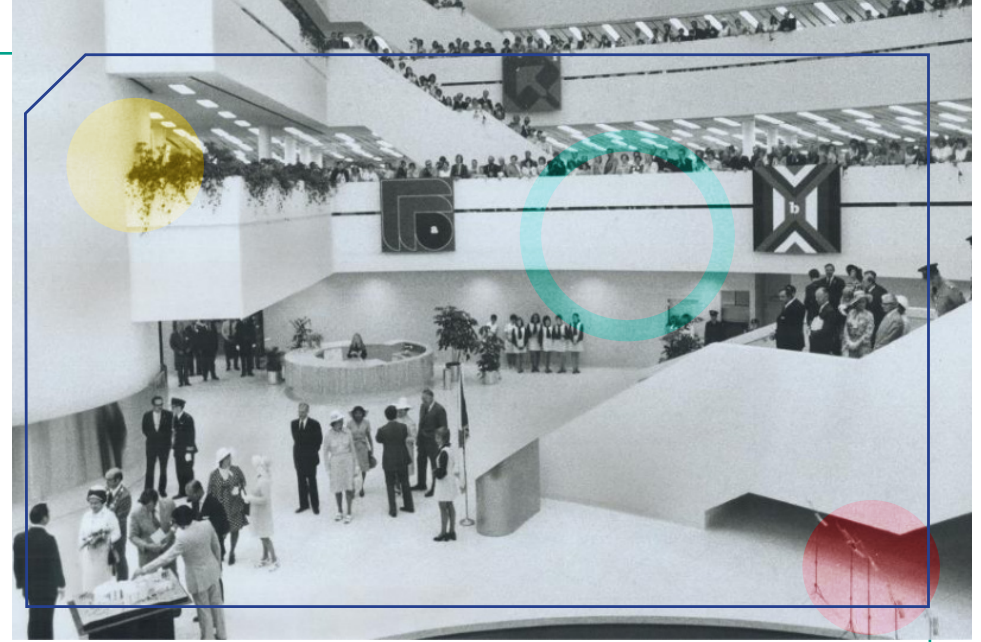
While the inner suburbs on Toronto's periphery face many challenges including lower income levels, lower levels of city services, and comparatively poor access to rapid transit, these neighbourhoods are rich places filled with culturally diverse, creative and ambitious people dedicated to their neighbourhoods.

Resident priorities are better predicted by personal experience than geography.

Interestingly, the researchers found that geography does not neatly predict the priorities of residents. Rather, priorities are more centrally motivated by personal experiences. The team identified five types or clusters of inner suburban residents that reflect their shared socio-demographics and experiences, and that help to predict their priorities (see Box 4).

There are three primary and two secondary critical neighbourhood issues that the majority of residents prioritize.

The primary priorities are: feeling safe; having good options for transportation and mobility; and having access to a wide variety of high quality neighbourhood services and amenities. The two secondary priorities are: living in diverse communities; and having access to quality and affordable housing. These priorities were shared to varying degrees across all five clusters of residents, indicating essential priorities that also align with important social determinants of health.



Supporting residents of study neighbourhoods to guide research about their neighbourhood leads to higher response rates and ultimately, better research results.

The Community Voices project was overseen by a Community Advisory Board, made up of members of diverse communities associated with community-based organizations located in the study neighbourhoods. The Board played a key role in many aspects of the study, including providing feedback on the wording of survey questions, as well as recruitment and sampling. For example, they helped the researchers to identify areas where older individuals congregate and the most appropriate ways to approach them for inclusion in the study. The Board also helped to identify the most effective ways to present the findings to the broader community.

As a result of their work to create more inclusive and people-centric research, the Community Voices survey achieved a response rate of about 40% – exceeding the average 33% response rate for most surveys. The team also developed a handbook meant to guide organizations to conduct more successful community research, which can be accessed at <http://community-voices.report/handbook/>.

Photo: Reg Innell. Toronto Star Photograph Archive, Courtesy of Toronto Public Library

Community Voices event in Scarborough

Community Voices: What Scarborough Needs was an event hosted by the School of Cities, supported by Wellesley Institute, the Suburban Mobilities Cluster of Scholarly Prominence (SuMo) at the University of Toronto Scarborough, and Progress. The event was held on Wednesday, June 29, 2022 at Highland Hall, University of Toronto Scarborough, and brought together over 80 attendees in conversation on the needs of Toronto's east-end communities. Participants included members from local Scarborough neighbourhoods, Community Voices researchers, and current and future leaders of the Scarborough Community.

The event was intended to bring together a diverse group – academics, local leaders and community – to talk about some of the most pressing issues relevant to upcoming municipal elections. The result was an event showcasing academic research, a panel discussion with passionate Scarborough leaders, and an opportunity to discuss topics concerning residents of Scarborough.

“ We want hopeful newcomers to remain trusting and to experience mobility. They're one group that needs increased focus from policymakers—a pool of people who would be really engaged if policymakers communicated with them. It's much easier to engage folks when they already trust you. ”

– Kofi Hope



TOP: Community Voices team members Dan Silver (left) and Kofi Hope
BOTTOM: Event participants in discussion

MIDDLE LEFT: Panel discussants (from left): Anjum Sultana, Andrea Hazell, Samiya Abdi, Esmond Lee, and Liben Gebremikael
MIDDLE RIGHT: Event participants in discussion

Five types of inner suburban residents in Toronto

BOX 4

9

1 Dissatisfied, left-leaning young people:

Residents in this cluster are predominantly young, lower income, and racialized. This group is most likely to report poor mental health, distrust in social institutions, feeling unsafe in their neighbourhoods, and have low support for elected officials

80%
racialized,
20% black

45%
between
18-35 years old

45%
foreign
born

Highest
proportion of
NDP supporters

30%
\$10k-\$40k
income

Distinctive Policy:
Affordable
Housing

2 Hopeful, trusting new Canadians:

Residents in this cluster are also young, lower income, and racialized. They mostly live in high rises and are 85% foreign born. Many have children, and have high confidence in local institutions, but comparatively low knowledge of local amenities.

95%
racialized,
40% South Asian

Many
have children

85%
foreign
born

Low
trust in charities

30%
income
< \$30k

Distinctive Policy:
Improving
local schools

3 Well-connected, racialized middle class:

Residents in this cluster are 50% middle income and 60% are over 50 years old; three-quarters are racialized. Most are highly satisfied with their local amenities and services and have high confidence in public institutions.

75%
racialized,
28% South Asian

68%
foreign
born

20%
low income

50%
are
homeowners

60%
over 50
years-old

Distinctive Policy:
Improving
Health Care

4 Highly educated and wealthy liberal homeowners:

Residents in this cluster have the highest income, and have the highest proportion of homeowners and university graduates; most are white. They have the most progressive values, are the least religious, and are relatively trusting of city hall.

60%
White

82%
are
homeowners

28%
foreign born

60%
university
educated

40%
over \$140k
(Highest income group)

Distinctive Policy:
Improving
Public Transit

5 Conservative leaning, older homeowners:

This cluster has the highest number of seniors, with 80% homeowners and 60% white residents. They are most likely to support the Conservative Party, and to hold traditional social values.

63%
White

80%
are homeowners

43%
foreign born

50%
over 65 years old

21%
upper income

Distinctive Policy:
Road maintenance



PHOTO
“One March night in
Cliffside”
by Viv Lynch, 2022

What’s next for this project?

The Community Voices project is continuing their vital research and advocacy for policy solutions to the unequal treatment of inner suburban neighbourhoods in political decision-making processes at City Hall.

Upcoming for the Community Voices team:

Following publication of the Community Voices report, the project team plans to continue to disseminate the results to policymakers in a wide variety of venues into the future. The team may also replicate the study in the future in downtown Toronto to enable comparative analysis to be completed between the downtown and inner suburban areas of the city.

The team also hopes that the research Handbook they developed will be utilized across the public, non-profit and community sectors to guide organizations to conduct more successful community research. You can access the handbook at <http://community-voices.report/handbook/>.

**Learn more about the
Community Voices Project [here](#).**

Sign up for our [newsletter](#)
to keep up-to-date!

Interview with Kofi Hope

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Tell us a little bit about your work with the Community Voices project.

I was one of the lead researchers on the project, and one of the folks who originated the idea for it. The starting point was having done work in the inner suburbs for many years, while also having some connection to policy circles and political circles. So much of Toronto municipal politics falls along the downtown/suburbs divide and many issues of health equity and social justice manifest in the inner suburbs. Elections tend to be proxies for determining what's important for people and what they want from the city, and many people assume that if people in an area vote for someone that they must support them and their political agenda, but there is often far more nuance. I hadn't really seen anyone doing in-depth research into what people's priorities were, and with that knowledge gap it seemed like there was a need to really disaggregate the views of people in the inner suburbs from the rest of Toronto and understand people's priorities.

How would you like the Community Voices report to be taken up by policymakers? What is the first change that you would hope they'd make?

There is a specific group that needs more focus from policymakers – what we call the “hopeful newcomers.” This is a group who are lower income and have recently arrived in the country; they're trying to build a life in Canada and they actually are incredibly trusting in Canadian institutions. But they're also the folks with the least amount of knowledge about the services and assets in their neighbourhoods.

Our challenge is to work with those folks and ensure that they become the integrated achieving middle-class cluster, and not the dissatisfied disengaged middle-class cluster. We want them to remain trusting and to have those experiences that allow them to have mobility. I think that's one group where there needs to be increased focus from policymakers. This is a pool of people who would be really engaged if policymakers communicated with them and if they specifically worked to build up their knowledge and understanding. It's much easier to engage folks when they already trust you.

Read the full interview here.



Kofi Hope is Urbanist-in-Residence at the School of Cities. He is a Rhodes Scholar and has a Doctorate in Politics from Oxford University. Kofi is the co-founder of Monumental, a Toronto-based strategic advisory firm. Currently, Kofi writes a monthly opinion column for the *Toronto Star* newspaper and is an emeritus Bousfield Scholar and adjunct professor at UofT's Department of Geography and Planning. He serves as a Senior Fellow at the Wellesley Institute and is a board member at the Atkinson Foundation. In 2017 he was the winner of the Jane Jacobs Prize and, in 2018, a Rising Star on *Toronto Life's* Power List. Kofi is also co-founder and former Executive Director of the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals.

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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 communities around the world to make cities and urban regions more sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, and just.

About City Research Insights

Community Voices: A study into what residents value in Toronto's inner suburbs is the first issue in the second volume of the City Research Insights series, 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.



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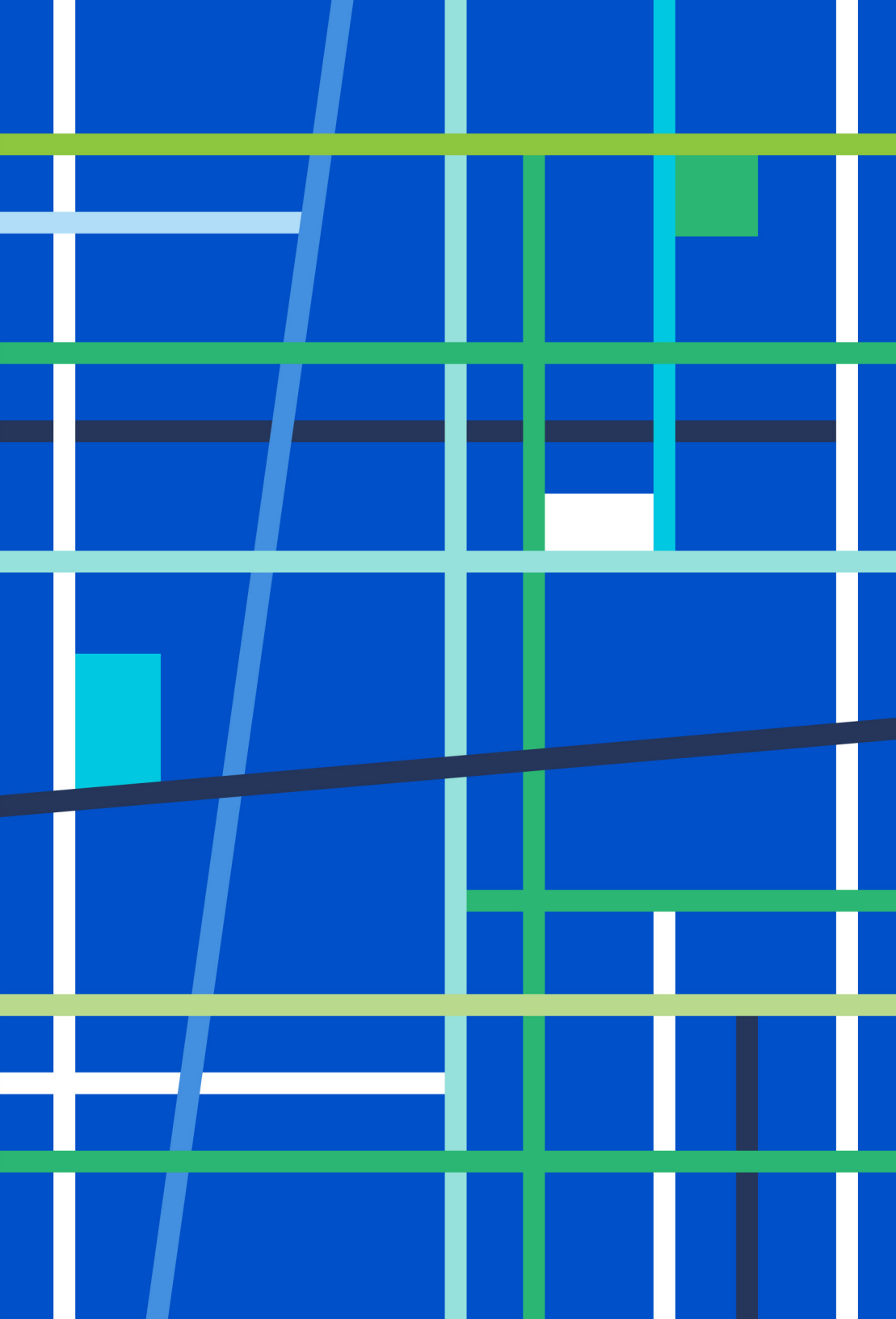
Unless otherwise noted, all information is based on the work of the researchers. Material published in this brief has been drawn from the Community Voices report and website, available at <https://community-voices.report/>.

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[Learn more about the Community Voices Project here](#)





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