



Region of Waterloo

PUBLIC HEALTH

Building Healthy and Supportive Communities

A Glance at Community Connectedness in Selected Areas of Waterloo Region



This is one report in a series that highlight key findings from a Statistics Canada survey of selected areas in Waterloo Region.

This report and others are available on the **Region of Waterloo Public Health website:**

www.region.waterloo.on.ca/ph
(Resources/Reports and Factsheets)

INTRODUCTION

Waterloo Region has a unique balance of urban and rural areas and as such, community sizes and characteristics (i.e. population density, land use, accessibility to services) vary considerably. Individuals choose their place of residence for a number of economic or social reasons. Research suggests that individuals migrate to rural settlement areas out of a desire for more space and to escape city noise and congestion, and that proximity to their job, school or amenities is not always a major factor in selection of neighbourhood (Fernandez, Brown, Marans, & Nassauer, 2005; Mitchell, 2003).

On behalf of Region of Waterloo Public Health, Statistics Canada collected data to explore differences in community size and composition as they relate to certain aspects of health (Statistics Canada, 2007). Selected residents (n=644) were surveyed in areas of Waterloo Region chosen for varying degrees of urbanization in May 2007. In addition to asking about how connected they feel to their community, the survey asked residents about their physical and mental health, commuting patterns, accessing amenities, and use of public transportation. Data collected from residents were adjusted to reflect the population size in the respective community. Results denoted by “S” are to be interpreted with caution because the sample size was not large enough to ensure precise estimates; results denoted by “--” were not suitable for release.

To gauge community connectedness, this survey inquired into Waterloo Region residents’ community likes and dislikes, sense of belonging, number of family and close friends within the community, and place of work as key components to determining how connected residents felt to their community.

ABOUT THE SELECTED AREAS OF STUDY

Small urbanized rural areas (Ayr and Wellesley), larger urbanized rural areas (Elmira and New Hamburg) and two urban neighbourhoods (Fairfield and Willowdale neighbourhoods, Kitchener/Waterloo) were surveyed in this study. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the selected areas.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Selected Areas of Study, Waterloo Region, 2007

	Ayr and Wellesley	Elmira and New Hamburg	Fairfield and Willowdale
Total population	4,647	10,744	8,579
Age			
18-34	25% [§]	27%	32%
35-49	43%	32%	18%
50-64	21%	23%	22%
65 and over	12% ^{a§}	17% ^{b§}	28% ^{a,b§}
Household income			
Less than \$30,000	5% [§]	9% [§]	15% [§]
\$30,000 to \$54,000	16% [§]	23% [§]	30%
\$55,000 to \$84,000	29%	34%	30%
\$85,000 and over	50% ^{c,d}	35% ^c	25% ^{d§}
Children in the household	51% ^{e,f}	36% ^e	22% ^{f§}
Seniors only in the household	9% ^{g§}	12% ^h	22% ^{g,h§}
Residency less than five years	25% [§]	15% [§]	17%

^{a, b, c, ...}Represent statistically significant differences between two proportions (%) at $p < 0.10$, e.g. two proportions with an "a" next to them are statistically different from each other

Table 1 Highlights

- More residents of Fairfield and Willowdale neighbourhoods were age 65 years and over (28%[§]) and were from seniors only households (22%[§]) as compared to Ayr and Wellesley, and Elmira and New Hamburg, respectively.
- More residents in Ayr and Wellesley had children in the household (51%) and had an annual income of \$85,000 or more (50%), as compared to Elmira and New Hamburg, and Fairfield and Willowdale neighbourhoods, respectively.

COMPARISON OF COMMUNITIES SURVEYED

Community Likes and Dislikes

- Waterloo Region residents were asked what they like or don't like about living in their community. Positive or negative community characteristics influence how connected residents feel in their communities.

Table 2. Residents' Community Likes and Dislikes, Waterloo Region Study Areas, 2007¹

	Ayr and Wellesley	Elmira and New Hamburg	Fairfield and Willowdale
Community Likes			
<i>Small city/quiet/peaceful</i>	70% [§]	67% ^b	39% ^{a,b}
<i>Central location/convenient</i>	22% [§]	24% [§]	35% [§]
<i>Activities/sports</i>	11% [§]	9% [§]	15% [§]
<i>Friendly people</i>	47% ^c	44% ^d	30% ^{c,d}
<i>Big city amenities</i>	9% [§]	14% [§]	22% [§]
<i>Regional services</i>	8% [§]	4% [§]	7% [§]
<i>Family is here</i>	9% [§]	15% [§]	9% [§]
<i>Aesthetics</i>	11% [§]	9% [§]	26% [§]
<i>Employment/education/opportunities</i>	--	2% [§]	13% [§]
<i>Safety</i>	22% [§]	15% [§]	10% [§]
<i>Other</i>	58%	50%	60%
Community Dislikes			
<i>Nothing</i>	25% [§]	35% [§]	33%
<i>Traffic</i>	3% ^{e§}	3% ^{f§}	17% ^{e,f§}
<i>Regional Services</i>	5% [§]	5% [§]	4% [§]
<i>Too much growth</i>	5% [§]	5% [§]	5% [§]
<i>Public transportation</i>	6% [§]	6% [§]	4% [§]
<i>Too few amenities</i>	28% ^g	21% ^{§g}	--
<i>Other*</i>	53%	50%	56%

^{a, b, c, ...}Represent statistically significant differences between two proportions (%) at $p < 0.10$, e.g. two proportions with an "a" next to them are statistically different from each other

Table 2 Highlights

- More residents of Ayr and Wellesley, and Elmira and New Hamburg respectively, indicated liking that their neighbourhood was small/quiet/peaceful than did residents of Fairfield and Willowdale neighbourhoods.
- Residents identified similar factors that they liked and disliked regardless of their area of residence.
- The three most attractive features across community types were:
 - Small/quiet/peaceful
 - Centrally located/convenient
 - Populated with friendly people
- These responses confirm the results of a 2007 Waterloo Region public survey (PMG Consulting, 2007).
- Almost one-third (32%) of residents did not indicate any dislikes of their community.
- More than one fifth of Ayr and Wellesley (28%) and Elmira and New Hamburg (21%) residents indicated their community had too few amenities compared with Fairfield and Willowdale.
- More residents in Fairfield and Willowdale (17%) indicated they didn't like the traffic than in the other two areas (3%; 3%). The Waterloo Region public survey (PMG Consulting, 2007) found similar results regarding the dislike of traffic.
- More residents in Ayr and Wellesley (47%) and Elmira and New Hamburg (44%) indicated that they liked friendly people as an aspect of their community than did residents in Fairfield and Willowdale (30%).
- More residents in Ayr and Wellesley (22%) indicated they like the safety of their community compared to Fairfield and Willowdale residents.

Sense of Belonging and the Number of Family and Close Friends within the Community

The number of family and close friends within the community can affect residents' sense of belonging and community connectedness; Table 3 presents the findings.

¹ Interviewers described community as Ayr, Wellesley, Elmira or New Hamburg for rural dwellers, and as perceived neighbourhood for urban dwellers

Table 3. Sense of Belonging and the Number of Family and Close Friends within the Community, Waterloo Region Study Areas, 2007

	Ayr and Wellesley	Elmira and New Hamburg	Fairfield and Willowdale
Sense of Belonging			
<i>Very strong</i>	30%	34%	25%
<i>Somewhat strong</i>	42%	48%	43%
<i>Neither strong nor weak</i>	14% [§]	9%	15% [§]
<i>Somewhat weak</i>	--	--	6% [§]
<i>Very weak</i>	9% [§]	6% [§]	11% [§]
Number of Family and Close Friends			
<i>None</i>	9% ^{a§}	4% ^{a,b§}	8% ^{b§}
<i>1 to 5</i>	27%	20% [§]	22%
<i>6 to 10</i>	22% [§]	18% [§]	31%
<i>11 to 29</i>	25%	34%	26% [§]
<i>30 or more</i>	18% [§]	25%	13%

^{a, b, c, ...}Represent statistically significant differences between two proportions (%) at $p < 0.10$, e.g. two proportions with an "a" next to them are statistically different from each other

Table 3 Highlights

- Three quarters of all residents in the study reported having a very strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to their communities. This finding was echoed in the 2007 PMG Consulting public survey.
- More residents in Ayr and Wellesley (9%[§]) and Fairfield and Willowdale (8%[§]) reported having no family or close friends living in their community compared to (4%[§]) of residents in Ayr and Wellesley.
- Approximately half of the residents in all three areas reported having more than ten family members or close friends within their community.

Place of Work

Work location may contribute to residents' sense of belonging within their community; Table 4 presents the findings.

Table 4. Residents' Place of Work, Waterloo Region Study Areas, 2007

	Ayr and Wellesley	Elmira and New Hamburg	Fairfield and Willowdale
Place of Work			
<i>Within your community</i>	20%	36%	24% [§]
<i>Kitchener/Waterloo</i>	25%	24%	27%
<i>Cambridge</i>	15% [§]	--	2% [§]
<i>Elsewhere in Region</i>	--	6% [§]	3% [§]
<i>Outside the Region</i>	10% [§]	6% [§]	6% [§]
<i>Not working</i>	24% ^{a§}	26% ^b	39% ^{a,b}

^{a, b, c, ...}Represent statistically significant differences between two proportions (%) at $p < 0.10$, e.g. two proportions with an "a" next to them are statistically different from each other

Table 4 Highlights

- Over half of all residents (53%) reported working within their community or within Kitchener/Waterloo; approximately one quarter of working residents reported that they work in Kitchener/Waterloo.
- More Fairfield and Willowdale residents were not working compared (39%) to residents in Ayr and Wellesley (24%^s) and residents in Elmira and New Hamburg (26%). This may be related to the finding that Fairfield and Willowdale had the highest proportion of adults aged 65 and over and the greatest proportion of seniors only households.

CROSS COMPARISONS WITH MEASURES OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Stress Level

- The results did not show a strong relationship between people's stress levels and either their sense of belonging or the number of family and close friends that they had within the community, contradicting research indicating that social support can positively affect health (PHAC, 2004).
- Previous research shows that in the rural communities, the privacy and pride which characterize rural culture in this area may lead people to handle difficulty themselves rather than seek help from others (Region of Waterloo Public Health, 2004).

Self-perceived Mental and Physical Health

- The survey did not reveal a strong relationship between people's self-perceived mental health and either their sense of belonging or the number of family and close friends within the community.
- There was also not a strong relationship between people's self-perceived physical health and either their sense of belonging or the number of family and friends they had within the community.
- These findings are somewhat surprising as there is other evidence to show that social support (or lack of it) contributes to a person's physical and mental health (PHAC, 2004).

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

A wealth of evidence suggests that sociodemographic circumstances contribute to personal health behaviours. The following sociodemographic variables were measured: age, children in the household, education, gender, household income, length of residency, and seniors only household. Statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.10$) are reported where found.

Age

- More residents that are 35 years of age or older (range of 30% to 42%) indicated strong sense of belonging than the residents aged 18 to 34 (17%^s)

Children in the Household

- More residents with children in the household indicated that they liked community features such as activities/sports and safety, and that they disliked that their community had too few amenities, than residents without children in the household.
- Community characteristics such as safety, athletics, and amenities may be more relevant to families with children.

Education

- Residents who completed university were more likely to indicate they liked their community because of employment and education opportunities, good athletics/sports, big city amenities, and central location compared to residents of other education levels.

Gender

- More female residents (18%) than male residents (11%^s) reported that they liked the safety of their communities.
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Length of Residency

- A large percentage of residents (79%) living five years or more in their communities reported having a very strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to their communities compared to residents living less than five years in their communities (61%).
- Residents reported having more friends and family the longer they lived in their communities.
- More than one fifth of residents who have lived in their communities for less than five years reported having no family or close friends within their community.

Seniors Only Household

- Almost half (46%) of seniors only households reported a very strong sense of belonging compared to other households (27%).
- Half (51%) of seniors only households reported that they liked friendly people as an aspect of their community.
- 44 %^s of senior's only households report they felt that there was 'nothing' they didn't like about living in their community.

IMPLICATIONS

- Community connectedness may have physical and mental health implications; how connected one feels to one's community may help in reducing stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Lack of social supports and networks, which contribute to feelings of community connectedness, have been shown to have a negative impact on health (OPHA, 2001).
- Overall, the majority of resident's reported a 'strong' sense of belonging to their community, which is consistent with findings of the PMG Consulting public survey of Waterloo Region residents (2007). Similar consistency is found in results on community likes and dislikes. The public survey (PMG Consulting, 2007) findings were used to inform Waterloo Regional Council's Strategic Plan for the 2007-2010 term, which ensures that the evolving needs of the community are continually met through a common focus and set of priorities. It is worth noting that more than one-quarter of residents reported that there was 'nothing' they didn't like about their community.

The technical report, *Urbanization and Health within Waterloo Region: Survey Report* (Statistics Canada, 2007), can be obtained from the Region of Waterloo Public Health Resource Centre 519-883-2256 and website: www.region.waterloo.on.ca/ph (Resources/Reports and Fact Sheets).

Additional reports in this series glance at accessing amenities, commuting, use of public transportation, physical and mental health, and are also available on the website.

For questions, please contact Health Determinants, Planning and Evaluation Division, at 519-883-2004.

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