

Listen to the kids

BY JOSH FULLAN

One of the curious features of our civic discourse is that the people with the longest futures get the shortest shrift. Young Torontonians — especially middle and high-school students — are rarely seen or heard from in debates about housing, public transit, community safety, or the future of public spaces like Ontario Place. And yet, when it comes to time spent with the outcomes, they have the most skin in the game. Children are a kind of muted majority partner in the investments we make, or don't make, as a city today. Rather than packing our public meetings with middle-aged and retired folks, a more enlightened approach would also involve those with many decades of city life ahead of them: vision as well as experience.

Other, structural, barriers threaten the youthfulness of our city. Toronto, in spite of its reputation for openness, is increasingly inimical to young families. At a population level, the city is growing but losing children. The most recent census was the fifth in a row that recorded an increase in Toronto's population while its youngest cohort declined, both as a total and a percentage of everyone. In round numbers, the city has nearly 330,000 more people than it did at the turn of the century, yet 50,000 fewer children under age 15. When young parents are pushed or pulled to somewhere else in the province, their current and future children go with them.

This demographic trend can be starkest in places where children actually prefer to live, play, and go to school. In Toronto's two dense and growing downtown wards, children represent less than 8% of the population. Yet many children actually prefer compact urban places compared to suburbs or smaller municipalities. In our work at Maximum City with thousands of children evaluating their neighbourhoods across the province, kids consistently rank dense, walkable places with lots of stuff — just like Toronto's core — highest.

So what do children want for the future of Toronto? What will keep them here as they start careers or families of their own? I asked 100 middle and high-school students from across the city what they want for Toronto



in the next 20 years. Their answers reveal that the future of the city is not some distant conflagration for them but something more urgent and changeable. I share here some of their unedited ideas, which I organized into three overlapping themes: Safety and Belonging; Mobility; and Environment and Social Justice. In summary, children want a fun and welcoming city, they want more density and growth, a housing solution for all, ease and safety of movement, and a greener, more just and environmentally sustainable city. And for anyone who thinks that kids don't have the language or insights to contribute meaningfully to our civic discourse and ultimately help us make a better urban future, I let the quotes speak for themselves.

Mobility

I want less car-friendly design and more train networks.
— Alex, grade 8, Toronto

I'd like Toronto to be a city with cheaper transportation and better TTC service, with only adults having to pay as kids don't always get allowances. Bigger libraries would also be nice.
— Janel, grade 8, Scarborough

I envision a Toronto where Scarborough transit is valued, efficient, and accessible for all community members to enjoy. I envision a Toronto where the TTC does Land Acknowledgements along popular routes like that of the GO Train arriving at Union Station. I envision a Toronto where the housing crisis is resolved by promoting the missing-middle housing strategy.
— Audrey, grade 12, Scarborough

A more connected city with more transit, more reliable transit, and less cars.
— Kai, grade 12, Toronto

I want a city that has a safe, clean, and efficient subway system. I hope Line 4 can be extended to Sheppard East, and there is a WiFi signal underground. I hope people can be kept safe, and no one falls or gets pushed onto the tracks.
— Jessica, grade 8, North York

In 20 years, I would like to see improved streets and more green space. Toronto has used its space poorly — its roads have worn-down asphalt, no bike lanes, and many of them are stroads, which are poor-functioning, multi-lane roads.
— Matthew, grade 12, Etobicoke

More and better subways. Larger parks and more density, but less high rises, like in Paris.
— Clara, grade 8, Toronto

I think the city getting taller is great and it sounds awesome. I want that for Toronto in 20 years because it will likely shorten commute times, have more available jobs, and be great for businesses.

— Kenzo, grade 8, Toronto

I want a community that is compact and has mixed land use.

— Justin, grade 8, Toronto

Instead of having to drive large distances, I would prefer it if Toronto built up instead of across. This means that people can stay within a specific area for all of their needs. I think this could decrease traffic and pollution. It might sound busy with people but less car noise.

— Grace, grade 8, North York

Safety & Belonging

Toronto should be a safe place that anyone could go through without worrying. It should also be a lively city with lots of colour.

— Adi, grade 8, Etobicoke

I want Toronto to be safer. As someone who takes public transport every day, I always feel unsafe in some way. This isn't only because of my experiences but what I hear and see on the news and the internet in regards to people having scary experiences while on public transport.

— Clara, grade 8, GTA

I want a city with thriving and interconnected people where homelessness is much less rampant.

— Charlotte, grade 8, North York

I want Toronto to have multiple cultures, many different places where people can feel safe. I want this city to feel like home to those who have just arrived, as to those who have lived here for a long time.

— Cathy, grade 8, North York



I want Toronto to be a city that provides, and includes, all of its citizens. I want it to provide further services for people in need, for example homeless people, and to reduce air pollution through more eco-friendly decisions and construction.

— Sarah, grade 8, GTA

In 20 years, I would like to see more affordable homes available. I would like to think about starting a family in 20 years and so I'd like to continue to see children's activities such as parks, splash pads, community centres, camps and pools available.

— Arabella, grade 6, GTA

I want a safe and welcome place for everyone with colourful and welcoming streets. And no more housing crisis.

— Allison, grade 8, GTA

I want more buildings and fun places, such as the Science Centre and cinemas, to visit, and better services such as transportation.

— Roger, grade 8, North York

Lots of tall buildings, well-developed with more affordable housing and better uses of public space.

— Elizabeth, grade 8, North York

Environment & Social Justice

I want Toronto to get rid of its un-eco-friendly ways and be more sustainable. This could include more greenery, taller apartments, more schools. Hopefully, there will be less traffic every day and more people will use bikes or sidewalks to go places.

— Kaylyn, grade 8, Toronto

I hope that more people will use public transport instead of cars, since cars are a large part of global warming. I also hope that there will be more greenery and parks in Toronto.

— Hannah, grade 8, GTA

I want less homeless people, less trash, and more equality.

— Grover, grade 7, Toronto

I want more dog parks.

— Jeremiah, grade 8, Scarborough

I want more greenery in Toronto, less and faster construction, less subway breakdowns, cleaner subways, and less expensive convenience stores.

— Beatrix, grade 8, North York

In the future I hope all of Toronto has access to reliable and safe public transport so we can reduce our city's carbon footprint by getting more cars off the road. I also hope as new high-rise buildings are put in place the city makes space for affordable housing so everyone can have a roof over their head.

— Claire, grade 11, Toronto

I want a beautiful and dense city, with low emissions, lots of shared spaces, and healthy people, good social networks and lots of mixed land use.

— Nikhil, grade 8, East York ↑

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