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ARTICLE

Austerity urbanism and recreation restructuring: insights from recreation workers and participants

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on the period 2009 to 2019 and is principally concerned with two objectives: first, to determine how austerity urbanism has affected municipal recreation workers' conditions and quality of employment and, secondly, to asses how recreation restructuring has affected accessibility for users and whether there has been a differential impact for low-income and racialized communities. Drawing from interviews with both recreation workers and participants, we argue that urban austerity has intensified the pressures and precariousness faced by recreation workers, while simultaneously compromising inclusive and accessible services for historically marginalized groups.

KEYWORDS
Austerity; precarious employment; recreation; Toronto; unions; urbanism

Introduction

Cities in Canada provide a range of recreational services that are essential to meeting the social, economic, and community needs of their residents. Broadly defined, recreational services include arts (e.g. crafts, dance, and music), general interests (e.g. gardening, cooking, carpentry, computers, and languages), day camps, fitness and sports programs, before- and after-school recreation care, youth outreach and seniors programs, among other activities. With more than 150 community centres providing more than 1.1 million hours of programming for more than 10 million participants, the City of Toronto is the largest provider of recreational services in Canada.[1] In recent years, the City of Toronto has undertaken reforms to its recreational services that compromise its capacity to provide adequate and accessible recreational spaces and opportunities for residents.

These transformations are linked to austerity urbanism—the practice of constrained spending for municipal services—which preceded but was intensified in the decade following the Great Recession. This includes policies designed to restrain public expenditures, particularly in the areas of public sector employment and services. In some cases, this has also included tax increases and/or the sale of public assets, in addition to new user fees. Focusing on the period 2009 to 2019, a decade of urban

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austerity in Toronto, this paper has two aims: to determine how austerity has affected municipal recreational workers' conditions and quality of employment and, secondly, to assess how recreation restructuring has affected accessiblity for users and whether there has been a differential impact for low-income and racialized communities.

The article draws from findings of 20 semistructured, open-ended interviews with both recreation workers and users who self-identify as low income. We argue that urban austerity has both intensified the precariousness faced by recreation workers, while simultaneously compromising inclusive and accessible services for historically marginalized groups. Recognizing the connections between working conditions and the quality of services, we conclude by highlighting the interrelated imperative to both limit the deleterious effects of precarious employment and improve community access to recreation.

Austerity urbanism and recreation services

Austerity urbanism can be understood to include the processes by which local states internalize the transformations of the state economic policy regime in their own forms, functions, and modes of administration and, in turn, produce the scales and spaces of neoliberalism. In the years following the 2008 financial crisis and arising in a longer-term context shaped by decades of neoliberalism, austerity measures were undertaken by many western European and North American governments at national and subnational scales. Such measures involved a variety of strategies designed to reduce government spending, restructure work within the public sector, and restrict the labour rights of public sector workers.[2] The politics of austerity has also been undertaken at the urban scale, with municipal governments pursuing strategies of privatization, municipal workforce restructuring, and downsizing.[3] These tendencies build on a longer-term project of neoliberal urbanization prominent in North American cities for several decades, as general neoliberal tendencies took hold in urban spaces in the 1980s and 1990s.[4]

Through austerity urbanism, fiscal austerity at the municipal scale impacts a variety of municipal services, including housing, transit, and others.[5] Such measures are often pursued in conjunction with "law and order" campaigns undertaken by police services—themselves protected from austerity measures—that target marginalized populations hit hardest by the cuts in city budgets.[6]

Urban spaces are not only the sites of austerity measures, but in recent years they have also been sites of collective resistance to contest austerity urbanism.[7] For example, in the decade preceding the 2008 financial crisis, mass protests against neoliberal globalization took place in major urban settings. During the years of Rob Ford's term as Mayor of Toronto, labour and community organizing mounted successive challenges to austerity measures directed at municipal workers.[8] In the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, cities have been central sites in the formation of anti-austerity organizing, most notably through the Occupy movement, as well as the Fight for $15 and Fairness led by precarious workers.[9]

Although not studied widely, municipally funded recreation programs are themselves doubly implicated in the politics of austerity urbanism. First, as sites of

public sector labour, recreation programs, like other forms of municipal service work, may be subjected to cost-cutting measures, including downsizing and work intensification. Second, recreation programs provide needed services to urban residents, particularly those in low-income and marginalized communities. Previous research has found that recreational activities enhance the well-being and healthy development of participants, enrich community bonds, and create opportunities for interpersonal development, as well as improve public health and create a democratizing public space where "rich and poor could mix on equal terms."[10] Additionally, recreation programs have been found to be strong social investments that build self-confidence and life skills, reducing the need for, and costs of, providing other social services that deal with ill health or antisocial behaviour.[11] The increased availability of recreational services has been shown to produce more inclusive inner-city neighbourhoods, more connections between people from diverse cultures, and more public spaces where low-income communities can develop social relationships and community leaders.[12] Recreation also addresses potential work-life conflicts, particularly for low-income families, by providing before- and after-school care for children and youth.[13] The context of austerity urbanism, combined with the well-noted importance of recreation services, raises a key question that guides this research. Specifically, what are the implications of austerity urbanism for both recreation workers and users?

Austerity urbanism in Toronto, 2009 to 2019

In the City of Toronto, the decade of 2009 to 2019 can be characterized as a recurring "class war from above" whereby consecutive municipal councils sought to extract wage and benefit concessions from unionized workers and to contract out or privatize existing public services and assets in order to meet fiscal challenges generated by the combined effects of capitalism in economic crisis and the policies of neoliberalism.[14] The years 2010 to 2014 were defined by the intersection of austerity with Right-wing populism under the Mayorship of Rob Ford, whereby municipal workers faced privatization, cost-cutting, and downsizing.[15] In 2014, the former leader of the Conservative Party of Ontario, John Tory, was elected mayor of Toronto. The mayoral regime of Tory, supported by an informal governing coalition made up of then-newly elected conservative councillors, sought to re-establish centralized elite power and normalize "roll-with-it" neoliberalization in the city. In this regard, Mayor Tory's regime differed modestly from the period of restraint and austerity that had characterized the tenure of the former mayor, Rob Ford, and council.[16]

A report to council by former City Manager, Peter Wallace, notes that despite severe budgetary restraint, the ability of the City to fund its programs had not improved.[17] Between 2009 and 2016, municipal spending in Toronto was reduced by 16 percent, while inflation-adjusted user fees for recreation services rose nine percent and close to 1,400 positions were eliminated. Increased user fees are a significant barrier to recreation participation. For example, in 2011 free adult programming at a handful of Toronto community centres was eliminated. While the City expected a 20 percent drop in registrations because of the introduction of user fees, registration

decreased by 61 percent in the first year alone.[18] Moreover, a structural underinvestment gap of recreation generally, and community centres in particular, has led to a substantial backlog of state-of-good-repair initiatives, totalling more than $450 million as of 2017.[19] The average City community recreation centre, along with arenas and swimming pools, was built in the late 1970s, and this backlog, without a significant increase in investment levels, is estimated to potentially double by 2037; the quicker it grows, the more difficult it becomes for the City to manage. Not only does deferred maintenance increase costs and risks, but it also affects working conditions and user experiences. For instance, between 2014 and 2017, Parks, Forestry and Recreation staff documented 32 unscheduled facility closures of one week or more at community recreation centres, ice rinks, arenas, swimming pools, wading pools, and other facilities, with short-term closures occurring more frequently. "Collectively, these events resulted in approximately 1,900 lost days of public access or program availability at facilities across the city—representing more than 5.2 years of accumulated time."[20] Re-elected in 2018, Mayor Tory and the council continued making cuts to services, increasing user fees, and extending the general state of austerity urbanism.[21]

Various methods have been used to reduce projected annual deficits and to balance budgets as required by provincial law, including tax-shifting for competitiveness, reducing service levels, contracting out, using public-private partnerships (P3s), and privatization. New workplace arrangements have proliferated, including the use of part-time and short-term contracts, and casual and seasonal forms of employment, along with new restrictions on workers' rights to bargain collectively, such as by removing the right to strike through essential service designations, as was the case with transit workers. In the context of receiving less assistance from other levels of government, cities in Canada are under increasing pressure to find effective ways to provide services and to manage shrinking budgets.[22] With the exception of policing and fire, the privatization of municipal assets and contracting out of employment have been put forward as a means to restore budgets. But the evidence regarding outsourcing and privatization shows that the privatization of formerly public-sector jobs and the experiences of private sector building projects on urban transport and infrastructure projects has correlated with more expensive infrastructure, reduced public oversight and lower service level provisioning.[23] Austerity urbanism has created numerous challenges for recreation service providers and users in the City of Toronto, many of which are reflected in the discussion of interview data that follows.

Research methodology

This project used a qualitative methodology informed by community-engaged and action-based research, which seeks to involve the local community with the aim of overcoming the distance between those doing the research and those who are the objects of study.[24] The data collection strategy included 20 open-ended, semistructured interviews with both those who deliver (workers) and those who use (participants) recreation services. An interview-based data collection strategy enabled us to delve

"beneath the numbers" of civic budgets to see the multiple and potentially unequal impacts of austerity urbanism.

Our first research task was to unpack how the City of Toronto has implemented austerity urbanism over the last decade with respect to recreation services. Drawing on previously published studies, we undertook a review of scholarly articles, grey literature, journalistic accounts, and labour and community-based research. In phase two, we drew upon our collective experiences to identify a diverse range of key informants willing to participate in interviews. In order to identify informants, we sent email requests to local community-based groups in Toronto. These requests were distributed by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 79, the union representing recreation workers at the City of Toronto.

Interviews ranged in duration from approximately 35 to 60 minutes, although one interview lasted 120 minutes. Ten interviews were conducted with current employees of the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division of the City of Toronto, who ranged in seniority/tenure from seven to 24 years. A majority of the interview participants were women and all are unionized being members of CUPE Local 79. As is common among recreation workers, most of the interview participants are employed part-time, with hours of work ranging from five to more than 30 hours per week. Work is also seasonal, with most recreation activities pausing during the months of July and August, a period when summer camps predominate.

Ten interviews were also conducted with recreation service users. As noted earlier, a central aim of this paper is to explain how municipal austerity measures have disproportionately impacted low-income communities' access and experiences with recreation. In order to identify "hidden and hard to find" participants,[25] emails soliciting participation were sent to a range of antipoverty groups and social justice organizations in Toronto. A snowball sampling technique was also used to expand participation beyond initial responses. Most interview participants were women, and a majority self-identified as racialized, as is consistent with the broader racialization of poverty across Toronto and Canada.[26] All participants noted having taken part in some form of recreation services within the last year, including after-school care, fitness programs, and general interest activities.[27]

Recreation workers

The interviews explored a number of aspects related to working conditions for recreation employees and revealed a diversity of experiences, in particular regarding training. There was variation in the responses related to workers' preference for hours of work. While some expressed satisfaction with the hours they received, others indicated a desire for more hours of work. However, there were a number of common concerns across a range of work experiences, including low pay, expectations for unpaid work time, tensions with other employee groups, a lack of cleanliness in recreational facilities, and expectations to provide recreational resources – such as music for workout routines – without financial reimbursement.

Regarding access to training, some participants indicated that they had sufficient employer-provided training, but others indicated that they were entirely responsible

for undertaking training at their own expense. One participant stated that "Most of my training to do my job has nothing to do with the City. They don't train me to do anything … All my certifications I paid for by myself and I do them elsewhere … " (W5). Another participant explained that training came about through their initiative: "I spend a lot of time researching new music, new choreography, practicing stuff, taking outside courses. The city provides no workshops, no help for instructors who might need to brainstorm with other instructors … The city used to do that. It doesn't anymore, hasn't for years (W4)."

As most participants were engaged in some form of fitness instruction, many discussed the high levels of discretion/control they maintain over their work. They are themselves responsible for designing workouts and exercise routines based on their knowledge and expertise, as well as for other aspects of the activity programming, such as setting/cleaning up the equipment and materials used and providing music. However, this level of autonomy was connected to two major concerns outlined by recreation workers. First, although they were required to design activities and recreation routines, and to continually update these activities and routines to keep service users interested, they were not compensated for preparation time, which could vastly exceed the time spent actually delivering lessons. Compensation was provided only for the formal duration of a scheduled activity session, with short allocations for setup/preparation before and clean-up afterward. One participant indicated that "I only get paid for the time that I'm actually in the centre, 15 minutes before my class starts, then class time, and 15 minutes after. That's all that I can set up and tear down and talk to my students (W5)."

Participants also described the lack of paid time for lesson planning: "The lesson plans, they actually expect us to do that on our own time. They pay us 15 minutes per class to write out those lesson plans, but the expectation is that I guess, it's being done on your own time (W1)." These 15 minutes of preparation time were described as insufficient and resulting in instructors spending considerable amounts of unpaid time in lesson preparation: "We're given 15 minutes before a class to set up the deck and having the lesson plan ready; within the 15 minutes, it's really not enough to write a lesson plan. You should be doing it before the day or the night before or whatever it is" (W2).

Interview participants reported other examples of unpaid time as well. As many participants worked at multiple recreation centres, they reported spending considerable time during the working day consumed by this unpaid travel. As one participant indicated, "I'm spending a lot of time getting to all these community centres and I don't get paid for any of my transportation time, none of it … I'm travelling double the amount of time for some of my shifts than I'm actually getting paid (W5)." Another form of unpaid time came through conversations with recreation users. Interviewees consider this to be an important part of their work because it enables them to get to know those attending their class and to get feedback and ideas for future lessons. However, as these conversations typically took place after the 15-minute allowance had passed, this time was unpaid.

As indicated earlier, instructors are expected to supply their own music at their own expense. Many participants raised concerns about the lack of compensation for work-

related expenses, including the City's refusal to provide a T2200 tax claim form. As one participant stated, "We have to buy music … I pay $42 a month for a licence. The city is technically not allowed to use the name of the program that I'm teaching … unless it pays the licencing fee. It uses that name in its marketing and its schedules and everything, but it doesn't pay for the licence. The instructors do … and we can't get the T2200 from them in order for us to get the money back" (W6). Although T2200 forms had been provided in previous years, this practice ended in 2013, adding to the workers' financial insecurity.

Many recreation workers reported experiencing financial insecurity because of low pay, noting in particular pay cuts implemented in 2010. The dramatic reduction in wages undermines their ability to earn a living through their employment at the City, bringing their earnings nearly to the level of the statutory minimum wage. One participant stated that "They don't get it, that people can't survive on less than $100 a day. They just can't. Rents are going up astronomically. Food prices are going up. Transportation is going up. Everything's going up but our wages are staying the same" (W5).

Recreation workers said that the new pay levels undermine the quality of their jobs such that low pay compromises the City's ability to retain current employees and attract new ones. In particular, respondents note an increasing tendency by management to hire younger, less committed workers who are more likely to leave before further developing their skills and experience. In the words of one participant: "Aquafit and fitness, and fitness centre, which is minimum wage, but that's what I'm getting. And to do other things, they just pay $14. It's like, forget it! Then I'm just gonna go flip burgers because you have so much responsibility, and you have to do so many different things" (W10). A participant noted the deeper impact of pay cuts, connecting these to both declining job quality and the ability of recreation workers to provide quality services:

> If you can't keep your employees happy, then when they deliver the programs, they're not gonna be happy about delivering, or excited, or whatever …. And I think it's just becoming more and more of a problem, to the point now where the lack of quality isn't even the instructor themself. Lack of quality is not even being able to provide that program because those staff no longer wanna work for you (W1).

Poor work quality overall was also connected to attrition of recreation staff, as one participant explained:

> There's a reason people are choosing to work at Tim Horton's or McDonald's over the City, whereas five, six years ago, it was the complete opposite. That's how I started. I was like that 'one step above' in terms of pay, in terms of quality of work, all that stuff. Whereas now, people are willing to take that dollar pay cut to go work somewhere else because they're given more incentive and more motive to work (W1).[28]

Declining wages affected not only fitness instructors but also those working in "front desk" positions. One participant explained that "we lost a ton of people because it was a real job before; now it's only for high school students" (W6).

The quality of recreation services and the working conditions of recreation employees were also connected through the lack of cleanliness in some facilities. Participants noted that the level of cleanliness varies considerably across the city

because some facilities are well maintained, while others are in very poor condition. This creates health and safety concerns for both providers and users of recreational services: "Sometimes I feel unsafe here, just because of the lack of basic cleaning that's just neglected completely. Our pool is neglected. I don't see the custodians taking water out of the pool like they should every two hours to check the chlorine. I never see the shark put into the pool at night to clean the bottom of the pool. If you walk around the edges, you could see dirt at the bottom of the pool" (W3). The lack of cleanliness was also captured in terms of tensions with other employee groups working in City facilities. Specifically, some cleanliness problems were attributed to poor performance by cleaning staff. The lack of standardization of cleanliness reflected a broader lack of standardization of a number of aspects of working conditions across the system. This creates a great deal of unevenness and uncertainty for workers, who often work at multiple sites.

Concerns about working conditions amplified when interview participants were asked about their relations with their managers, or with management in more general terms. In particular, one of the most notable concerns raised was a lack of meaningful interaction between managers and front-line workers. Specifically, employees expressed concern that management did not provide open channels of communication: "They've never really given us the opportunity to comment on how our recreation programs function, which is incredibly sad seeing as we're the frontline workers and we know what works and we know what doesn't" (W3). Communication problems were partly related to concerns about the presence of favouritism/nepotism among some managers. As the same participant explained further, "The city's got a lot of nepotism, so you don't want to talk about something to the right person, but you don't wanna say it in a way that hurts them or makes them think badly of you. So I think a lot of people just shut their mouths and continue" (W3).

Recreation workers said that management also contributes to tensions in the workplace through unmanageable workload expectations:

> I think that management is putting a lot of pressure on each specific facility by overwhelming them with the workload. Because these programmers, some of them are running up to four or five facilities at a time. … You're diluting your quality at that point because now people have to focus little pieces of their time at each of the centres as opposed to dedicating 100 percent of their time to that one specific location … (W1)

This extends to what some workers perceive to be a lack of knowledge on the part of managers about the kinds of tasks required by various jobs, or the needs of service users. One participant put it bluntly by stating that "[t]he people that we report to don't know what our jobs are" (W5). Another participant noted that, given the specialized nature of their work, they "should be the one training [management]" (W9). According to some recreation employees, more diversity is needed at the management level so that the particular needs of service users in the communities can be better met.

The interviews also explored the role of CUPE 79 in the workplace. Responses from recreation workers ranged from ambivalence to critique, with interview participants noting the lack of union presence in their workplaces, the lack of information received about union activities, and the persistence of a variety of poor working conditions

despite the fact that the workplace was unionized. One participant described the need for "more active engagement" on the part of the union:

> I wish a union representative would actually come to the facility and talk to [us], obviously in a safe space where we don't feel like we're going to be judged, and the information is confidential, but that doesn't ever happen. It's more so 'If you have a … disciplinary meeting you come to the union, and we will give you a union steward.' But that's about it (W3).

While one interview participant was active in the union as a steward, most were not well connected. Concerns were raised about the need for union activities to be much more visible. Some interview participants expressed antipathy towards the union, though others offered more overt criticism. The perceived lack of attention received from the union was also linked to the part-time status of most recreation workers. As CUPE Local 79 is a very large union representing close to 30,000 city employees, part-time recreation workers felt their interests might be marginalized within the union.

Not all participants were critical, however. One interview participant was very active in the union, becoming involved after a health and safety incident. This employee linked the effectiveness of the union to the involvement/participation of union members, stating "[u]nless you get really involved in the union, you don't even know what the union offers" (W5). The same participant who was critical of the union for its inattention to part-time workers noted the need for employees to become more vocal in raising their concerns: "The union's there for a reason. If there's a problem in a workplace, it needs to be addressed, and that's why they're there … but I don't think there [are] enough people complaining about it, and I don't think any of the complaints that are happening are actually being pushed through and changed on their end" (W1). This participant provided a reminder that there is a responsibility on the part of both workers and the union representatives to raise issues and follow through to see that concerns and complaints are resolved.

Overall, recreation workers expressed a strong belief in the value of the services they provide for City residents, particularly for recent immigrants and seniors. A number of workers noted that both qualities of services and access to services were compromised by funding cuts: "So I know that there's been that cutback … that was when I was in Recreation they kept saying that 'Well, we have to cut back four percent … so if the equipment's broken, we can't run the program.' And then that's a shame because then people don't have access to that program" (W7).

Recreation workers interviewed had mixed views about the extent to which users experience barriers to accessing services. While some employees felt services are accessible, some noted the presence of barriers, including language (particularly for recent immigrants), fees (for low-income residents), and physical structure (for residents with disabilities). One participant explained that the cost to join a recreational program can inhibit participation, which can then affect the availability of programming: "It's actually pretty expensive to attend programs and they should absolutely be cheaper, but it's $100, it could be more than $100 for a nine-week program. You do that three or four times a year; it's a lot if you have two or three kids, right?" (W7). However, some respondents felt that some sort of user fee was appropriate because it provides a source of funding to support recreational services and is a fair exchange for having access to services (W1). Generally, interview

participants agreed that any such fees should not be so high as to serve as a deterrent to low-income groups. With respect to access for people with disabilities, it was noted that there are insufficient resources: "There's only one person for the entire City of Toronto that's in charge of being the advocate for people with disabilities. … She's run off of her feet. She is working from practically eight in the morning until eight at night every single day. She has some staff working with her but she's the only one that can deal with people directly on all their issues … They need four or five advocates for people with disabilities" (W5).

Recreation participants

Recreation participants emphasized a number of barriers preventing low-income households from participating in recreation programs. These grievances can be organized in terms of three interrelated themes: first, rising user fees, often linked to escalating transit and housing costs, as well as precarious work; second, a general sense of community disconnect, particularly related to a lack of consultation as well as the need for ethnocultural and gender-specific programming; and, third, difficulty accessing information and the need to make new investments in recreation consistent with public need. Participants draw on a range of services, including children and youth drop-in arts and sports programs, pre- and after-school recreation care, and swimming and general interest activities (for example, henna tattoo, yoga, and painting classes).

The wide range of reasons that participants gave for participating in recreation programs are consistent with what has been documented in research published previously. One participant noted that "I participate in recreation for my mental health and my physical health. I've been participating as a multisport athlete for my whole life, and it helps me feel like I'm still connected to my community" (P7). Others note that participating in recreation helped them develop their own sense of community, reduced feelings of isolation (P2), and built community leaders (P7). Another person mentioned the importance of such programs for childhood development:

> I really wanted [my daughter] to be able to not just go to daycare and come home but to also have a variety of activities that she can explore to see different avenues where she could explore for herself growing up different sports programming, and different arts programming. And so, just to try everything and see what she's good at and what she likes, and stuff like that. And I think it's really important to provide a variety of activities for kids outside of school, just to have other learning options, but also to give them things to do and to have structured time to do other stuff (P8).

Others said that recreation programs give families opportunities to participate in active leisure and to spend quality time together: "One of the reasons why I participate, especially with swimming, is because it's something that I can do with my kids, together as a family time … I think if people are able to find leisure, are able to have space within their community, that have better services, I think it helps … not only mental health but also physical health … And I think overall, it helps in creating a harmonious and a healthy neighbourhood" (P8). An unexpected finding was that participants often frame their inability to access recreation services in class terms, that is, as an unequal distribution of services between rich and poor communities. Community members also emphasized feelings of segregation, the interests of the

powerful eclipsing those of the poor, as well as a widespread sense that their voices were not being heard by decision-makers, including recreation management and councillors.

The increasing costs associated with accessing community services were a significant barrier for many participants. Many note that austerity budgeting has reduced services and increased fees for access, which in turn reduce their ability to participate:

> We feel a huge challenge after Rob Ford became mayor … because they are putting more price tag and the austerity is coming. [W]e see the city's recreation services get cut and did not get back again after the new mayor [John Tory] is coming. It's still like austerity is here. So, they put a price tag on the swimming club, they put a price tag on the kid's program. So even though it's a Loonie or Toonie, sometimes a low-income family or no income family, Toonie is a big deal to pay for their kids in recreational services (P2).

Other participants noted that the lack of affordable recreation services, particularly those related to before- and after-school care, meaning they have to choose between taking care of their child or participating in paid employment: "I tried the after-school program for my daughter, but again there was a waiting list. And that is another reason I did not start working because I needed two or three hours after-school service for my daughter, but they are overcrowded … Then I tried afternoon working and that was also not possible because I was the only one to take care of my daughter, so I had to quit both morning and the evening work" (P7).

Many participants said that rising recreation costs disproportionately impacted low-income, female-led, and racialized households, particularly in the context of widespread precarious work: "The community's main issue is poverty … and poverty is related with the issue of precarious work … It is quite impossible to survive without working more than 8 to 12 hours a day for each person … So no decent job in here, no decent income in here, no decent time for socialization, no decent time for providing for the children" (P2). Speaking of the challenging circumstances that immigrant communities, like her own, face, one participant stated that "I think 95 percent of these residents are immigrant people [with] younger kids, and they are just coming from outside Canada, and they do not have a very stable or permanent job, or very high-income situation" (P5). In addition to newcomers, many noted how elderly persons also struggle to take part in community services as a result of user fees: "I don't think it's accessible financially because seniors, especially a lot of seniors in our communities who are racialized and who are poor, it's not accessible to them financially because they have a limited income and it's a fixed income" (P8).

The precarity of job tenure and poverty were also tied to the rising costs of basic necessities: "[Over] the last year, rent has increased very dramatically … So it's kind of one barrier to the person because you can't pay too much for your recreation because you have to fulfil the basics first, that is housing and your food" (P8). For many, this has created a sense of segregation, as noted by another participant:

> I think there's a lot of segregation among the community of people that are lower-income … I think if the City of Toronto programs sort of build bridges between those communities by offering programs that are inclusive of both groups … I think recreational programs, in general, need to be built so that inclusion is the main focus

> and the coaches or the people that are running them need to know how to balance inclusion and fun, so that everybody is having fun, but nobody's feeling left out (P7).

Others emphasized that the class composition of austerity urbanism disproportionately affects women, racialized, poor, and working-class communities:

> It's just a case of whether or not the interests of the powerful align with the development of community centres or not. Because it would also be more profitable, and probably easier, for them to just privatize all of it. For those who have influence, or for those who are in positions of power, it's probably in their interest or at least easier for them to just focus on privatization of these sorts of services or scaling them back (P4).

One participant further expanded on the class divide: "It is very awkward when you see very poorly designated communities beside a big golf club when all the rich people are playing and we are not allowed to go over there … because it is totally private property. These things need to be the city's concern to see how they can vitalize here to minimize this rich and poor distance … " (P2). Another spoke of a "two-tier system" for the rich and poor:

> [In] our communities, kids are exposed to the very minimum and you're not given the same resources to be able to thrive. If low-income kids or kids from poor areas, all they get is 'go to school, come home, either sit at home all day and watch TV,' it has a huge impact on your mental health versus a kid who finished school went to the Rec Centre, did this amazing, I don't know, taekwondo program and then did swimming. It builds your confidence, your self-esteem, it helps them in terms of choosing a very healthy sort of lifestyle. We look at physical activity and recreation, sometimes it's like not looking at sort of the mental health piece and sort of how we boost people's enthusiasm and energy and things like that (P9).

As another participant said, these reflections were tied to feelings of marginalization "because low-income people are also sitting at home feeling shitty about themselves from reading all the rich people's lifestyles" (P9). Others mentioned the alienating structures of capitalism: "I think it comes down to capitalism because the whole independent Western values [are] like 'let's push myself forward and screw everybody else,' even if they have the same goals" (P7).

As researchers, our working hypothesis was that low-income communities would be populated by fewer community centres. Unexpectedly, however, as Figure 1 shows, our mapping of community centres found that lower-income neighbourhoods actually had a slightly higher proportion of community centres (48 percent of the City identified as low-income has 58 percent of the centres).[29]

If we assume, however, as in Figure 2, that the community centres we have today were all in the same locations in 1990, then there was previously a much more even distribution by neighbourhood income. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that community centres were once created as middle-class amenities for an imagined middle-income city which, over time, has increasingly become part of a threadbare redistributive strategy for low-income neighbourhoods.[30] Infrastructure such as community centres are long-term investments and, although their location is spatially fixed, the populations they serve can change quickly over time. Given current spatial and income polarization trends, community centres are more likely to serve low- or

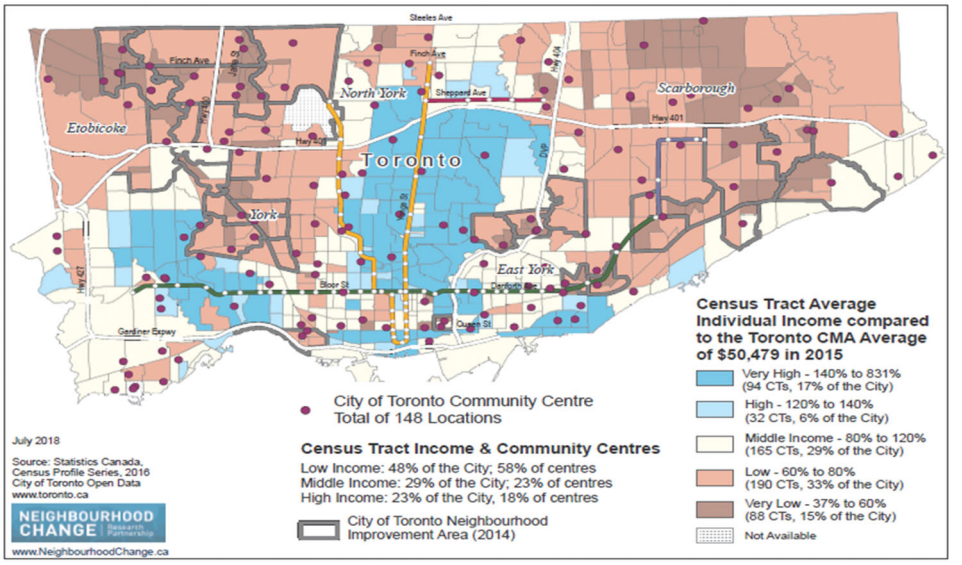

Figure 1. Census tract average individual income, 2015 and community recreation centre locations 2018, City of Toronto.

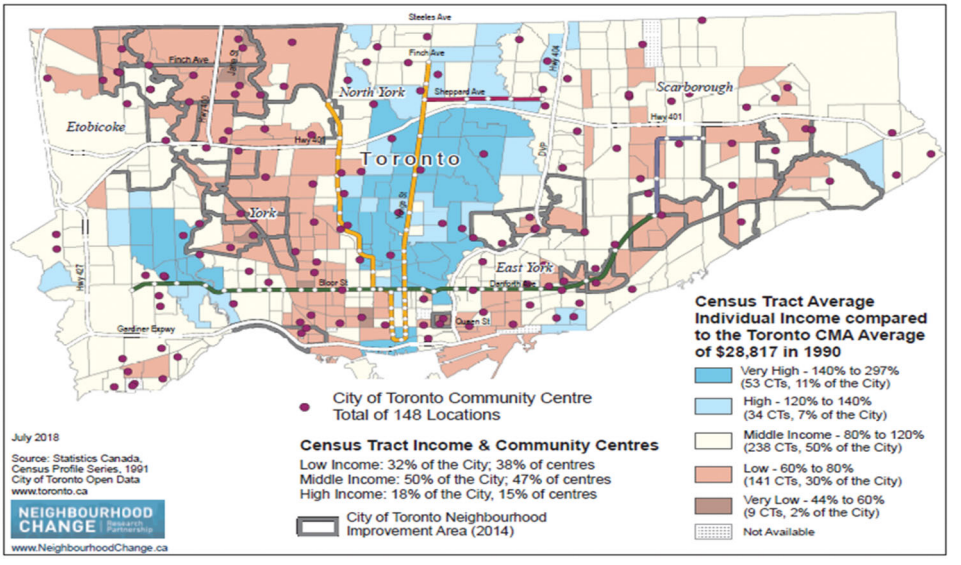

Figure 2. Census tract average individual income, 1990 and community recreation centre locations 2018, City of Toronto.

high-income neighbourhoods over time and less likely to serve middle-income ones, which are increasingly disappearing.[31]

Many respondents also noted that greater community input is needed in determining which recreation programs to implement. One participant explained that "We do not get any invitations from them … there is no constructive partnership with the community centre or with the community organization" (P2). Others reflected on earlier experiences of marginalization with respect to their community centre. One participant recalled that:

> When I was in high school, there was a community centre right across the road, but we were kind of pestered to not go in … And there were definitely times I would have preferred to just be in the community centre, or just have a place to exist that wasn't a school hallway or something. It's a nice thing to have and to ground yourself in a neighbourhood, and to be able to seize and understand the space around you and feel a sense of control and influence over it … and act as multiple people in a common interest to assert the fact that you live here, that you belong here (P4).

In this respect, many participants spoke of a strong desire to implement more ethnocultural and gender-specific programming:

> We are an underserved area and it should be more accessible for the people … we really need a very small cooking program for the women to break their isolation … we want free accessible exercise program for women because this community's people are at risk in health and risk of chronic disease, especially the women, they need a recreation place, especially doing the exercise, so only the women can because it's kind of culturally inappropriate that men and women are doing exercises together in this community (P2).

Others mentioned the need to develop trans-inclusive services:

> I also work in the LGBTQ service provision field, but definitely, I don't think they've made a point to say that their pools are transinclusive. I don't think they've made it to a point to talk about gender neutral change rooms … I feel like they need to have an outreach strategy for LGBTQ population. This is a population that needs recreation … and LGBTQ folks are very articulate about what they need and so it's really easy to just ask for their feedback (P5).

One participant said that the availability of free English as a Second Language programming at their local library cultivated a sense of community and stewardship: "When I moved to Canada, the library was such an impressive thing, so I used to hang out there a lot, I used to volunteer, especially with English as a Second Language kid" (P5).

A common grievance related to the lack of consultation is the difficulty accessing information both in the FUN Guide [recreation program booklet] and when it came to registering online or in person. One participant, for instance, described the challenges when trying to register two of her children: "You have to call them early in the morning, or sometimes after 12:00 AM [when registration begins] … And when we call early in the morning, every time, we see the registration get full. So it is a very crowded place. Services are very few … every year I find that my kids get excluded from the services" (P1). Two other participants shared the same sentiments, noting that the "midnight rush" to register has resulted in a significant amount of anxiety and guilt when they were unsuccessful (P3, P6). Another said that "the FUN Guide is so complicated … It's a coursebook but you have to be literate … you have to know how to navigate" (P5). Finally, another talked about the near absence of organized recreation during the summer months (July and August), when most community centre programs are put on hold in order to facilitate day

camps. She explained that "There needs to be an increase in programming over the summer because, after an hour, it's full … There are obviously a lot of people in the city who are dealing with austerity issues and live below the poverty line and need access to affordable city recreation … especially with city day camps for parents who can't afford childcare because it's so expensive" (P8).

As a result of both rising user-fees, which are situated in the broader context of escalating transit and housing costs, precarious work, and community disconnect, many community stakeholders explained that they have had no alternative but to turn to alternative providers, including informal labour, as in the case of childcare or recreation programs run by other organizations. One participant, for example, discussed turning to non-profit organizations as a result of programs being full at her local community centre (P6). Similarly, in the absence of available childcare spaces, another noted that she and others have regularly turned to other unlicensed women in the community for childcare, even though her preference would be to participate in city-run programs: "They actually are not home daycares. And in my knowledge, there are more than 10 to 15 women I know personally, they are using this service. They're entrusting their kids to the other women in their apartment … the apartment buildings are not so spacious" (P3).

Many participants expressed concerns about which city services were prioritized and which were not. With reference to escalating policing costs, one indicated a desire to "put more money back in the city. Take money away from policing, take it away from the police budget and put it towards [recreation] programming" (P8). In a similar way, another noted that "I think that all of those community programs should just be free, covered by tax or something … A community centre should be a mutual arrangement between the community and the centre itself. It should be paid for and financed by them, and in turn, the community centre itself kind of provides services and makes the community a better place, more tight-knit" (P4).[32] Generally, participants expressed a strong desire that municipal funding for recreation be sharply increased, whether in the form of reductions to escalating police budgets, targetted tax increases for the wealthy, or some combination of both in order to fund new programs.

Conclusion and directions for future research

Returning to the questions set out at the outset of this paper, our findings suggest that austerity urbanism has significantly impacted the workplace precarity of recreation workers, most notably in the form of: staff concerns about unpaid working time; the individualization of responsibility, such as the expectation to cover costs associated with work duties; reductions to supply and equipment budgets, as well as cutbacks to program hours and availability of work; low pay and wage stagnation, often tied to rising costs of living; high staff turnover, which was partially a result of low wages; and a widespread sense of powerlessness and lack of decisionmaking ability. Although some interview participants expressed a positive view of their union, an unexpected finding is the moderate sense of apathy and, in some cases, outright hostility by workers towards CUPE Local 79, as well as tensions with other unionized workers in the same facility, such as CUPE Local 416 workers. This is a noteworthy finding that

requires further analysis and investigation. Some workers also expressed suspicion of fee-free recreation, equating higher program costs with higher quality, while others were critical of increases to the Ontario minimum wage suggesting that other workers with fewer "life and death" responsibilities (such as swimming instructors and childcare workers) were now earning a similar wage, thereby eroding what they perceived as higher pay for more dangerous work.

Recreation users expressed a number of similar concerns, especially related to rising user fees—often linked to rising transit and housing costs as well as workplace precarity—thereby limiting their ability to participate in a range of recreation programs. Recreation users also noted frustration with a perceived lack of community engagement, especially in terms of ethnoculturally appropriate and gender-specific programming. Unlike the ambiguity expressed by some recreation workers, nearly all recreation user interview participants expressed a strong desire for fee-free recreation, noting that municipal budgets need to spend less on policing and more on providing opportunities for low-income and racialized communities to participate in recreation programs. Others also noted that provincial and federal governments need to do more to support municipalities. An unexpected finding is recreation participants' tendency to express their discontent in class terms, with many suggesting that privatized public services are in the interest of "those with power" who could afford to pay user fees. A number of respondents also noted their inability to register for programs, citing difficulty registering and long waiting lists. This issue, and how to improve it, require further investigation.

Both workers and recreation users said that recreation services are important long-term social investments that improve health and well-being and build and develop strong community relationships. Both groups raised similar concerns about the rising costs of living, transit, and precarious work, which often result in work-life conflicts, particularly for low-income families. Our research confirms and extends previous findings of a growing polarization among Toronto's rich and poor, whereas historically, there was a much more even distribution of community centres by neighbourhood income. While this research presents a snapshot of the effects of austerity urbanism on workers and participants, future research needs to expand stakeholder input to both a higher number of workers and participants, and a wider range of stakeholders, such as local councillors, recreation management, elected union representatives, and other community-based groups.

Future research also needs to examine how the experiences of other municipalities, in Canada and elsewhere, compare and contrast with those of Toronto. Another aspect that bears further investigation is the extent to which, given increasing patterns of spatial and income segregation, community centres, such as libraries,[33] could become nodal points of community participation and organization, including building union-community alliances.

To conclude, our research has found that poverty, low incomes, and job precarity are major barriers to accessible recreation. There is a strong need to address these socioeconomic imbalances in order to counteract the multiple and harmful impacts of austerity urbanism on precarious workers and marginalized communities.

Notes

1. City of Toronto, *Parks & Recreation Facilities Master Plan*.
2. Thomas and Tufts, "Austerity, Right Populism, and the Crisis of Labour in Canada," 212–30; Evans and Fanelli, *The Public Sector in an Age of Austerity*; Albo and Fanelli, "Austerity Against Democracy," 65–88.
3. Peck, "Austerity Urbanism," 626–55.
4. Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism," 427–50.
5. Albo and Fanelli, "Fiscal Distress and the Local State," 264–98; Fanelli and Hudson, "Urban Political Economy," 254–77.
6. Thomas and Tufts, "Blue Solidarity," 126–44.
7. Tufts, Thomas, and MacDonald, "Austerity Urbanism," 206–14.
8. Thomas and Tufts, "Enabling Dissent," 29–45.
9. Luce and Lewis, "Retail, Neoliberal Urbanism," 62–79; Evans, Fanelli and McDowell, *Rising Up*.
10. Sherer, "The Benefits of Parks"; Warburton, Nicol and Bredin, "Health Benefits of Physical Activity," 801–9.
11. Tremblay et al., "Physical Activity and Immigrant Status," 277–82.
12. Hutchinson, *Physical Activity, Recreation, Leisure, and Sport*; Lee et al., "Effect of Physical Inactivity on Major Non-Communicable Diseases Worldwide," 219–29.
13. Totten, *The Health, Social, and Economic Benefits*; Cradock et al., "Neighborhood Social Cohesion," 427–35.
14. Fanelli, *Megacity Malaise*.
15. Thomas and Tufts, "Austerity," 212–30.
16. Keil, "Toronto Uber Alles," 189–218; Kipfer and Saberi, "From 'Revolution' To Farce?," 127–52.
17. Wallace, *The City of Toronto's Long-Term Financial Direction*.
18. Block et al., *Exercising Good Policy*.
19. City of Toronto, *Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan, 2019–2038*, 57.
20. City of Toronto, *Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan, 2019–2038*, 61.
21. Toronto Foundation, *Toronto's Vital Signs*; Metcalf Foundation, *The Working Poor in the Toronto Region*.
22. Fanelli, *Megacity Malaise*; Taylor and Dobson, *Power and Purpose*, 1–73.
23. Loxley, *Ideology Over Economics*; Whiteside, *Public-Private Partnerships*.
24. Ferrance, *Action Research*.
25. Atkinson and Flint, "Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations," 1–4.
26. Dinca-Panaitescu and Walks, *Income Inequality*.
27. For both workers and participants, interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and transcribed using *Scribie*. Transcripts were then checked against the audio recordings for accuracy.
28. This was echoed by another participant, who noted: "Our hourly wages went down $5 and now this year, we are at the point that they don't have enough fitness instructors. They don't have enough aquafit instructors, they don't have enough lifeguards, they don't have enough people at the wading post. So, they just scrambling, struggling. And the leaders, the supervisors they're going bananas (W10)."
29. The authors would like to thank David Hulchanski for his assistance and permission to overlay the spatial distribution of community centres across the Three Cities in Toronto maps (Figures 1 and 2).
30. Thanks to SPE reviewers for bringing this to our attention.
31. Hulchanski and Maaranen, *Neighbourhood Socio-Economic Polarization*.
32. Others expressed a similar sentiment, going further: "I think if there was more free programming at the quality that we're looking for, then we would access it more often … I definitely think that increasing taxes for people who can afford it would be and businesses would be a great way to bring in revenue as needed … increase taxes for the

rich, so that you could have more programming for the poor or for everybody … It doesn't make sense to be benefiting only the rich when the rich can also afford to pay those taxes, and can also afford to pay for programming that they're getting in their neighbourhoods … I feel like the city, and the province, and the federal government has actually a lot of money to use, but they just need to use it in a way that's actually beneficial to people and not to corporations and all the mismanagement that's happening within our government." (P7).

33. Rao, *The Great Equalizer*.

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