

# Great divide of extremes and disparity

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Long before his meagre personal belongings ended up in an industrial-sized trash bin, long before he spent his nights sleeping in a Salvation Army dormitory, John Donnelly was leading a productive, reasonably successful life.

At age 21, he was lured to Canada from his native Scotland by the Hudson's Bay Company.

"They show you these pictures of a trailer in B.C. with the mountains in the back, " he said with a chuckle. Instead, he landed in the Arctic portion of northern Quebec, greeted by Inuit on snowmobiles.

He then had a decent job for 16 years with a company that made mining machinery. His territory was Latin America, so there were occasional business trips to Chile and Peru to visit customers.

There was a condo apartment in Hamilton, vacation cruises, a trip back to Glasgow every Christmas to visit his family.

Then Donnelly lost his job.

Little did he know that would be the start of a decade-long downward spiral that eventually spun him into a transient lifestyle, living in cheap rented rooms and then homeless in a men's shelter.

"I was shocked to see how the whole job market had changed, " said Donnelly, now 50. "For every job that's posted, you've got maybe 40 people who are applying or a hundred people applying, and nowadays they want young kids."

One day last summer, he came home to his room above a seedy bar to discover that he'd been evicted, and that his few possessions had already been hauled off to a landfill.

"Sometimes you just go wow, can I handle any more?" Donnelly said.

The Spectator's massive health mapping project shows there are striking connections between the health of Hamilton residents and social factors, such as income, poverty levels and education.

The implication is clear: The economic health of Hamilton has a powerful impact on the physical health of its citizens.

What's also clear is that the decline in Hamilton's economic health hits hardest at those who are the most disadvantaged.

Take the issue of cardiovascular disease, for instance.

The Spectator's data analysis shows that there was a 22-year difference between Hamilton neighbourhoods in the average age of a patient suffering a cardiovascular-related emergency.

That difference is almost the same as the 21-year gap that exists in life expectancies from best to worst across Hamilton neighbourhoods.

The average age of cardiovascular emergency patients was 57 years old in an east-end neighbourhood bordering Parkdale Avenue North.

By contrast, in one Stoney Creek neighbourhood near Barton Street and Millen Road, the average age of a cardiovascular emergency patient was just over 79 years old.

\* In one east-end neighbourhood near Nash Road South, the rate of cardiovascular-related emergencies was 27 per 1,000 people.

By contrast, one rural Flamborough neighbourhood had a rate of one cardiovascular emergency visit per 1,000 people.

\* According to Ontario's health ministry, the cost of an acute-care hospital bed in Hamilton is \$1,299 per day.

Using that figure, the cost of acute-care bed use for people between the ages of 16 and 69 was \$947,400 for every 1,000 people in the inner-city neighbourhood bounded by James Street North, Cannon Street East, Wellington Avenue North and King Street East.

At the other extreme, one rural Flamborough neighbourhood had acute-care hospital bed costs of \$59,500 per 1,000 people for the same age range.

That's a difference of 16 times from best to worst across the city.

Now look at some of the social and economic factors at play in Hamilton and the differences are just as dramatic.

\* In the east-end neighbourhood near Parkdale Avenue North and Windermere Basin, nearly 42 per cent of the adults between the ages of 25 and 64 don't have either a high school or postsecondary diploma.

In the Ancaster neighbourhood near Wilson Street and Sulphur Springs

Road, the same rate is 2.4 per cent.

In fact, the top 30 neighbourhoods with the highest rates of adults without a high school or postsecondary diploma are all found in the lower part of the former City of Hamilton.

\* Almost half of the people in the downtown neighbourhood bounded by James Street North, King Street East, Wellington Avenue North and Cannon Street East are living below the poverty line.

By contrast, in one rural Flamborough neighbourhood, the rate of people living below the poverty line is less than 1 per cent.

The top 44 neighbourhoods with the highest rates of people living below the poverty line are all found in the former City of Hamilton.

Take, for example, the narrow corridor from Queen Street North to Sherman Avenue North, between King Street to the south to Cannon Street to the north.

There are 13,036 people living in this corridor, according to the 2006 census, and 5,464 -- 42 per cent -- are living below the poverty line.

That's a staggering level of poverty concentrated into an area of just two square kilometres.

Terry Cooke, president and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation, said concentration of poverty affects both social and health outcomes for a neighbourhood.

"Poverty's a bad thing anywhere in the community, " said Cooke, the former regional chairman of Hamilton-Wentworth, "but when we put a lot of people in a small geographic area, all of whom have high needs and limited resources, it's a recipe for everyone to spiral downwards."

There was a time, not that long ago, when Hamilton was bursting with jobs -- decent, stable jobs that could support families, sometimes generation after generation.

Those jobs were everywhere, but mostly they were in the large companies that filled the blocks around the city's northeast waterfront.

Tally them up and it's like a trip down memory lane.

There was Firestone, with 1,800 employees in 1964. All gone.

International Harvester, 2,900 employees in 1958 -- gone.

Proctor and Gamble, 1,000 employees gone. Dominion Glass, 1,300 jobs gone. Westinghouse, Studebaker, the bulk of Slater Steel's jobs -- all gone.

And, of course, there are the two largest employers, the steelmakers.

Dofasco had 11,300 employees in 1980. Less than half of those jobs remain.

The former Stelco's Hilton Works alone had 13,000 employees by the early 1980s.

Now, less than 10 per cent of that total remains.

Add it all up and that's nearly 25,000 jobs that have disappeared from an area that measures maybe 10 square kilometres.

"You translate that into the average family of four, and the impact of that is not just 25,000 jobs, it's probably 100,000 people, " said Hamilton Mayor Fred Eisenberger.

Cooke said that Hamilton's demographics more closely resemble a large U.S. rust-belt city than comparable Canadian cities.

"If you look at places like Buffalo or Cleveland or Pittsburgh or Youngstown, where there were heavy job losses in manufacturing and steel 30 or 40 years ago and the decimation of the middle class, I think you would see similar patterns, " said Cooke.

Hamilton's legacy of heavy industry and manufacturing jobs has brought with it environmental costs that have been heightened thanks to the city's unique split-level geography.

The escarpment acts like a catcher's mitt for offshore breezes from Lake Ontario, trapping pollution over the lower city, particularly the northeast.

Research has uncovered dramatic evidence that the burden of pollution in Hamilton is not shared equally.

One major study by researchers at McMaster University has shown that poorer people in Hamilton are exposed to higher levels of particulate air pollution than wealthier Hamiltonians.

The study also showed that the higher the level of pollution exposure, the lower the value of houses.

One of the interesting findings of the study was just how drastic the differences are in pollution exposure across the city.

The air over some areas near the city's industrial core was found to exceed environment ministry pollution standards more than a quarter of the time.

That's about five times more often than the occasions when pollution standards were exceeded in Flamborough.

Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, Flamborough's neighbourhoods have some of the city's best health outcomes and house values, based on The Spectator's data analysis.

Dr. Chris Mackie winces a little when he hears all this.

He's one of Hamilton's associate medical officers of health and he fears that people will look at the numbers and the maps and come to the mistaken conclusion that neighbourhoods cause the problems or that neighbourhoods cause people to access health care services more.

"People don't move to a neighbourhood and then the neighbourhood makes them poor, " said Mackie. "They're often in those neighbourhoods because they can't afford to live other places.

"It's not the neighbourhood, it's people's prior conditions."

Meet Mark Chamberlain.

He's a successful businessman who took Wescam from a small company to a globally known enterprise and now he's president and CEO of Trivaris, which tries to match capital with innovative ideas.

But Chamberlain is also chair of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, a role he has embraced with almost wild-eyed zeal.

"Knowledge is a pain in the ass, " Chamberlain explained, "because once you've got it, you have to do something with it."

He understands that businesses -- not just governments -- have a role to play in finding solutions to poverty.

"We have to show the urgency and the emergency of it to get them involved, " said Chamberlain.

"It's not that businesses are bad, " he added. "Businesses are there for a reason. They create wealth, they create jobs, they create profit, but they're focused on the things that matter to them.

"We have to make this matter to them."

But what he also understands is the strong link between personal wealth

and personal health.

"It's so counterintuitive to say to somebody, 'You know, a big part of your health outcome in your life will be your income, '" said Chamberlain.

"If that's true then we could improve our health outcomes in our country and reduce our overall health care illness cost if we simply pay people more."