Introduction and Overview

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Hamilton is a mid-sized Canadian city located in the southern portion of the province of Ontario, about 75 km west of Toronto. In 2011, it had a population of 520,000. Throughout its history, Hamilton has served as an important industrial centre active in steel production, manufacturing and transportation. In recent years, economic restructuring has resulted in the loss of thousands of industrial jobs and growth in the service and knowledge based sectors, particularly health and education. Despite these changes, manufacturing remains a leading source of employment. In 2011 the city's unemployment rate was 6.5, lower than that of the province at 8.0. However, economic change has resulted in Hamilton's once robust city core experiencing decline. A socio-economic divide is evident among residents with several neighbourhoods in the city's central and eastern sections suffering from high levels of poverty and disadvantage. In these areas, the standard of living has lowered, child poverty has increased and more families are using food banks.

Hamilton, like other Canadian cities, recognizes the social problems facing many of its residents and has established community-based organizations and strategies (such as the Hamilton Community Foundation, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and Clean Air Hamilton) to address quality of life issues and environmental problems. Over the past several years, these organizations have identified priority issues in several communities in the city and have embarked on neighbourhood research. In 2011, the City of Hamilton announced its Neighbourhood Development Strategy (NDS). The NDS will be implemented in the geographic regions of the city exhibiting poorer health, social and economic outcomes. Its objective is to better coordinate staff and resources across departments to improve service delivery in local neighbourhoods while helping the City develop stronger relationships with neighbourhood residents and stakeholders.

McMaster University is Hamilton's largest post-secondary institution. Over the past decade, it has partnered with the City of Hamilton and community organizations to conduct research on issues relating to well-being, health, health promotion, transportation, housing and air quality. An important element of this work has been linking research to policy through the development and analysis of social indicators. The School of Geography and

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Earth Sciences, among other units at McMaster, has been actively engaged with the community in applied research on neighbourhood quality of life. This special issue consists of a series of papers that highlight the nature of this research.

Recently, McMaster University conducted the Hamilton Household Quality of Life Survey. It was carried out via telephone by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) between November 2010 and March 2011. A total of 1,002 households responded to the survey, which posed a series of questions relating to neighbourhood conditions, health, belonging, social capital and demographics. The survey targeted three neighbourhood clusters in Hamilton representing areas of different socio-economic status (SES)—low SES, mixed SES and high SES. The criteria for selecting the neighbourhood clusters were as follows: (1) each neighbourhood had a population greater than 1,000; (2) neighbourhoods in each cluster were contiguous and represent identifiable boundaries, and; (3) each cluster represented socio-economic conditions and important geographic locations within Hamilton as determined by the 2006 census. The objective was to collect data on approximately 300–350 households in each cluster. The ISR drew a random sample of telephone numbers (associated with unique households) as the basis for its sampling frame, contacting 3,599 households with a response rate of 28 % ($n = 1,002$).

A total of 19 authors representing McMaster University and community-based organizations have contributed nine articles divided into two sections. Section A consists of four papers, which employed data from the Hamilton Household Quality of Life Survey to investigate a number of neighbourhood based issues including: playground accessibility (Bennet et al.); social capital (Kitchen et al.); perceptions of air quality (Simone et al.), and; sense of place (Williams et al.). Section B consists of five papers that examine additional issues and employ data from a variety of sources including; sense of belonging (Kitchen et al.); perceptions of quality of life in Hamilton's 'neighbourhood hubs' (Eby et al.); the 'Code Red' project that highlighted significant health disparities in the city (DeLuca et al.); Hamilton's proposed light rail transit system (Topalovic et al.), and; mobile air monitoring in the city's neighbourhoods (Adams et al.). When considered as a whole, this volume represents a good example of the partnerships that can be formed between academia and the community to engage in policy relevant research aimed at understanding and improving quality of life. It also provides a snapshot of the major trends in social well being in the mid-sized central Canadian city of Hamilton.