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SHIFTING REALITIES:

SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRENDS AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING IN OTTAWA

2025

COMMUNITY WELLBEING REPORT

Prepare by:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ottawa is widely regarded for its high quality of life, strong public services, and economic stability. However, beneath this image, deepening disparities in housing, income security, employment, healthcare, and community services have placed growing pressure on residents—particularly low-income and racialized communities. These challenges are not short-term fluctuations but structural issues requiring immediate and sustained action.

Building on the 2018 Ottawa Community Wellbeing Report, this research integrates 2021 Census data, resident feedback, community service agency reports, municipal interventions, and policy analysis to assess the shifting realities of Ottawa's socio-economic landscape. As Ottawa's population grows to 1,017,449, with visible minorities now comprising 32.5% of residents, economic benefits remain unevenly distributed. Many low-income households face poverty rates nearly double the city average, with rising housing costs and stagnant wages compounding financial insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2021; City of Ottawa, 2024).
The housing crisis remains urgent: home prices have surged over 50%, and rents have increased by 35% in the past five years. More than 12,000 residents are on the social housing waitlist, with many waiting over five years. While government relief measures have been introduced, they fall short of addressing systemic barriers. In response, community-driven solutions—such as tenant advocacy networks, cooperative housing models, and land trusts—have emerged as promising strategies, demonstrating the need for long-term investment in resident-led initiatives (Ottawa Community Housing, 2024).

Income inequality is growing, with precarious and low-wage employment leaving many workers vulnerable. Community-based job training programs, worker co-operatives, and social enterprises have shown promise in promoting economic inclusion but lack the sustained funding necessary to expand. Meanwhile, social service organizations—food banks, shelters, and mental health providers—are overwhelmed, often operating beyond capacity due to chronic underfunding. Grassroots initiatives, mutual aid networks, and peer-led mental health programs have stepped up to fill these gaps, showcasing the power of community resilience when adequately resourced. Ottawa has the resources and policy tools to drive meaningful change—but without long-term investment, systemic inequities will only deepen. The city must shift from reactive crisis responses to proactive, structural solutions that strengthen housing, employment, healthcare, and community supports. A collaborative approach—grounded in public investment, social innovation, and resident-driven leadership—is essential to achieving lasting economic security, social equity, and community wellbeing for all.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) has provided a trusted, holistic framework for understanding the quality of life in communities across Canada. It reminds us that GDP growth alone is not a sufficient measure of success. True community wellbeing must consider how people experience their daily lives—whether they feel safe, supported, and connected, and whether they have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. This report—Shifting Realities: Socio-Economic Trends and Community Wellbeing in Ottawa— builds on that foundation. It provides a detailed narrative of how residents are truly doing across eight CIW domains: Living Standards, Community Vitality, Education, Environment, Healthy Populations, Time Use, Democratic Engagement, and Leisure & Culture. Using the most recent data available, the report highlights areas where progress is being made and exposes where inequities are worsening. Most importantly, it centers the systems and structural issues that underpin these outcomes—root causes rather than symptoms.

Since the last report in 2018, Ottawa has experienced significant disruptions: a global pandemic, escalating climate threats, inflationary pressures, and major demographic changes. While some residents have benefited from increased digitization and flexible work options, others face rising costs, housing instability, unemployment, or disconnection from services. Over 30% of Ottawa's population are now immigrants, and nearly 33% identify as visible minorities—yet these communities continue to experience disproportionate barriers across every domain of wellbeing (Statistics Canada, 2021).

This report is structured in two phases. Phase One, captured in this publication, analyzes available secondary data, trends, and existing system responses. It provides an overview of the current state of wellbeing in Ottawa using quantitative and qualitative information. Phase Two, to be completed in the coming weeks, will integrate direct community feedback, including lived experience from residents, input from grassroots organizations, and reflections from frontline service providers. This two-phased approach ensures that data is not decontextualized, but grounded in the realities of those most impacted by systemic inequities.

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DOMAIN 1: LIVING STANDARDS

Living Standards *are the foundation of wellbeing. They encompass a person's ability to meet basic needs—housing, food, income, and job security—and live with dignity. In Ottawa, these standards are shifting under the weight of a volatile economy, an affordability crisis, and persistent structural inequities. Although aggregate income and employment levels have improved since 2016, they mask deepening disparities across race, gender, age, and immigration status.*

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a major inflection point in Ottawa's living standards. Pre-pandemic, many households were already on the edge—managing tight budgets, low wages, and limited affordable housing. The economic shock of 2020-2021 pushed thousands of residents into deeper poverty. While some segments of the population rebounded quickly by 2023, many low-income families, racialized workers, and seniors continue to experience a worsening cost-of-living crisis.

Housing: The Epicenter of the Crisis

Ottawa's housing market has become one of the most inaccessible in the country. Between 2016 and 2021, the average resale home price rose from $398,000 to over $610,000. By 2024, it had surpassed $730,000—an increase of more than 80% in less than a decade (Ottawa Real Estate Board, 2024). Renters, who make up more than 35% of Ottawa households, have also been hit hard. The average rent for a two-bedroom unit now exceeds $2,100/month (CMHC, 2024), pricing out minimum wage earners and newcomers.

The pandemic accelerated these trends. Remote work increased demand for suburban and rural housing, reducing supply in urban cores and inflating prices. Many racialized and immigrant families, disproportionately represented in lower-paying jobs, were unable to compete in the housing market and forced to live in overcrowded or unsafe conditions.
Ottawa's affordable housing waitlist surpassed 12,000 households in 2023, with average wait times of five to seven years depending on unit type (Ottawa Community Housing, 2024). Shelter usage has increased, with families comprising a growing share of the homeless population. The urgency of this housing crisis cannot be overstated—it is both a symptom and driver of poor living standards.

Income and Employment: Growth Without Equity

Between the 2016 and 2021 Censuses, Ottawa saw modest income growth. The median after-tax household income rose from $85,981 to $97,900. However, wage growth has not kept pace with inflation. In real terms, many households are earning less than they did a decade ago, while expenses have skyrocketed.

COVID-19 disrupted employment across sectors, disproportionately affecting hospitality, retail, and care work—fields with high rates of racialized and newcomer workers. By 2023, overall employment rates had recovered, but job quality had deteriorated. Precarious work, part-time

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DOMAIN 1: LIVING STANDARDS

contracts, and gig economy jobs became more common, offering limited stability or benefits (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023).
Ottawa's income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, rose from 0.308 in 2016 to 0.318 in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). The city's high-income households captured most of the gains, while those at the bottom struggled with stagnant wages, rising debt, and limited access to employment support.

Food Insecurity: A Growing Reality

In 2016, approximately 10.8% of Ottawa households experienced food insecurity. By 2021, that number had climbed to 14.5% and continues to rise. The Ottawa Food Bank (2023) reported a 39% increase in food bank use between 2020 and 2023. Over 150,000 residents now rely on food assistance.
Children, seniors, and racialized communities are most affected. Black households experience food insecurity at more than twice the citywide average, while single-parent families—especially those led by women—report the highest rates of hunger and nutritional deprivation.
While community food banks and emergency meal programs have expanded their services, they were never meant to be permanent infrastructure. Hunger is not a failure of charity, but a failure of policy.

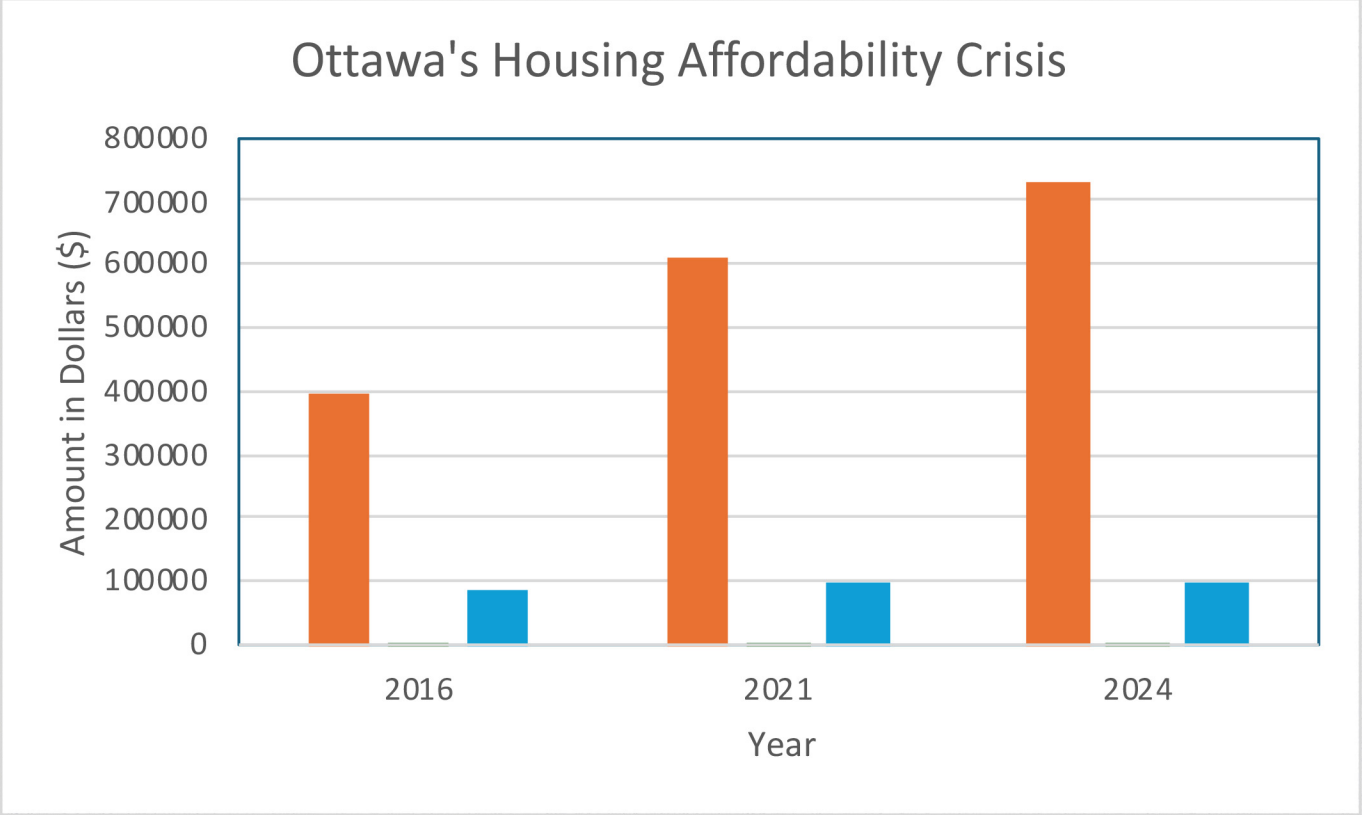
Community feedback summary

Organizations express urgency in addressing the housing crisis and food insecurity, particularly for racialized newcomers, refugee families, and single-parent households. They have implemented tenant advocacy and housing stabilization programs to support access to equitable housing, alongside community kitchens and pop-up food programs to combat a significant rise in food bank usage. Challenges include insufficient funding, systemic barriers like racism in housing access, and administrative burdens that limit scalability. Consultations recommend expanding core funding for community-led, trauma-informed supports and streamlining administrative processes to prioritize prevention.

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DOMAIN 1: LIVING STANDARDS



This chart shows how housing costs have outpaced income growth, highlighting the urgent affordability crisis.

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DOMAIN 2: COMMUNITY VITALITY

Community vitality is the social glue that holds cities together. It reflects how connected, safe, and supported people feel in their neighborhoods. It is about trust, relationships, belonging, and the shared commitment to care for one another. In Ottawa, these threads have been tested over the past decade. The combined effects of social inequality, political division, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed and, in some cases, deepened the fractures in community life. Yet, despite these pressures, many communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience, particularly through informal support systems and grassroots action.

A City of Contrasts: Belonging Amidst Disconnection

According to Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (2021), 69% of Ottawa residents reported a strong sense of belonging to their local community—an encouraging figure slightly above the national average. However, this aggregate masks disparities across identity and neighborhood. For example, just 48% of racialized residents and 41% of newcomers reported high levels of belonging. These gaps are even more pronounced in low-income neighborhoods and areas with concentrated rental housing or shelter services.

The pandemic created both barriers and bridges. Public health restrictions reduced in-person interaction, but mutual aid networks, tenant associations, and neighborhood support groups flourished. A surge in informal caregiving, food delivery, and emotional support revealed how deeply Ottawans care for one another—even as formal institutions struggled to respond in real time.

In communities such as Vanier, Donald Street, Bayshore, and Heron Gate, grassroots groups have led safety walks, mental health check-ins, and youth engagement programs. These efforts have sustained connection and dignity where traditional services were lacking.

Discrimination and Safety

Systemic racism and discrimination continue to undermine community vitality. The 2021 Ottawa Police Services Board Equity Audit found that racialized residents, particularly Black and Indigenous communities, experience disproportionate levels of police surveillance, discrimination in public spaces, and institutional mistrust. Reports from Ottawa Public Health (2023) highlight that Indigenous youth and LGBTQ2S+ residents are more likely to report feeling unsafe in public, particularly after dark.

During COVID-19, incidents of anti-Asian racism and Islamophobia increased, targeting individuals in transit, parks, and local businesses. For many, safety remains a conditional experience—contingent on appearance, language, or perceived affiliation.

These experiences erode trust, limit mobility, and create mental health burdens. They also reveal the need for community-centered safety strategies that go beyond policing and emphasize care, de-escalation, and equity.

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DOMAIN 2: COMMUNITY VITALITY

Volunteering, Trust, and Collective Action

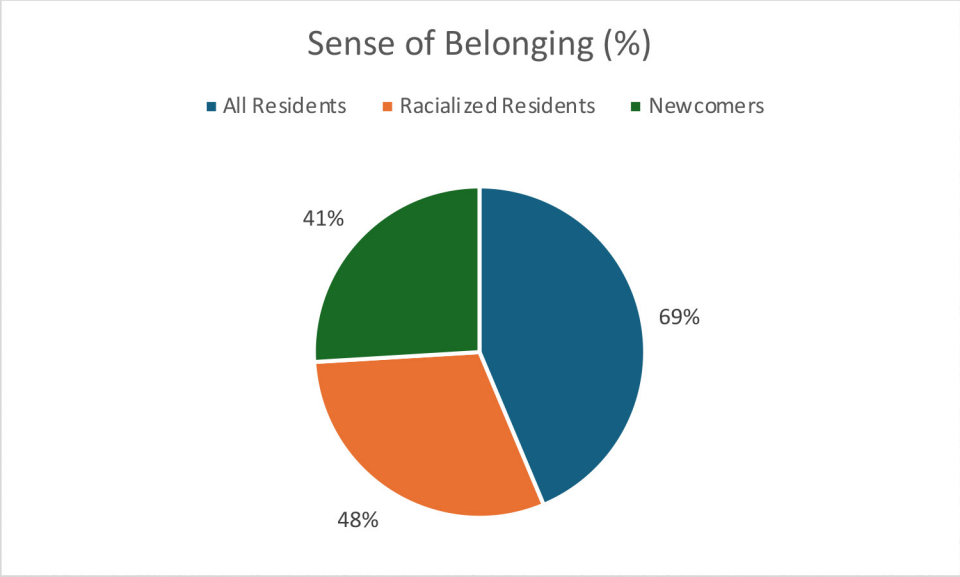
Formal volunteering rates declined from 43% in 2018 to 36% by 2023 (Volunteer Ottawa, 2024), as pandemic pressures, burnout, and economic precarity reduced capacity for unpaid work. However, informal helping behaviors increased. Over 84% of residents reported helping a neighbor or friend in the past year—providing childcare, meals, errands, or emotional support (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Trust in neighbors remains high (73%), but trust in institutions is waning. Fewer than 35% of Ottawa residents express confidence in city council, and only 31% trust federal institutions to represent their interests fairly (Canadian Election Study, 2023).

Yet, collective action is alive and well. Tenant unions, school parent councils, and youth-led initiatives like YouthVoice Ottawa have mobilized for safer schools, rent freezes, and public accountability. These movements are less likely to show up in traditional civic metrics but are essential indicators of democratic vitality.

Community feedback summary

Feedback from the organizations highlights efforts to foster belonging and safety through neighborhood equity walks and informal safety circles, particularly in areas with low reported sense of belonging among racialized and newcomer residents. These initiatives aim to build trust and counter systemic racism and discrimination. Key challenges include digital divides, lack of inter-agency coordination, and short-term funding that undermines sustainability. Consultations suggest increasing funding for place-based models and ensuring equitable representation in civic decisions to strengthen community trust.



This chart reveals disparities in community connection, especially for racialized residents and newcomers, signaling a need for inclusive policies.

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DOMAIN 3: EDUCATION

Education is a cornerstone of equity and mobility. It shapes future earnings, health, civic participation, and social belonging. In Ottawa, the education system boasts high overall attainment levels—but these achievements are unequally distributed. Access to early childhood education, post-secondary pathways, and adult learning opportunities remains deeply stratified by income, race, and geography.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these disparities. While some students thrived in virtual learning environments, others fell behind due to lack of devices, internet, or support at home. As the city moves beyond the crisis phase of the pandemic, it must confront the longer-term learning gaps it exposed—and ensure that education systems adapt to serve all learners, not just those already positioned for success.

High Achievement, Uneven Access

According to the 2021 Census, 94% of Ottawa residents aged 25 to 64 have at least a high school diploma, and 70% have post-secondary credentials—well above the national average. These figures, however, conceal geographic and socio-economic divides. In neighborhoods like Alta Vista and Rockcliffe Park, over 80% of adults hold a university degree; in Vanier, Heron Gate, and Bayshore, the figure drops below 50% (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Newcomers face particular challenges. Although 60% of immigrants arriving since 2016 have post-secondary degrees, many experience de-skilling due to lack of credential recognition, English/French language barriers, or discriminatory hiring practices. Their education remains underutilized, impacting both household income and social integration.

Youth from low-income households are also less likely to complete post-secondary education. Financial pressure, family responsibilities, and lack of guidance or mentorship often divert them from traditional academic pathways.

Early Learning and Childcare

Early childhood education lays the foundation for lifelong success. Yet, in Ottawa, access remains limited and expensive. As of 2023, only 28% of children under the age of five had access to regulated childcare spaces (City of Ottawa, 2024). Waitlists for subsidized care can span years, disproportionately impacting newcomer families, single parents, and low-wage earners.

The federal-provincial $10-a-day childcare agreement promises to expand access and reduce costs, but implementation has been slow. Licensed providers face staffing shortages, and capital grants for expansion are limited. Meanwhile, informal childcare arrangements—often unpaid— continue to fill the gap, particularly in racialized communities.

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DOMAIN 3: EDUCATION

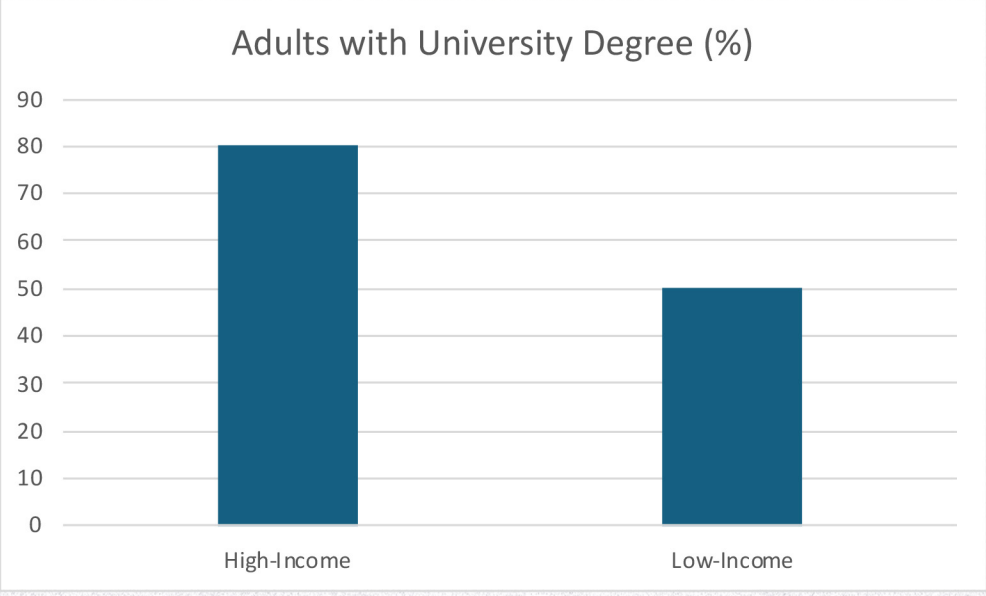
Post-Secondary: The Price of Progress

Ottawa's post-secondary institutions—Carleton University, the University of Ottawa, Algonquin College, and La Cité—are engines of innovation and learning. But the cost of attendance continues to climb. Between 2016 and 2023, undergraduate tuition rose by 17.1%, and student debt loads have increased accordingly (Statistics Canada, 2023). Many students now graduate with over $28,000 in debt, delaying major life milestones such as home ownership or starting a family.

The shift to online learning during the pandemic expanded access for some, but for others it meant isolation, disengagement, and reduced educational quality. Mental health challenges among post- secondary students have surged, with campus counseling services overwhelmed by demand. Meanwhile, access to trades, apprenticeships, and alternative learning pathways remains limited. These routes—often better suited to practical learners and those facing systemic barriers—are underfunded and culturally undervalued, despite strong labor market demand.

Community feedback summary

Education Organizations emphasize addressing barriers to early learning and post-secondary education for low-income, BIPOC, and newcomer communities through mobile cultural hubs, youth leadership programs, and digital literacy initiatives. These efforts tackle childcare waitlists and credential recognition issues. Challenges include digital divides, long waitlists, and exclusion from policy design. Consultations recommend streamlining funding for trauma-informed education supports and prioritizing programs led by those with lived experience to enhance access and equity.



This chart highlights educational inequities, showing a 30% gap in university attainment between high- and low-income areas.

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DOMAIN 4: ENVIRONMENT

A healthy environment is fundamental to individual and collective wellbeing. It provides clean air, safe water, fertile land, green spaces, and protection from climate risks. It also shapes physical and mental health, recreation, and cultural connection. In Ottawa, the environment has long been seen as a public asset, with rivers, forests, and trails woven into the city's identity. Yet climate change, urban sprawl, environmental degradation, and uneven access to green infrastructure are now challenging this legacy.
The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of local environments. For months, parks, riverbanks, and outdoor spaces became sanctuaries for physical and mental health. However, it also exposed gaps in environmental equity—while some neighborhoods enjoyed walkable, tree- lined streets and accessible greenspace, others were left behind, with limited shade, few amenities, and proximity to environmental hazards.

Climate Change and Its Local Effects

Ottawa is warming faster than the global average. Between 1976 and 2020, average annual temperatures in Ottawa increased by 1.6°C (City of Ottawa, 2022). Climate models project an increase of 3.2°C by 2050, bringing more extreme heat days, heavier rainfall, and freeze-thaw cycles.
The number of days above 30°C has already increased from an average of 11 in the 1990s to over 30 in recent years, disproportionately impacting seniors, children, and unhoused residents (Environment Canada, 2023). In 2023, prolonged wildfire smoke led to record-breaking air pollution, prompting school closures, mask advisories, and increased emergency room visits. Flooding remains a significant concern. The Ottawa River's 2017 and 2019 floods caused widespread displacement, property damage, and insurance losses. Rising sodium levels in drinking water—caused by excessive road salt—now exceed 20 mg/L in some areas, raising health concerns for people with hypertension and vulnerable populations (Ottawa Public Health, 2023).

Green Space and Environmental Equity

Ottawa has over 4,300 hectares of public parkland, yet access to green space is not equitably distributed. High-income neighborhoods like Westboro and Glebe enjoy abundant parks and tree canopy. In contrast, areas like Overbrook, Heron Gate, and Vanier—home to many low-income and racialized residents—have less access to shaded streets, safe parks, and recreational trails. Urban sprawl, driven by real estate development and infrastructure expansion, continues to threaten agricultural land and biodiversity. Between 2016 and 2021, Ottawa's urban footprint grew by over 3,000 hectares, with car dependency increasing and natural corridors disrupted (City of Ottawa, 2022).

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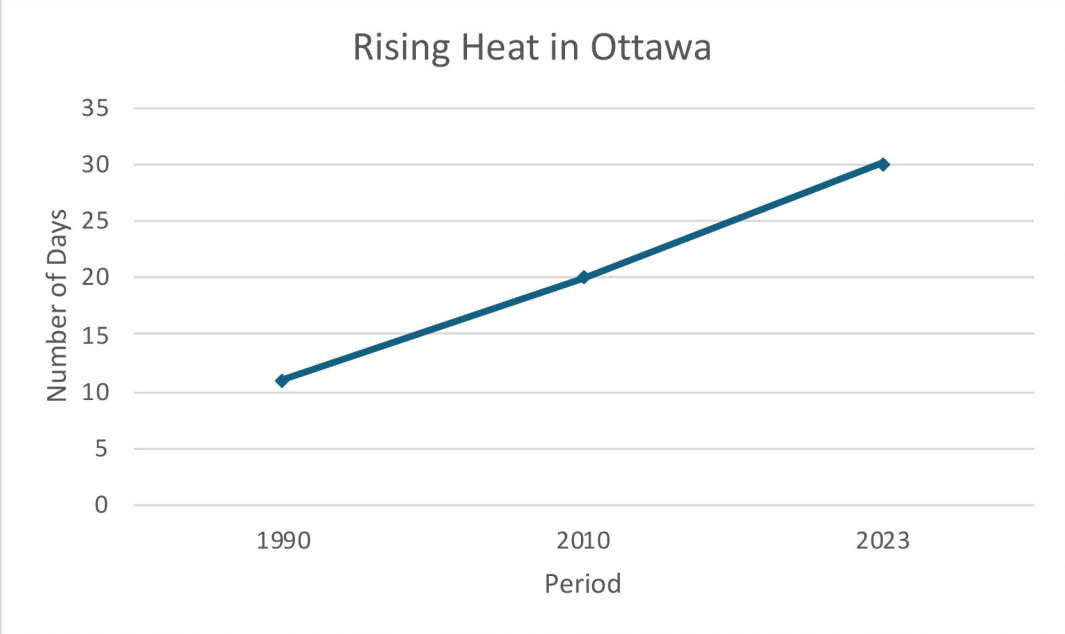
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DOMAIN 4: ENVIRONMENT

These environmental gaps are not just spatial—they are structural. Communities bearing the brunt of climate change are often the least resourced to adapt. This dynamic mirrors other forms of inequality and requires intersectional environmental policy.

Community feedback summary

Environment Community responses focus on mitigating disproportionate climate impacts on marginalized neighborhoods through intergenerational climate resilience programs and environmental education workshops. These initiatives aim to improve access to green spaces and promote environmental justice. Systemic barriers like short-term funding and lack of coordination limit impact. Consultations advocate embedding environmental justice in policy frameworks and expanding funding for community-led environmental initiatives to ensure equitable access to a healthy environment.



This chart shows the tripling of extreme heat days, underscoring the need for climate resilience strategies.

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DOMAIN 5: HEALTHY POPULATIONS

Health is a multidimensional measure of wellbeing, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social conditions. In Ottawa, while many residents benefit from a well-resourced healthcare system, significant gaps persist in access, outcomes, and equity. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing disparities and placed enormous strain on frontline health services, exposing systemic vulnerabilities and renewing the urgency for transformation.

Ottawa's health profile tells a story of paradox: life expectancy is among the highest in Canada, yet mental health distress is on the rise. Most residents report good or excellent health, but this masks profound differences based on income, race, gender, and housing stability. The pandemic, while initially a public health emergency, evolved into a social crisis—laying bare the deep connection between health and the social determinants of wellbeing.

Health Outcomes and Inequities

According to Ottawa Public Health (2023), life expectancy in the city remains high at 83.7 years. However, a closer look reveals a 5–7 year gap between low-income and high-income neighborhoods. Chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma are more prevalent among racialized and low-income populations, largely due to barriers to healthy food, housing, and preventive care.

Mental health indicators have declined steadily since 2016. In 2019, 70% of residents reported excellent or very good mental health; by 2023, that number dropped to 60% (OPH, 2023). Youth, women, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and newcomers report even lower rates. Emergency room visits for self-harm and anxiety have increased sharply, particularly among girls aged 12–17.

The opioid crisis continues to ravage communities. Overdose deaths in Ottawa reached 111 in 2022, up 65% from pre-pandemic levels. Harm reduction services—while expanding—remain underfunded, stigmatized, and geographically uneven.

Access to primary care is another pressing concern. Over 122,000 Ottawa residents do not have a family doctor (OPH, 2023). This gap, driven by physician shortages, retirements, and population growth, disproportionately impacts newcomers, seniors, and people experiencing homelessness.

The Social Determinants of Health

Health does not begin in the doctor's office—it begins in homes, schools, jobs, and communities. The pandemic illuminated this reality. People in precarious housing, low-wage jobs, or crowded apartments were at greater risk of infection and death. Racialized and Indigenous communities experienced higher rates of COVID-19, lower access to vaccines in the early rollout, and greater long-term impacts on mental health and employment (OPH, 2022).

Food insecurity, unsafe housing, lack of transit, social isolation, and discrimination are all predictors of poor health outcomes. These are not individual failings—they are policy outcomes.

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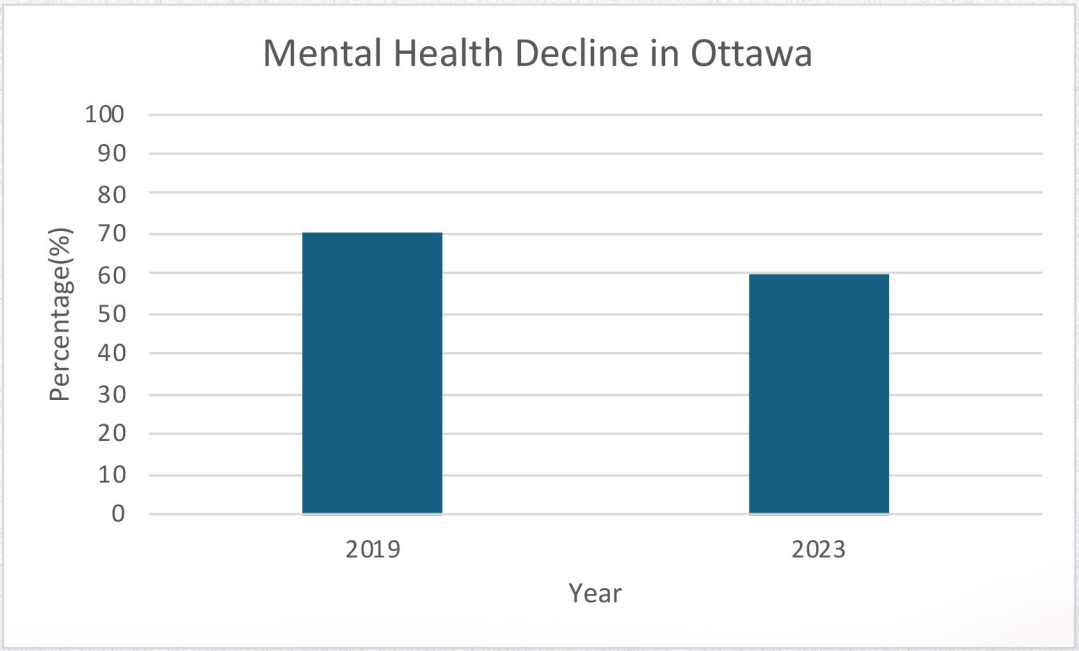
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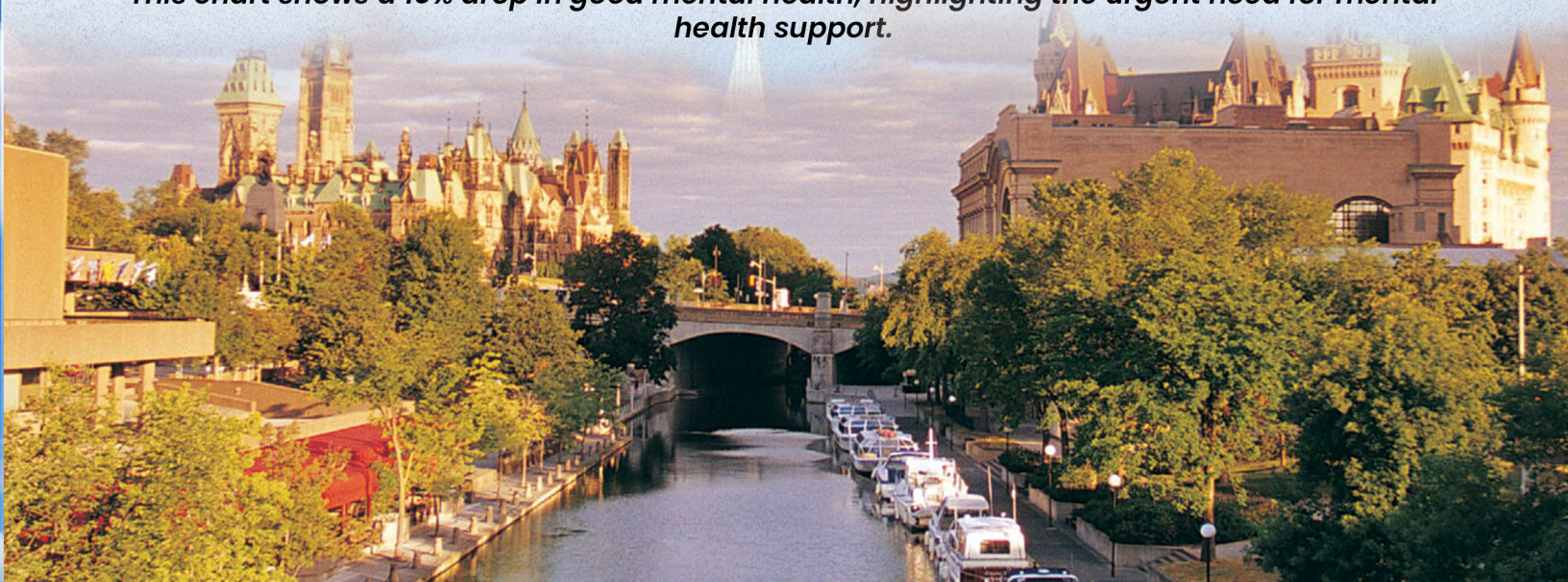
DOMAIN 5: HEALTHY POPULATIONS

Community feedback summary

Sentiments reflect a strong commitment to addressing rising mental health needs, particularly among youth and racialized communities, through pop-up mental wellness programs and cultural arts therapy. These efforts provide trauma-informed, community-based care to bridge gaps in health services. Challenges include systemic racism, underfunding, and digital divides. Consultations call for increased core funding for wrap-around health supports and policies that prioritize mental health justice and culturally relevant care.



This chart shows a 10% drop in good mental health, highlighting the urgent need for mental health support.



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DOMAIN 6: TIME USE

Time use is one of the most overlooked but essential indicators of wellbeing. How people spend their time reflects their access to rest, leisure, productivity, relationships, and personal development. It reveals how balanced or burdened their lives are, and whether society supports their right to a fulfilling, sustainable rhythm of life.
In Ottawa, as in much of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic radically altered time use. For some, remote work opened up new flexibility. For others—particularly frontline workers, caregivers, and low-income families—time became more constrained, unpredictable, and stressful. The divide in how time is experienced has grown sharper, deepening inequities between those with autonomy and those stretched thin by competing demands.

Work, Care, and Time Poverty

In 2016, the average Ottawa adult spent about 8.2 hours per day on paid work and 2.4 hours on unpaid work, including childcare, elder care, cooking, and cleaning (Statistics Canada, 2016 Time Use Survey). By 2021, those numbers shifted dramatically—many women reported a "double shift" of remote work and increased caregiving during lockdowns. Mothers of young children reported spending an additional 4 to 6 hours per day on unpaid care (Vanier Institute, 2021). This time poverty is not gender-neutral. Women, especially racialized and newcomer women, continue to bear the brunt of unpaid labor. This limits their participation in education, the workforce, and civic life. Among newcomer households in Ottawa, multi-generational caregiving is common, and often invisible in time use statistics.
Meanwhile, gig economy and shift workers—often working multiple jobs—report erratic schedules and reduced control over their time. For these workers, flexibility is not a benefit, but a burden. They cannot plan for rest, family time, or education.

Rest, Sleep, and Mental Load

Rest is a human right, yet many Ottawa residents are not getting enough. Only 36% of residents report sleeping 7–8 hours per night on most days—a sharp decline from 42% in 2016 (Ottawa Public Health, 2023). Poor sleep is linked to stress, housing insecurity, shift work, and caregiving strain.
For low-income residents and students, the inability to "switch off" is a growing concern. Many report using evenings and weekends to catch up on gig work, side hustles, or caregiving duties. The mental load—especially for parents, disabled individuals, and immigrants navigating systems—is a form of invisible labor rarely captured in official statistics.
Social time has also declined. The average Ottawa resident spends just 45 minutes per day engaging in social or leisure conversations—a figure that dropped during COVID and has not fully recovered (Statistics Canada, 2021). Social isolation, especially among seniors and people with disabilities, remains a silent epidemic.

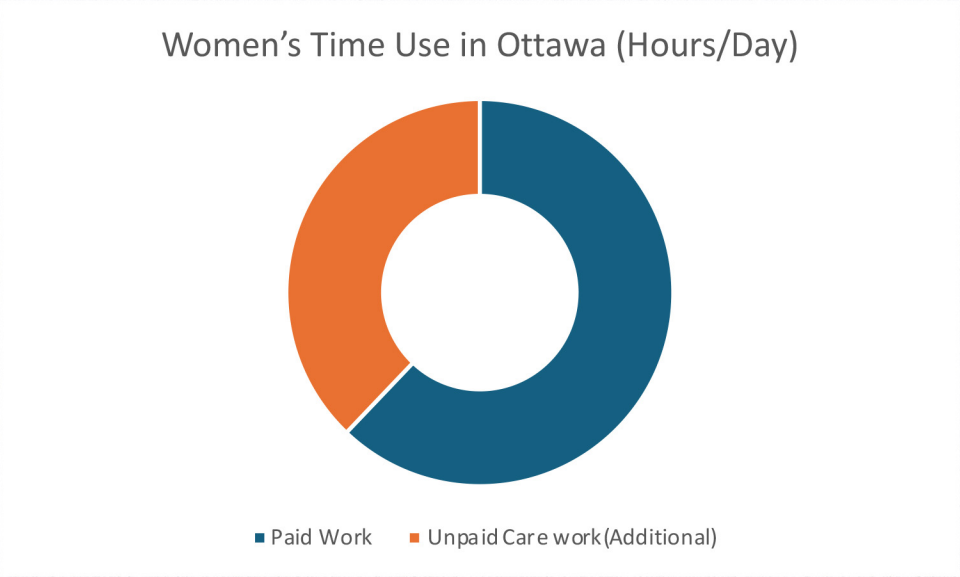
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DOMAIN 6: TIME USE

Community feedback summary

Organizations highlight initiatives like collective kitchens and peer-led support sessions to alleviate time poverty, especially for caregivers and single-parent households. These programs aim to free up time for rest and community engagement. Administrative burdens and short-term funding are significant challenges. Consultations recommend streamlining reporting requirements and investing in community-led solutions to support equitable time use and reduce caregiving burdens.



This chart shows the heavy burden of unpaid care work on women, especially racialized and newcomers, limiting their opportunities.

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DOMAIN 7: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Democratic engagement reflects whether people feel they have a voice in decision-making and trust that their governments act in their best interests. It encompasses not only voting and political participation, but also confidence in public institutions, access to civic information, and a sense of shared responsibility in shaping the future. In Ottawa, democratic engagement has been strained in recent years. While voter turnout and youth activism have shown some growth, public trust in institutions—especially among racialized, newcomer, and low-income communities—has eroded. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated civic life, delaying public consultations, shifting meetings online, and deepening the digital divide for residents with limited access to technology.

Voter Turnout and Representation

According to Elections Canada (2021), Ottawa's average federal election turnout was 72.8%— above the national average of 62.6%. However, turnout varies significantly by riding. Wealthier areas such as Ottawa Centre and Kanata–Carleton report turnout rates above 75%, while lower- income ridings like Ottawa–Vanier see rates closer to 58%.

At the municipal level, voter turnout for the 2022 City of Ottawa election was just 43.8%, reflecting a decline from previous years. Many residents report feeling that local politics do not address their daily realities, particularly in areas impacted by poverty, housing instability, or systemic racism. Representation also remains a challenge. In 2022, only three members of Ottawa City Council identified as racialized, despite nearly one-third of residents being people of color (City of Ottawa, 2022). The same underrepresentation exists at school boards and in provincial nomination races.

Civic Knowledge and Public Trust

Civic knowledge is essential to engagement. However, many Ottawa residents—especially youth, newcomers, and people with disabilities—report lacking clear, accessible information about how to participate in civic processes. Language barriers, complex websites, and bureaucratic jargon create distance between citizens and decision-makers. Public trust is fragile. Only 31% of Ottawa residents expressed confidence in federal institutions to represent their interests (Canadian Election Study, 2023), while just 29% trusted municipal government to deliver equitable outcomes. These numbers are even lower among Indigenous, Black, and disabled communities.

COVID-19 policies, while necessary, sometimes exacerbated this divide. Sudden closures, uneven enforcement, and inaccessible communications left many residents feeling unheard. Community consultations moved online, but digital participation was uneven—further excluding those without stable internet, childcare, or digital literacy.

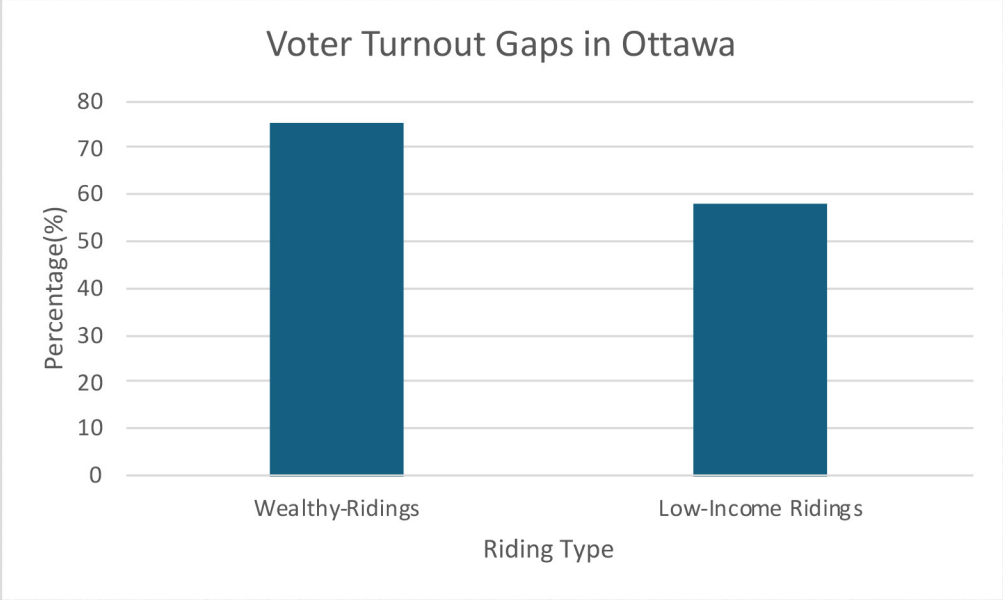
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DOMAIN 7: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Community feedback summary

Feedback underscores efforts to boost civic participation through youth leadership programs and community equity initiatives, targeting low voter turnout and eroded public trust in marginalized communities. These programs foster inclusive decision-making. Challenges include digital divides, underrepresentation, and systemic exclusion from policy processes. Consultations suggest ensuring equitable representation for marginalized groups in civic decisions and streamlining administrative processes to enhance engagement.



This chart highlights civic participation gaps, with lower turnout in low-income areas, calling for better engagement strategies.

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DOMAIN 8: LEISURE AND CULTURE

Leisure and culture are not luxuries. They are vital dimensions of community wellbeing, shaping identity, joy, belonging, and emotional health. Access to arts, culture, recreation, and heritage connects people to place, uplifts expression, and supports physical and mental health. Yet in Ottawa, systemic inequities in access to cultural spaces, affordability of recreation, and representation in the arts persist—barriers that the COVID-19 pandemic magnified.

The pandemic decimated Ottawa's arts and culture sector. Concerts were cancelled, museums closed, sports leagues paused, and public festivals shuttered. Cultural workers lost employment, children lost access to play and performance, and communities lost shared rituals of celebration and healing.

As the city rebuilds, leisure and culture must not be treated as secondary or expendable. They are central to recovery, especially for marginalized communities whose creative expression is essential to resilience and identity.

Access, Affordability, and Belonging

While Ottawa has a rich ecosystem of cultural institutions—national museums, galleries, music venues, and festivals—access is not equal. According to Ottawa Public Health (2023), residents in lower-income neighborhoods are 40% less likely to participate in organized recreation programs due to cost, transportation, or lack of culturally appropriate options.

User fees for city-run programs have risen steadily. A typical family of four can expect to pay over $400 per season for registered recreation. While subsidy programs exist, many are underutilized due to stigma, complexity, or language barriers.

Youth in Ottawa's east and south ends often report having "nowhere to go" after school, especially those living in high-rise housing or areas with limited green space and indoor recreation. For newcomer families, cultural norms, religious practices, and systemic racism can further reduce participation in mainstream programs.

In the arts sector, Black, Indigenous, and racialized artists continue to face barriers to funding, mentorship, and exhibition. Cultural programming often centers Euro-Canadian narratives, excluding the voices and visions of Ottawa's growing diverse population.

Cultural Workers and Creative Recovery

The creative sector employs thousands in Ottawa—from musicians and visual artists to event staff, curators, and heritage professionals. These workers were among the hardest hit by pandemic shutdowns and among the slowest to recover. Many left the field entirely due to income instability, burnout, and lack of institutional support.

Between 2019 and 2021, employment in arts, culture, and recreation dropped by over 20% in Ottawa (Statistics Canada, 2022). Despite government relief programs like the Canada

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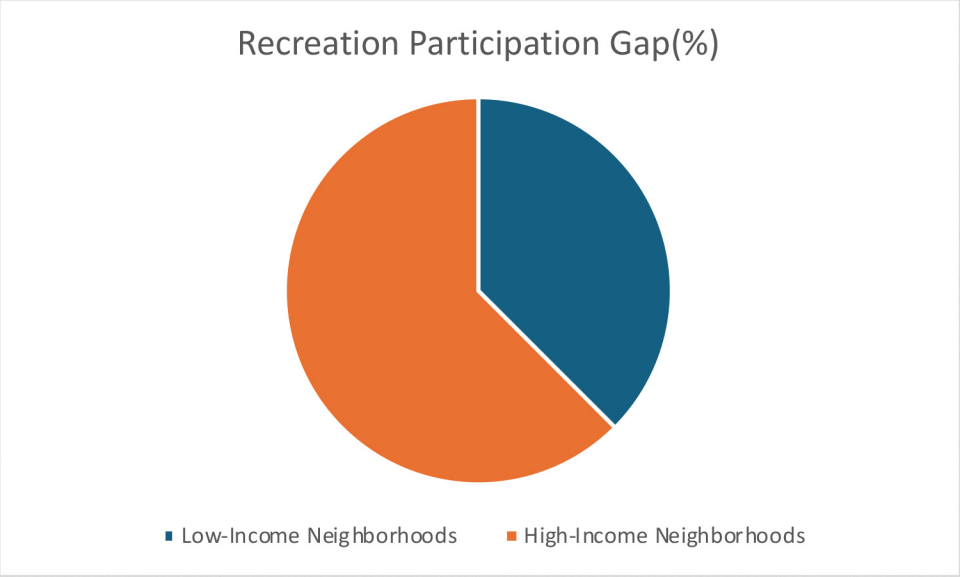
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DOMAIN 8: LEISURE AND CULTURE

Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), many freelancers and part-time artists were ineligible or received inadequate support.
Today, while public venues have reopened, audience attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels. The emotional and financial scars of the pandemic are still present.

Community feedback summary

Community sentiments focus on enhancing access to culturally relevant leisure through arts therapy and youth creative programs, particularly for BIPOC and low-income youth. These initiatives address barriers like high costs and lack of inclusive programming. Systemic racism and short-term funding limit scalability. Consultations recommend funding place-based, culturally inclusive programs and prioritizing community-led creative spaces to support belonging and emotional health.



This chart shows a 40% gap in recreation access, emphasizing the need for equitable leisure opportunities.

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CONCLUSION:

FROM STRAIN TO STRATEGY — A CALL FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

The data tells a story we can no longer afford to ignore. Ottawa, long considered one of Canada's most livable cities, is facing a tipping point. While public narratives often highlight our economic strength, cultural diversity, and quality of life, this report exposes another truth: beneath that image lies a growing divide — one where too many residents are struggling to meet basic needs, stay healthy, find housing, or feel safe and included in their own communities.

Between the 2016 and 2021 Census periods, and through the years shaped by COVID-19 and its aftermath, Ottawa has undergone a profound transformation. Some of these changes have brought opportunity and innovation — increased digital access, flexible work options, creative new programs. But many others have deepened hardship, especially for those already at the margins. The pandemic did not cause inequity; it revealed it, intensified it, and laid it bare in every domain of community wellbeing.

In housing, we face a crisis of both affordability and accessibility. Renters and low-income households are being priced out, while shelter systems overflow and waitlists for social housing stretch into years. In employment, job recovery has been uneven — with too many workers locked in cycles of precarity, gig work, and low wages that fail to match the rising cost of living. In health, cracks have widened across the system, particularly in mental health, where the demand for culturally relevant and community-based care far exceeds capacity.

Food insecurity has grown sharply. Community members are skipping meals, relying on food banks not for emergencies, but as part of daily survival. Many caregivers — especially women and newcomers — face "time poverty," juggling unpaid care work, multiple jobs, and their own mental load without rest. Public trust has eroded, and residents in racialized, low-income, or newcomer communities continue to feel excluded from civic decisions that shape their lives.

Yet, this report is not only a story of hardship — it is equally a record of hope, resilience, and resistance. Across Ottawa, people have stepped up where systems fell short. Mutual aid networks, youth organizers, tenant advocates, cultural workers, and community health champions have filled gaps, created new models of care, and reminded us what it means to be in relationship with one another. These community-led responses are not temporary fixes — they are blueprints for what equitable, people-first systems could look like, if adequately funded, supported, and scaled.

The social service sector has carried this work forward with limited resources and extraordinary commitment. But their resilience should not be mistaken for infinite capacity. The nonprofit, grassroots, and social enterprise actors highlighted in this report are at a breaking point — and unless bold, structural solutions are implemented, these contributions risk being overwhelmed or unsustainable.

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CONCLUSION:

FROM STRAIN TO STRATEGY — A CALL FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

The path forward must begin with a clear and shared understanding: we are not facing a collection of isolated problems, but an interconnected crisis that demands systemic action. Tackling housing means tackling income inequality. Promoting health means investing in food, housing, mental health, and culturally safe care. Building community vitality means protecting public space, advancing civic inclusion, and ensuring everyone — regardless of background — feels that they belong.The shifting realities of Ottawa demand a shift in how we lead, plan, and care — together.



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