

Ice Storm 2013

A report on community connections and how older adults fared in East York

Introduction

The community of East York is a place where residents still feel a strong connection to its pre-amalgamation identity. Many of its neighbourhoods residents have lived there for decades. Other newer neighbourhoods have seen the influx of new immigrant populations, mainly living in the tall towers in Crescent Town, Thorncliffe Park, and the Pape Village area. The detached homes and higher income areas of Leaside and Governors Bridge/Bennington Heights round out the community, acting as a small-scale version of the wider dynamics across the city of Toronto.

After its merger with Community Care East York, WoodGreen Community Services committed to looking at the issues of older adults and housing in the former borough. An Advisory Committee, composed of leading academics from the University of Toronto, and key stakeholders such as the Toronto East General Hospital, Toronto Police Services (54 Division) was formed. A large, randomized research project was designed to look at issues of community connections and to find out how older adults in our communities are managing as they age, across all the neighbourhood forms in East York.

During this time period, the natural experiment of the ice storm occurred. These early results show how older adults were able to manage through the crisis and give indications as to how service-providers and government might prepare for the next emergency.

Results

78% of older adults randomly surveyed in East York were affected in some way by the ice storm of 2013, losing heat, power and/or water. Those living in single houses were most likely to be affected. 89.5% of them reported such a loss. However they were also more likely to report that they did well during the ice storm.

67% of those living in apartment buildings reported losing power, heat and/or water. Areas such as Thornecliff Park were even less likely to report being affected – where 57% of older adults reported some loss. Apartment dwellers in the area of Broadview, Pape, and Woodbine were most likely to report they fared poorly, with 52.5% reporting they did poorly, in counter balance to their neighbours in the bungalows and single houses around them, where 73.6% said they fared well, despite the challenges of the storm. Residents in this area were also most likely to report the longest outages of five or more days.

The Leaside/Bennington area reported the highest levels of outages, with 96% of older adults reporting loss of heat, power and/or water. However they were most likely to report an outage of one or two days.

Overall, most people reported an outage of three to four days.

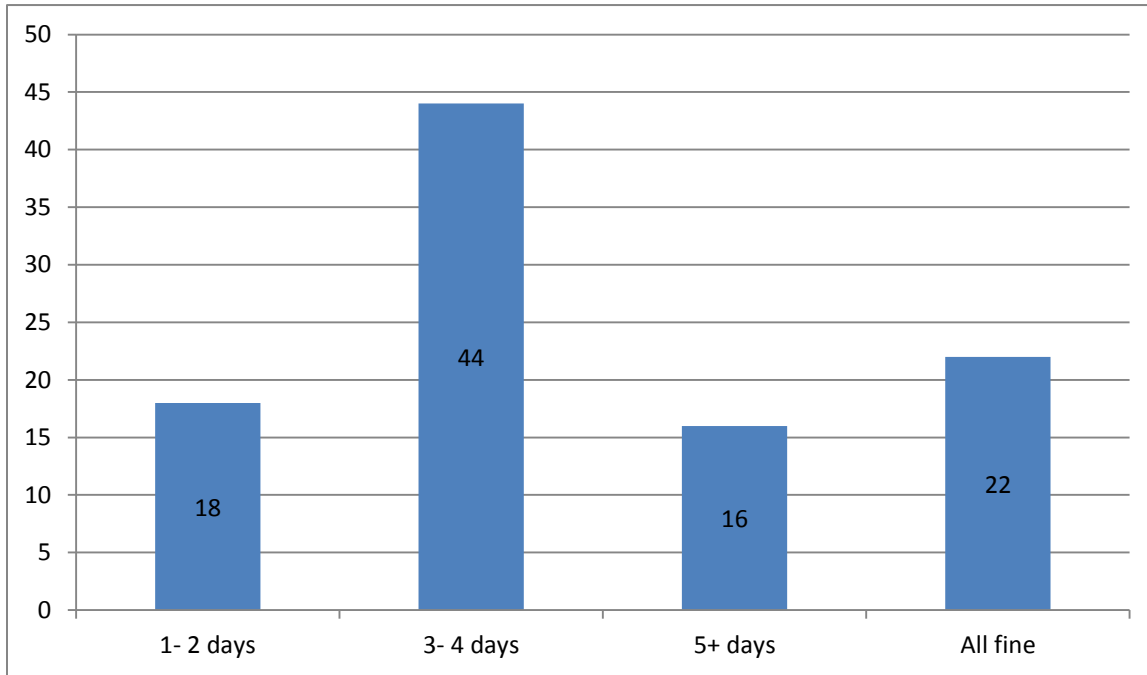


Figure 1: How long were you affected by the ice storm?

9% of survey respondents reported damage to their homes as a result of the ice storm.

Coping

Overall, 42% of 360 seniors in East York said they did fair to very poorly during the ice storm. 30% said they did well and 27% did very well. (23% reported they had no effect from loss of power/hear/water).

People with the highest incomes were most likely to have reported doing well. Sometimes moving to a hotel room or purchasing additional supplies. People with the lowest incomes were most likely to report managing poorly during the ice storm. They were also more likely to be in an apartment where neighbours were facing the same challenges and who were able to help in more limited ways.

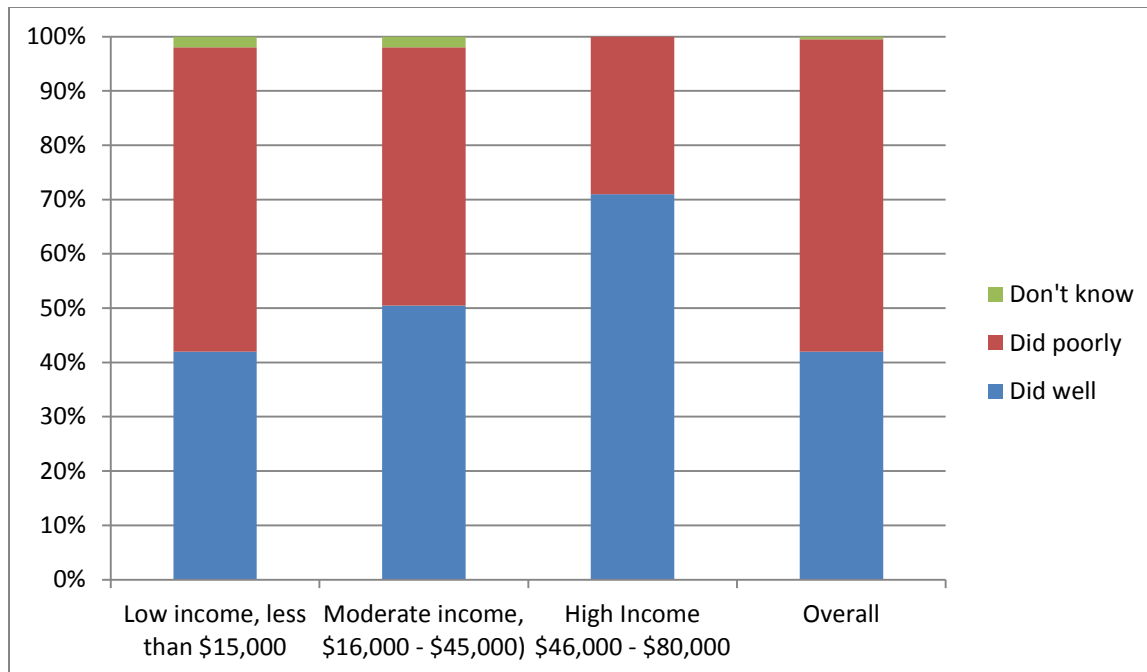


Figure 2: How well did you manage in the ice storm?

These questions are important as the City of Toronto considers how to develop a registry for vulnerable seniors and as building codes are pushed to include the capacity to support a generator.

Community connections and supports

One of the expected responses from a disaster is that people will help each other through it. In fact, research shows this is the sign of a strong community. More than half of older adults (54%) reported connecting to family, friends, and neighbours to offer help or receive it (46% reported they did not turn to others outside the household). The results from these respondents, who relied on community connections, divided in the following way:

- 40% reported asking for help. Of these, supplies, such as food, phone or batteries, was the most common support needed (64%). Another third (29%) looked for information, encouragement or safety check. 7% needed shelter, finding warmth, shower and/or a bed outside their own home.
- A similar proportion (39%) reported being offered help, unbidden. Offers of food, batteries and other material supports were the most common response from friends, family, and neighbours. 48% of those offered help were given this. Safety checks/encouragement/information was offered to 38% of respondents. 14% were offered shelter.
- Seniors were also able to offer supports. When asked what kind of support, 21% offered help to others, most frequently in the form of offering moral support (47%), material supports (32%), and shelter / heat/ warmth to others outside their household (23%).

- 28% of older adults vacated their home, moving to a new place, most frequently with family. 21% moved to friends or family, while only 2% moved to a hotel (72% stayed in place.).

Information

TV/Radio were the largest source of information (43.3%).

Friends/Family members were next as an information source (30.6%). 16.7% said they did not get any information. 6% relied on neighbours. Community agencies, police, and strangers were also sources of info.

Those who had lived in their homes longest (20+ years) were most likely to offer help or get help. Those who lived alone or with a spouse were also most likely to be offered help, unasked (41.3%).

Worry for the future

A majority of seniors were worried, if something like the ice storm were to happen again.

- 26.4% of older adults are very worried if this were to happen again.
- 18% worried.
- 19.4% somewhat worried.
- 25.3% only a bit
- 10.6% not at all.

Conclusion

The Ice Storm demonstrated:

- The goodwill that people felt to the more vulnerable around them.
- A large portion were not connected to others outside their household for additional help.
- Isolated and vulnerable adults were more likely to be low income, in apartment buildings which also lost water, or were isolated from the community.

These findings will be further explored in the full report.

Methodology: *The randomized survey of 360 older adults living in East York neighbourhoods was administered from February – August 2014. Full results will be published in 2015.*

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