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Neighbourhood characteristics of lower-income families in census metropolitan areas



by Mark Brown, Jonathan Fonberg and Grant Schellenberg

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The characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which people reside are relevant to various public policy domains, such as urban planning, population health, housing and community development. Statistics Canada continues to develop and refine neighbourhood-level information to answer questions about where Canadians live and how this affects their lives.

In this article, the neighbourhood characteristics of individuals in the bottom 20% of the family income distribution (i.e., quintile 1) are compared with the population in the other 80% of the income distribution (i.e., quintile 2 to 5). This focus is taken because of the primary role that family income plays in shaping housing options and decisions, and the prospects of those in the bottom 20% are most constrained in this respect. The results are based on a sample of almost 50,000 survey respondents who were spread out across 6,481 neighbourhoods in 29 census metropolitan areas in Canada. In 2016, the median population of these neighbourhoods was about 550 people.

Chart 1a shows the relative over- or underrepresentation of individuals in lower-income families across four neighbourhood characteristics. These characteristics are shown as quartiles—neighbourhoods ranked from lowest to highest population density, percentage of the population in multi-unit dwellings (e.g., row houses, apartments), family income and density of green space (measured using satellite imaging). A vertical bar with a value that is less than one indicates an underrepresentation (a lower proportion of their population) in such neighbourhoods, and a vertical bar with a value that is greater than one indicates an overrepresentation (a higher proportion of their population) in such neighbourhoods, relative to the comparison group.

Across population densities, individuals in lower-income families are underrepresented in neighbourhoods with low population densities (quartiles 1 and 2) and overrepresented in neighbourhoods with the highest densities (quartile 4). The same pattern is observed in the overrepresentation of individuals in lower-income families in neighbourhoods where the highest shares of the population reside in multi-unit dwellings. Individuals in lower-income families are highly overrepresented in low-income neighbourhoods (again, quartile 1) and somewhat overrepresented in neighbourhoods with the least amount of green space.

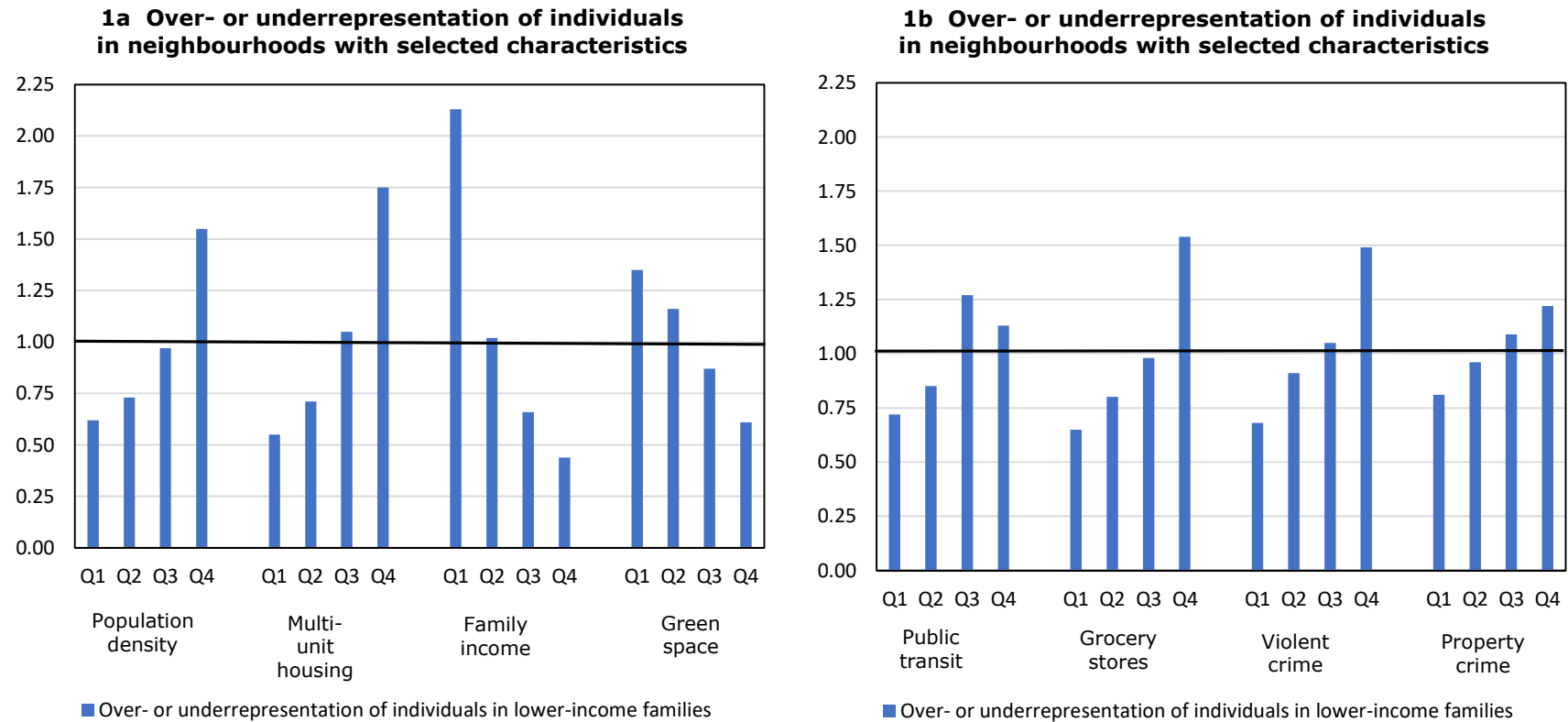
Chart 1b adds additional information to the emerging profile. Individuals in lower-income families are slightly overrepresented in neighbourhoods with the highest accessibility to public transit and in neighbourhoods with the highest prevalence of grocery stores. This is consistent with the concentration of individuals in lower-income families in neighbourhoods with a higher population density that are better able to support the provision of public and commercial services. But, of course, a downside of high density is less green space. Lastly, individuals in lower-income families are more likely to reside in neighbourhoods with higher rates of violent crime and property crime.

All told, these data provide a reasonably detailed picture of the characteristics of neighbourhoods that influence the day-to-day lives of their populations (e.g., their density, access to services and amenities, and potential exposure to crime). A fuller stocktaking across a broader set of groups (i.e., visible minorities, immigrants, single parents, people with mood or anxiety disorders) broken down by gender can be found in a [longer paper](#) developed with the support and funding of Women and Gender Equality Canada.

Acknowledgement

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Chart 1
Individuals in lower-income families: Overrepresentation and underrepresentation in neighbourhoods with selected characteristics



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.