

Pandemic exposes gaps in social supports

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Stacey Martin and a host of volunteers connected with the Crouch Neighbourhood Resource Centre helped during the pandemic. Credit: University of Western Ontario

Neighborhood supports for Londoners in poverty have been pressed to the limits during the 18 months of the pandemic, a new Western-led report says.

The [research](#) should raise concerns about improving [support services](#) both in the long-term and in the event of another crisis, said Abe Oudshoorn, Nursing professor and Labatt chair in nursing leadership in health equity.

"We need to pandemic-proof our network of services and assistance," said Oudshoorn, whose team led the study. "The pandemic has exposed existing vulnerabilities in a different way."

In 2020, the number of people served by the Crouch Neighborhood Resource Center (NRC) surged 40 percent—an increase that led executive director Jennifer Martino to ask Oudshoorn to help decipher the reasons and come up with solutions.

"It was important to find out more about them and what their holistic needs were," Martino said.

The center provides meals, food, hygiene products, child and youth support, as well as social connection for the Hamilton Road neighborhood. During the lockdown, the Crouch center remained open and shifted to delivery and pick-up supports.

Oudshoorn initially expected to find that the surge at Crouch was a result of added strain on an already vulnerable area of the city. Instead, he found many of the new visitors came to the center from other neighborhoods because emergency supports and churches nearer to their homes had closed.

"Word spread quickly that (Crouch NRC was) open and people began coming there from across the city," he said.

While Crouch NRC never considered stopping services, Martino said its physical space inside a library did close to the public. Staff and three agencies and about 50 volunteers pivoted to making, sorting, packing and delivering food and meals.

By contrast, many community lunch programs rely on senior-citizen volunteers who operate out of churches; and if the churches shut down or the volunteers themselves are among the most vulnerable to the virus, those they serve become even more at risk.

Unmet needs

Oudshoorn and Martino said some people in the neighborhood actually fared better during the pandemic because of income supports and top-ups. One woman told Martino she was able to afford healthy, balanced meals for the first time in years.

He said that shows a flaw in existing government assistance that, in ordinary times, is often so inadequate that people cannot afford both a home and groceries.

"To me, this tells a story of endemic poverty," Oudshoorn said. This needs to be addressed at provincial government levels with more robust disability support, [social assistance](#) and living wage programs, he added.

"The bigger picture is, 'why is assistance not keeping up?' At the very least, we need something in place that allows people to both pay rent and buy food. With a more sustainable assistance rate, we'd have less need for a patchwork of services."

Martino said the findings also reinforced the concept that people crave community and that isolation during lockdown affected some people more profoundly. The new visitors had not only lost access to their nearest basic-needs supports, they also lost the relationships they had built closer to home.

"Every week, people came out for a take-out meal, regardless of weather. Part of it was for the meal and part of it was for social connection."

She added the overwhelming daily need sometimes makes it difficult to tackle the structural issues that cause or exacerbate poverty. "I think we need to do more advocacy as front-line service workers so people don't have to rely on community food and social services for what is supposed to be an emergency," Martino said.

"We really want to focus beyond basic needs and move towards building social capital that fosters [social connection](#)," she said.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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