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**Standard Research Grant 2006**

### *Adolescent Leisure Opportunities in a Changing Community*

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#### **Project Summary**

The context of leisure is especially amenable to fostering the acquisition of developmental assets and the development of. However, the issue of access to developmentally significant opportunities becomes problematized as inner-city areas are transformed by the process of gentrification, which may disrupt existing usage patterns and which alters the dynamics of supply and demand at the community level. It is not clear to what extent community “revitalization” projects are considered improvements by all members of the community, and there is scant research about the impact of the process on pre-existing residents, specifically their leisure behaviour. Additionally, youth perspectives are seldom sought by researchers examining gentrification, although appealing to such perspectives has been advocated for social research, particularly research with policy implications. The objectives of this research are to examine the extent and distribution of socioeconomic changes within a gentrifying community and to elicit the views of youth pertaining to their perceptions, experiences and use of the community leisure infrastructure.

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#### **Research Methods**

The first step in this research has been to assess the degree and distribution of gentrification within the community of Little Burgundy, an approximately one square kilometre area of Montreal, Quebec. Whereas Little Burgundy has been identified as prototypical of gentrification, there has been scant attention paid to intra-community changes resulting from the gentrification process. Data from the Canadian Census were used in order to paint a socio-economic profile of the community and to examine differences as may be evident between the four census tracts of which Little Burgundy is comprised.

The second step in the research process involved semi-structured interviews conducted with over four-dozen adolescents residing in the community. Interviews covered adolescents’ perceptions of the community and their use of community leisure resources, daily time-use, leisure companions, and impressions about community change. Interviews were recorded, conducted in either English or French, and their duration ranged from 20 to 90 minutes. Data coding procedures were used to derive a wide variety of descriptive categories as well as broad themes which best captured the experiences and meaning of the community, its leisure resources, and its development over time for these adolescents.

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#### **Research Results**

Initial analyses sought to examine the socio-demographic evolution of Little Burgundy over the quarter century between the 1981 and the 2006 Canadian Census. Of particular interest were changes in population, household income, linguistic make-up, and the proportion of youth under 20 residing in each of the four census tracts within Little Burgundy (67, 68, 77, and 78). Demographic changes have been previously reported but, in short, community change along a number of dimensions has not been uniformly distributed across

Little Burgundy. Indeed, from the relatively similar tract profiles in 1981 there have developed two areas of marked contrast, represented by tracts 68 and 78, and another two tracts that have developed between these extremes. While tract 78 has seen an influx of wealthy residents to occupy converted and built accommodations, tract 68 is distinctly more impoverished, ethnically and linguistically diverse, and has far greater proportion of youth in the area than in all other tracts.

Given the elevated proportion of youth and the concentration of disadvantage in tract 68, it is here that community leisure provisions would seem of greatest need and also of greatest potential benefit. The perceptions of youth from tract 68, and their use of community resources, are highlighted below.

Youth within this area were generally quite positive about Little Burgundy overall as well as the community leisure affordances: *It's a nice neighbourhood. Like, the people are nice, people are friendly, you have the basketball court right there. You can just come outside and walk around a chill. So, it's a good area.* That said, youth seldom indicated use of any of the leisure resources in Little Burgundy that were beyond tract 68 and, in certain cases, indicated that such areas were largely ignored. Of paramount importance to these youth was the park located within this tract, one of the two main parks in Little Burgundy: *It is very attractive for the youth and the community. A lot of kids go there because it is... the closest place to the centre of the community and that's where we get together—everybody coming and going because it is, like, in the middle.* Although most frequently mentioned as a favourite place, the park had its detractors, as well: *The thing is that a lot of teens go there that have a bad influence, so... It is mostly between four and five [o'clock] that they start to come... after those times... when I go the park I am scared because you never know what can happen.*

Youth from this area also mentioned their reliance upon not-for-profit organizations in order to occupy their free-time and also serve their leisure needs. Indeed, such community organizations were reported as “favorite” places by a substantial proportion of tract 68 youth. Of significance, as well, were that such community agencies provided financial support to youth with limited means in order to participate in leisure activities: *They helped me out this year to pay my fees for basketball. People are nice here; I like to spend my time with the advisors and people.*

The youth in the area certainly noted the economic changes in Little Burgundy that have left tract 68 largely unaffected—both in terms of income growth and also infrastructural improvements: *All the stuff that is coming in, all the condos and everyone is pushing people out of Burgundy... like, most of the people here, most are on welfare, so they can't really pay what they have to pay.* Some expressed concern that resources that they valued may also be affected: *They may destroy some places and build other things. Maybe they might do that. Or here [community youth-serving organization], for example, maybe they might break it down to build condos or something... I don't think they should do that because it is a place that you like to go.*

Within the context of a Little Burgundy that has seen drastic though unequally distributed economic and social change over the 25 years examined here, adolescents within the most impoverished and socially troubled area of the neighbourhood respond relatively favorably to their environment. Perhaps they have developed resilience in the face of adversity due to supportive adult networks and opportunities for the constructive use of time, and some teens in this study have alluded as much. However, with the prospect of further gentrification to come, it is essential that “low-income residents have a say in their neighbourhood's future” (Formoso, Weber & Atkins, 2010, p 399) and no constituency needs a voice more than tract 68 adolescents.

### **Policy Implications**

The findings suggest the crucial importance played by the developed sports and leisure infrastructure for positive adolescent development. However, the findings also suggest that gentrification does not benefit all youth residents equally due to the asymmetrical patterns of economic and social development. It is, thus, imperative to consider the needs of all residents when considering infrastructure renewal and development, program offerings, and community access to resources. It is also important to seek from youth information about the range of barriers and constraints that may limit their participation in developmentally-appropriate leisure in the community.

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### **Next Steps**

The findings reported here suggest many research questions and fruitful avenues for research engagement. Examples include an in-depth analysis of leisure policy as it pertains to youth engagement at the community level; for instance, what policies serve to encourage or inhibit youth use of community spaces and places? Similarly, systematically assessing the needs of all community adolescents with respect to leisure programs, facilities, and green spaces may help disclose differing patterns of use across segments of the youth population of relevance to leisure planning and policy. Lastly, an assessment of the degree of coordination between the private, not-for-profit, and public sectors would facilitate the equitable development and distribution of leisure goods in areas undergoing gentrification.

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### **Key Stakeholders and Benefits**

- Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Québec
- UQTR - L'Observatoire québécois du loisir
- Sport et Loisir de l'Île de Montréal
- Association québécoise des professionnels en loisirs