

Waterloo Region Quality of Life Index: 2000 Update

June 21, 2000

**Dan Vandebelt, Researcher
Gloria DeSantis, Project & Research Supervisor
Trudy Beaulne, Project Supervisor**

Published by:



Social Planning Council
of Cambridge & North Dumfries

Ongoing funding from: United Way of Cambridge &
& North Dumfries, City of Cambridge, & Township of
North Dumfries



Social Planning Council
of Kitchener-Waterloo

Ongoing funding from United Way of Kitchener-
Waterloo and Area, City of Kitchener, Region of
Waterloo, City of Waterloo

Data collected for this project will be used for a Regional Trends Project
supported with funds from the Regional Municipality of Waterloo.

**© THE SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL
OF CAMBRIDGE & NORTH DUMFRIES**

ISBN 0-9687497-0-4

**© THE SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL
OF KITCHENER-WATERLOO**

ISBN 1-895577-30-6

**Parts of this report may be reproduced on the condition
that proper reference is made to
the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries
and the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo.**

**For more information, or to purchase a
copy of this report (\$5) please contact:**

or

Gloria DeSantis, Executive Director
Social Planning Council
of Cambridge & North Dumfries
24 Queen's Square, Cambridge,
Ontario N1S 1H6
Phone: 519-623-1713
Fax: 519-621-6220
E-mail: spccam@sentex.net

Trudy Beaulne, Executive Director
Social Planning Council
of Kitchener-Waterloo
68 Queen Street N.,
Kitchener, Ontario N2H 2H2
Phone: 519-579-3800
Fax: 519-578-9185
E-mail: spckw@waterlooregion.org



Table of Contents

1.0	Introduction and Definition of Quality of Life	1
2.0	Indicators.....	3
2.1	Social Indicators	3
2.1.1	Child Welfare Admissions to Care.....	3
2.1.2	Social Assistance Beneficiaries.....	4
2.1.3	Public Housing Waiting Lists	4
2.2	Economic Indicators	5
2.2.1	Unemployment.....	5
2.2.2	Employment.....	6
2.2.3	Bankruptcies	6
2.3	Environmental Indicators.....	7
2.3.1	Hours Moderate/Poor Air Quality	7
2.3.2	Toxic Spills.....	8
2.3.3	Tonnes Diverted to Blue Boxes	8
2.4	Health Indicators.....	9
2.4.1	Low Birth Weight Babies	9
2.4.2	Long Term Care Facility Waiting Lists.....	10
2.4.3	New Cancer Cases.....	10
3.0	Summary	11
3.1	Summary of the Twelve Indicators	11
3.2	Summary of the Four Sectors.....	12
3.3	Context and Future Work	12
	References	14
	Appendices	15
	Appendix A - Indicator Data Chart	15
	Appendix B - Indicator Denominator Data Chart	15
	Appendix C –Proceedings from the January 1999 Public Meetings.....	16



Acknowledgements

This report is connected to two larger projects. One is a province wide ongoing quality of life trends project being done jointly by the Social Planning Network of Ontario and the Ontario Social Development Council. The second project is a Waterloo Region trends project being undertaken by the two local social planning councils with funding support from the Regional Municipality.

Even a small project such as this enlists the help of numerous people and organizations across the community. We have received qualitative and quantitative data from the following organizations:

Blanche Walsh, South Waterloo Housing Authority

Frank Dobroff, Ministry of Environment & Energy

Inta Bregzis & Millie Rider, Community Care Access Centre of Waterloo Region

Fatima DaSilva, Ministry of Community & Social Services

Lynn Randall, Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Social Services Department

Malcolm Shookner & Jonathan Pratt, Social Planning Network of Ontario

Myra South & Lynda Fitzgerald, North Waterloo Housing Authority

Ron Martens, Family & Children's Services of the Waterloo Region

Steve Robb & Shahin Virani, Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Waste Administration Centre

Terry Goodenough, Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Community Health Department

Veronica Chesney, Human Resources Development Canada

We are very grateful to the above mentioned people for their help, insight, and support.



1.0 Introduction and Definition of Quality of Life¹

To a great extent, quality of life is subjective and its perception can vary from person to person. However, a community's social, cultural, political, economic, and physical resources all contribute to that perception. With a population nearing half a million residents, people in Waterloo Region can benefit from feedback on its progress in a number of areas that influence what life is like for people who live and work here. This report is an update to the 1998 *Waterloo Region Quality of Life Index*, using local numbers to explore trends in a set of selected areas since 1990.

How are we doing in Waterloo Region? As we found for this 2000 update, the trends reported in 1998 more or less continued. This is good news, but, we must exercise a degree of caution in assuming all is well. Other information, not tapped by the selected indicators, tell us a different story.

Observations, key informant accounts and a range of other community activity provide context for the objective measures of quality of life. Whether it is in the areas of health, social, economic or physical environment, some people are not benefiting from positive changes we see happening around us. As we examine the data used to measure the various aspects of quality of life, it is imperative that we ask who is benefiting and who is not benefiting from the changes we see reflected in these figures and trend lines. This commentary will be presented in this report as well.

Before going further, a definition is essential. The *Quality of Life in Ontario Project (1998)* defines quality of life (QLI) as:

“The product of the interplay among social, health, economic, and environmental conditions which affect human and social development” (Shookner, Spring 1998; p. 3).

Quality of Life Indexes are but one tool that may be able to shed some light on how we might attempt to measure our progress toward a healthier community. It can also be used to measure how government policies are impacting the well-being of our community as well as how informed citizens can make healthier lifestyle choices.

For the Waterloo Region Quality of Life Index we have used the methodology developed by the Social Planning Network of Ontario for the ongoing Quality of Life in Ontario Project. Both the Provincial and this Waterloo Region projects examine three indicators in each of four sectors.

Social:	Child Welfare Admissions to Care Social Assistance Beneficiaries Public Housing Waiting Lists
Economic:	Unemployed in Labour Force Employed in Population 15+ Years Bankruptcies
Environmental:	Hours of Moderate/Poor Air Quality Toxic Spills Tonnes Diverted to Blue Boxes
Health:	Low Birth Weight Babies Long Term Care Facility Waiting List New Cancer Cases

These indicators are not intended to be exhaustive and definitive measurements of the well-being of our community. These particular indicators have been chosen to give us a snapshot of where we are at in each of

¹ Quality of Life is but one of many terms referred to in the literature. Other labels include social well-being, community well-being, sustainable development, etc.



these four main sectors relevant to the quality of life. The collected data, over time, can show us emerging trends, progress, and concerns. We have included commentary on what the trends in each indicator mean as there is often much context that is needed to better understand the complexity of each indicator.

We have taken the data for each indicator and created a rate by dividing by an appropriate denominator (for example, the social assistance beneficiaries are divided by the total population of Waterloo Region, or the hours of moderate/poor air quality is divided by the total number of air quality testing hours). Because we have 12 indicators we made the base year (1990) value for each indicator to be 8.3 (one-twelfth of 100). We then took the percentage changes in the rates for each year and multiplied those by the base year indicator value of 8.3 to arrive at the individual indicator values for each year. In calculating sector composite QLI values, if data was not available for the current year the most recent value was used for that indicator. For a more detailed description of the methodology used in this report please see the original Waterloo Region Quality of Life Index (1998).

This report includes a short overview of each of the twelve Quality of Life indicators, a summary of the four sectors (Social, Economic, Environmental, Health), and a summary discussion about Quality of Life in Waterloo Region at present. This is intended to be an update to the original discussion paper (*1998 Waterloo Region Quality of Life Index*) published two years ago. For more detail about Quality of Life indexes or about the commentary on, and limitations of the individual indicators, please see the original 1998 discussion paper.

This update report is intended to continue the public discussion about quality of life in Waterloo Region. There are many local efforts that can impact these indicators and improve the quality of life for all members of our community. Many of these efforts are already being made, and several more could be explored.

With this understanding in mind, the following goals were established for the Waterloo Region QLI Project:

- To define and measure the quality of life in Waterloo Region from 1990 to 1999.
- To explain some of the factors which affect quality of life and how these have changed over time.
- To stimulate awareness and discussion among community people, organizations and government decision-makers about the evolution of quality of life in our Region.
- To help those in leadership positions to make more informed decisions about local and regional policies affecting our social, health, economic, and environmental well-being.
- To support ongoing dialogue toward establishing a consensus on how best to define and manage desired change within our Region.
- To participate in the integration of a variety of efforts which exist at the government and non-government levels – as well as within each of these – that seek to enhance the quality of life in Waterloo Region.

This report is intended for a range of audiences, from policy makers, to service providers, to residents in our community. The two Social Planning Councils within Waterloo Region are committed to working with the community to further define and help resolve factors that inhibit our rise to a higher quality of life. Government and non-government organizations alike can play roles in responding to community trends. As well, the two Councils will serve as a resource to organizations and groups that wish to take this information and organize community action. This Quality of Life Index is offered as one building block in the work toward the creation of a healthier society.

3.0 Summary

These 12 indicators suggest that there are areas of progress and areas of dire need. Some people are participating in, what many note is, a very healthy economy and community.

However, there are signs of concern for other people in areas such as children in care, social assistance restrictions, affordable housing, quality and equity of work, bankruptcies, air quality, consumption and waste, and long term care facilities.

Something as multidimensional as the quality of life across a community is difficult to measure. For this reason, it is critical that we examine the commentary on each of these indicators (both in this update and the original 1998 report), continue public discussion about the issues raised, and all take responsibility for ensuring that everyone can benefit from the progress we see in Waterloo Region.

3.1 Summary of the Twelve Indicators

Since the 1998 Waterloo Region Quality of Life report, there have been some indicators that have shown progress and others in which setbacks are evident.

Social

1. The 1998 report noted a gradual increase in child welfare admission rates into 1996 with a drop in 1997. This decrease continued in 1998 with a small rebound in 1999.
2. Previously, there was reported to be an increase in the rate of social assistance beneficiaries into 1995 then a decrease into 1997. The rate of beneficiaries has continued to decrease steadily into 1999.
3. There had previously been an evident decrease in public housing waiting list. No new monthly average data was available for this report.

Economic

4. Although in the last report a clear pattern in unemployment rates was not evident, it has become apparent that except for an increase in 1994 to 1996, unemployment has generally been dropping since 1991.
5. The employment rate had been decreasing until 1997, after which the rate of people working in the labour force increased.
6. The increase in bankruptcies that was evident up to 1997 peaked and began to decrease.

Environmental

7. There continues to be no clear pattern in air quality rates.
8. There had previously been a decrease in toxic spill rates. While the rate of toxic spills increased slightly in 1998 it leveled off again in 1999.
9. There continues to be an increase in the amount of recycled waste diverted through Blue Box program although an increase in landfilled waste since 1996 has pushed the recycling rate down slightly in recent years.

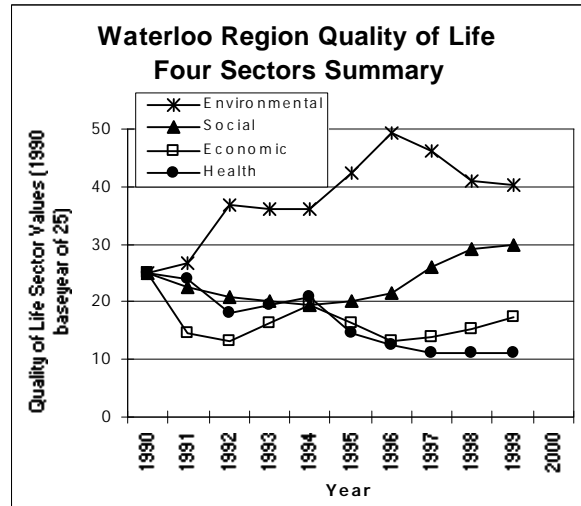
Health

10. Previously, there had not been a clear trend in the rates of low birth-weight babies. It appears now that the rate of low birth-weight babies peaked in 1993 and decreased to 1996.
11. The long term care facility waiting list rates have increased dramatically since 1991. In fact 1999 fiscal year end data suggests that waiting lists have continue to increase.
12. After rising sharply between 1990 and 1991 the rate of new cancer cases did not show a discernable trend.

3.2 Summary of the Four Sectors

Context is important when we interpret the data presented in this report. The following general observations are offered for the four sectors from which the twelve indicators were measured over the last 10 years:

The **social sector** experienced a negative trend into the mid 1990s, and then increased positively into the latter part of the 1990s. Questions remain about whether the dramatic drop in social assistance beneficiaries after 1996 is due completely to recipients not needing assistance or if it also reflects the exclusion of needy recipients because of tighter restrictions. It also appears that the steady increase in the number of people looking for affordable housing is not reflected in the public housing data as this does not include other affordable housing providers.



The **economic sector** dropped during the recession of the early 1990s, climbing temporarily into the mid 1990s, and climbed again in the latter part of the decade.

The **environmental sector**, apparently the most improved of the four sectors in Waterloo Region, increased dramatically and peaked in the middle years of the decade. The recent decrease in this sector is likely largely influenced by the decrease in waste exporting and other economic factors.

Finally, the **health sector** has generally shown a negative trend since 1990, driven primarily by the dramatic increase in long term care waiting lists. Promised long term care beds to be funded by the Province have not materialized, and is especially concerning given the imminent ballooning of the number of seniors as the population ages. A decrease in the rate of low birth-weight babies from the peak in 1993 is an encouraging promise of present and future health.

Generally, from the indicators measured here, Waterloo Region is doing well. There is economic prosperity, some evidence of individual environmental responsibility and positive changes evident in health and social measures. On the downside, air quality is problematic, more waste is in landfills relative to that being recycled and there are increasing long term care waiting lists. In addition, where there appear to be gains, especially in the social sector, this could be more a result of policy and program delivery changes that actually mask a growing serious community issue of poverty and related issues.

3.3 Context and Future Work

This Quality of Life update is intended to inform and inspire discussion and action. Although the indicators in this Quality of Life project are not exhaustive measures of quality of life these do create a broad stroke picture of what is emerging and impacting people who live and work in Waterloo Region. It is these issues – beneficial and destructive – that we need to continue to discuss and act on. We need to know better who is benefiting and who is hurting. We need to know which policies, programs and/or pressures we want to improve to enhance the quality of life for all citizens of Waterloo Region. We need to build the collective will and energy to build a better community.

After our 1998 Quality of Life report was released we had two public meetings. In general, we heard that the 12 indicators offer a simple overview of quality of life, but more work needs to be done. Both qualitative and quantitative information is important, as was greater depth of locally relevant indicators and knowing what



levels we hope to attain in our quality of life efforts. The discussion offered us some explanations about both conceptual issues and other indicators to consider for future work. [Refer to Appendix C for more details.]

In light of these discussions to date, the Social Planning Councils in Waterloo Region (both Cambridge and Kitchener-Waterloo Planning Councils) have been able to develop a Regional Community Trends project, which will greatly expand the breadth of local indicators of community well-being. Waterloo Region Community Trends will examine data from Statistics Canada and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, to name just two, as well as local agency data detailing program utilization and client needs. By increasing the amount of commentary about a greater breadth of community trends it is hoped that this project will offer a more concrete foundation for action.

And so, this document closes with a challenge as to how can we integrate readily available data with community residents' ideas on what really constitutes quality of life.

