

*With rising poverty and a dearth of social services, southeast Scarborough is spiralling into decline. Watch for it to rank high in a report next month identifying Toronto's neediest neighbourhoods. **JEFF GRAY** reports.*

Even Wal-Mart's leaving...



There is still a food court inside the brown slab that is Morningside Mall. But you can't buy food there. The counters where teens once served French fries have long been closed with metal shutters. On a weekday afternoon, only a handful of senior citizens occupy a few of its pastel plastic tables.

Onside, the haunting, faded, blue-and-red façade of what was once a Wal-Mart – which decamped last year, along with fellow anchor-tenant Dominion – oversees a mostly empty parking lot.

The mall, now slated for demolition and to be replaced with big box stores, is for the moment home to a motley collection of mostly no-name retail outlets, whose numbers continue to dwindle. Several store windows are covered with brown paper. On one, a small sign tells customers that the Stretch-a-Buck is now closed for good.

For local community organizer Lori Metcalfe, the state of the mall at Morningside Avenue and Lawrence Avenue East is a warning sign of southeast Scarborough's decline. And, she says, its pending closure means things are about to get even worse for the area's neediest residents – seniors, poor single moms, the mentally ill, most of whom can't drive and live in high-rises nearby. "The big boxes do not really meet the needs of the community," she says. "How can you walk around, say hello to your neighbour?"

This corner of the former suburb is a vast jumble of contrasts, with its used car lots, motels turned into refugee hostels, \$1-million lakefront homes and new condo developments. But research by the United Way paints a clear picture of southeast Scarborough as a pocket of the city in dire need of help. The organization is expected to single out a handful of its neighbourhoods next month – West Hill, where Morningside Mall is located, and parts of Scarborough Village will likely be among them – as the targets of new community-building efforts aimed at helping Toronto's neediest areas.

Data collected by the United Way reveals that a growing concentration of people living in poverty and increasing numbers of new immigrants have left southeast Scarborough overburdened, lacking many of the services – community health clinics, job counselling, language help – that vulnerable populations need.

For instance, in Scarborough Village – an area centred around Markham Road and Kingston Road, stretching from the lake to Eglinton Avenue East and from Bellamy

Road in the west to Scarborough Golf Club Road in the east – 32.4 per cent of tenants spend more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.

That makes it comparable to Regent Park, which has a corresponding figure of 32.1 per cent. In Scarborough Village, 18 per cent of the population are recent immigrants, compared to Regent Park's 16 per cent.

But services have not kept pace, community workers say. For example, Bruce MacDougall, executive director of West Hill Community Services, says his Kingston Road facility is the only community health centre where recent immigrants without health insurance can see doctors in all of Scarborough. Downtown, he says, there are at least 11 such places.

Services for the disadvantaged have traditionally been concentrated in the centre of Toronto, leaving Scarborough and other inner-city suburbs less able to cope, says Barney Savage, senior policy advisor with the United Way.

From 1981 to 2001, according to the United Way's *Poverty by Postal Code* report, Scarborough as a whole saw a 136.6 per cent increase in the number of poor families, along with a spike in the neighbourhoods deemed predominantly poor.

The former city of Toronto saw a 21-per-cent increase in poor families during that time.

At Lawrence Avenue East and Galloway Road, two brown brick towers hold more than 300 subsidized housing units. On the first floor, West Hill Community Services, a local agency, operates a drop-in centre for parents and children, a youth drop-in centre, a clothing bank and a small food bank, where, community workers say, demand is up 40 per cent from last fall.

Behind the towers one afternoon this week, Renate Cekavicius, 49, rummages for treasures to salvage from the buildings' dumpsters, which overflow with broken furniture.

Ms. Cekavicius, who is on social assistance and has a 10-year-old daughter with a learning disability, lives at a similar complex at Lawrence and Markham Road.

Despite phoning ahead and learning the food bank was closed for the day, she walked for half an hour on the off-chance someone would be there to help her.

"I get really low on money by the end of the month," she says, adding cheerfully that she doesn't mind the walk, since she can't afford to take the TTC anyway. But the other nearest food bank, she says, is much farther, and wasn't accepting new clients yesterday.

Scarborough's spread-out urban form can be a real problem, says Mr. MacDougall, of West Hill Community Services, which gets money from governments and other donors, including the United Way.

"For a mother with two kids, it's a two-bus-ride hitch over to here, with buses that are not very frequent. Just the transportation alone is daunting," Mr. MacDougall says, adding that new government funding will allow West Hill to soon open two new satellite clinics.

And unlike in Regent Park, where many residents identified intensely with their community and were very dedicated to improving it, the people he deals with in Scarborough are more scattered and harder to mobilize, he adds.

Kathleen Scott, who runs West Hill's food bank and other facilities at the public housing at Lawrence Avenue East and Galloway Road, where she herself used to live, says southeast Scarborough doesn't need more food banks. It needs more jobs, and services to help people get jobs – retraining, language classes and résumé and life-skills courses.

Ms. Scott says some immigrants – many in recent years from Sri Lanka – cram two families into one- or two-bedroom apartments, because unsubsidized rents can run to \$1,100 a month, creating a problem of “hidden homelessness.”

“A lot of people come to Toronto because they think it's going to be better. But that's not always the case,” she says as she takes a young couple to her clothing bank.

Back at Morningside Mall, the only part that is actually busy is not a store at all: It's a community centre called East Scarborough Storefront. New Immigrants get help finding housing. A group of black teenagers type away on a bank of computers. Seminars and discussion groups help new parents, the mentally ill and the unemployed. Troubled youth are a major focus, as increasing crime here worries many.

But Ron Rock, who runs the centre, warns that most of the Storefront's federal funding is being cancelled. And if new sources for much of its \$300,000 budget aren't found, it will have to close in six months – never mind finding a new home when the mall is gone.

“You have to give kids an alternative,” Mr. Rock says. “Were [Storefront] to be closed, I think we will see an increase in violence.”