

# The Quality of Life in Ontario Spring 1998

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report, and the background papers that support it, are the results of a collaborative effort by a group of people who are members of the Quality of Life Index Project Working Group:

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Malcolm Shookner	Ontario Social Development Council
Kathy Woodcock	Peterborough Social Planning Council

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May, 1998

# THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN ONTARIO

## SPRING, 1998

“The Quality of Life in Ontario is Declining!” That was the headline in October 1997, when we published our first report about the quality of life in Ontario. We introduced the Quality of Life Index (QLI) as a new tool for measuring and monitoring living conditions which affect our health and well-being. We also introduced a new model which links sustainable human development with quality of life and health. We promised to release regular updates to keep the public informed about changes in our living conditions that affect our social, health, economic and environmental quality of life. This is our Spring 1998 Update. And the good news is that the quality of life is showing some recovery, with qualifications.

### THE QUALITY OF LIFE INDEX MODEL

A brief summary of the Quality of Life Index is provided here for the convenience of readers. For more information, please consult the background reports (Appendix 2).

### *THE PARTNERS*

This project has been developed by the Ontario Social Development Council (OSDC), working in partnership with the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) and in association with the Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto (HP/UT) and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition. (See Appendix 1: Partners and Associates). We also have 20 community partners who are working on their own local Quality of Life Indexes.

### *DEFINITION OF QUALITY OF LIFE*

**“The product of the interplay among social, health, economic and environmental conditions which affect human and social development.”**

Establishing consensus on how best to manage growth and change is the purpose of defining and measuring local quality of life. Each community that seeks to define and measure quality of life will have to build consensus on what is considered important and worth preserving, enhancing or striving for. It should become a regular component of community planning processes.

### *TWELVE INDICATORS IN THE QLI*

The Quality of Life Index is composed of twelve indicators, selected on the basis on these criteria:

- relevant to quality of life
- time sensitive
- available on a regular basis (monthly or quarterly)
- from credible sources

<b><i>SOCIAL:</i></b>	Children admitted to Children's Aid Societies Social assistance beneficiaries Public housing waiting lists
<b><i>HEALTH:</i></b>	Low birth weight babies Elderly waiting for placement in long term care facilities Suicide deaths
<b><i>ECONOMIC:</i></b>	Number of people unemployed Number of people working Bankruptcies (individual and business)
<b><i>ENVIRONMENTAL:</i></b>	Hours of moderate to poor air quality Environmental spills Tonnes diverted from landfill to blue boxes

Please refer to the "Summary of Indicators Report" for more information about each indicator.

The partners in this project are all using the same set of "core indicators" to calculate the Quality of Life Index provincially and in local communities. In this way, we can compare our progress at the provincial and local levels across Ontario.

Visit our website for more information about the Quality of Life Index for Ontario:

**[www.lks.net/~cdc/spno/qli](http://www.lks.net/~cdc/spno/qli)**

## **SPRING UPDATE**

This report provides an update on trends in our quality of life as of May 1998. We have collected the most current data available for each of the twelve QLI indicators, except for suicides and low birth weight babies. The value of the QLI for these two indicators will remain the same as in our 1997 report. Problems associated with the collection of data are discussed later in this report. We have also collected the data for each year between 1990 and 1997, in order to fill in the trend line over the past seven years.

### *QUALITY OF LIFE INDEX - MAY, 1998*

The Quality of Life Index for May, 1998 is **90.1**. This compares with 87.2 in September 1997 and 100 in the base year.

We calculate the Quality of Life Index by using the chart on the following page. We took into account the growth in population since 1990 by converting the data for each indicator into a rate per 10,000 population. The value of the QLI is calculated for 1990 (base year) September 1997 and May 1998.

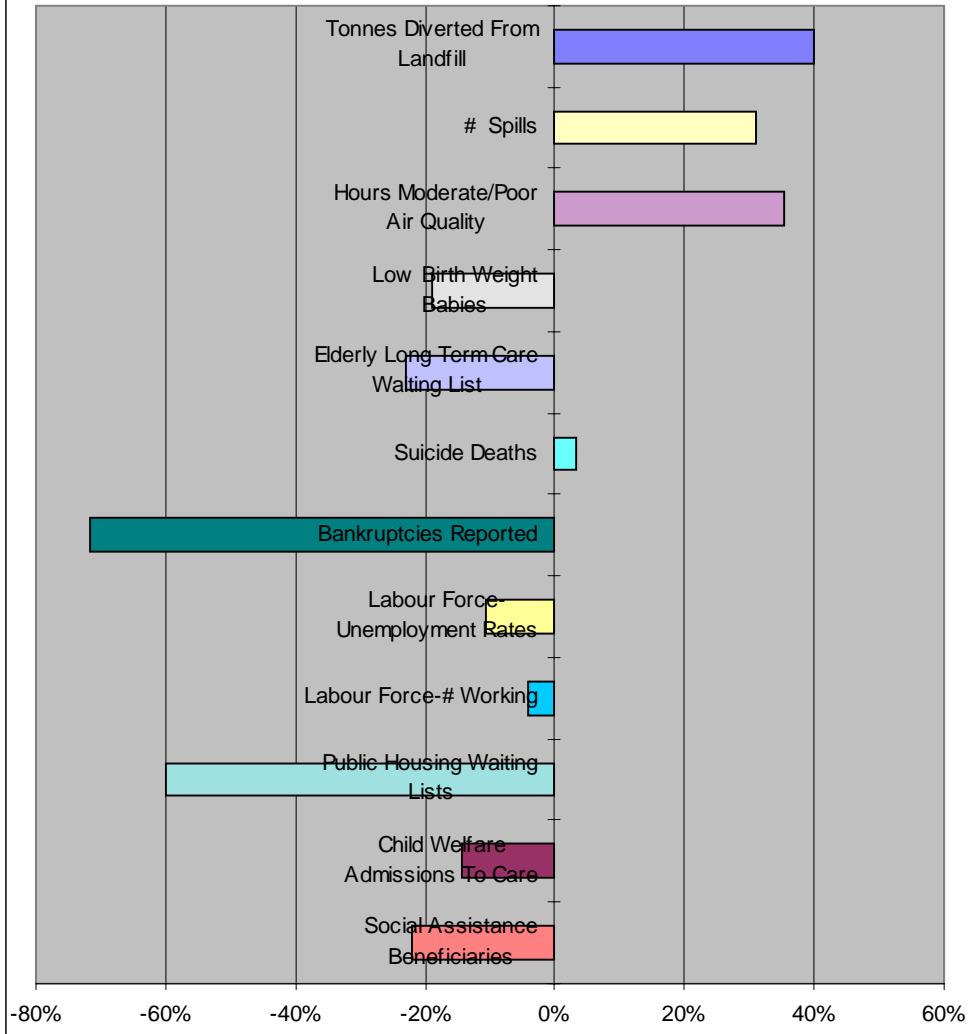
INDICATORS	BASE RATE/10,000	BASE QLI VALUE	CURRENT RATE/10,000	% CHANGE	QLI IMPACT	SEPT. '97 QLI VALUE	CURRENT QLI VALUE
<b>Social Indicators:</b>							
1: Social Assistance Beneficiaries	780	8.3	951	22%+	Neg.	5.8	6.5
2: Child Welfare Admissions To Care	8.4	8.3	9.6	14.3%+	Neg.	7.8	7.1
3: Public Housing Waiting Lists	40	8.3	64	60%+	Neg.	4.8	3.3
<b>Economic Indicators:</b>							
4: Labour Force-# Working	5,053	8.3	4840	4.2%-	Neg.	7.8	8
5: Labour Force-# Unemployed	339	8.3	375	10.6%+	Neg.	5.5	7.4
6: # of Bankruptcies Reported	19	8.3	32.6	71.6%+	Neg.	3.1	2.4
<b>Health Indicators:</b>							
7: # Suicide Deaths	0.95	8.3	0.92	3.2%-	Pos.	8.6	8.6
8: Elderly Long Term Care Waiting List	13	8.3	16	23%-	Neg.	7.7	6.4
9: # Low Birth Weight Babies	7.4	8.3	8.8	18.9%+	Neg.	6.7	6.7
<b>Environmental Indicators:</b>							
10: # Hours Moderate/Poor Air Quality	16.2	8.3	10.5	35.2%-	Pos.	10	11.2
11: # Spills	5.5	8.3	3.8	30.9%-	Pos.	9.1	10.9
12: Tonnes Diverted to Blue Boxes	340	8.3	476	40%+	Pos.	10.3	11.6
<b>QLI COMPOSITE INDEX</b>		<b>100</b>				<b>87.2</b>	<b>90.1</b>

### *THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE 1990s*

Using data we have collected for each indicator from 1990 to the most current year available, we have calculated the Quality of Life Index from 1990 to Spring, 1998. The graph on the next page shows the trend of quality of life to be on the decline in the 1990s. The economic and social indicators have led the decline, with the economic recession/depression in 1991-92, rising social problems, and a badly frayed social safety net. The recent increase in the QLI in the Spring of 1998 signals good news, since it has turned around the declining trend into an improving one.

We will have more to say about these trends in our Fall 1998 report.

**Percent Positive/Negative Change: As of April 1998**

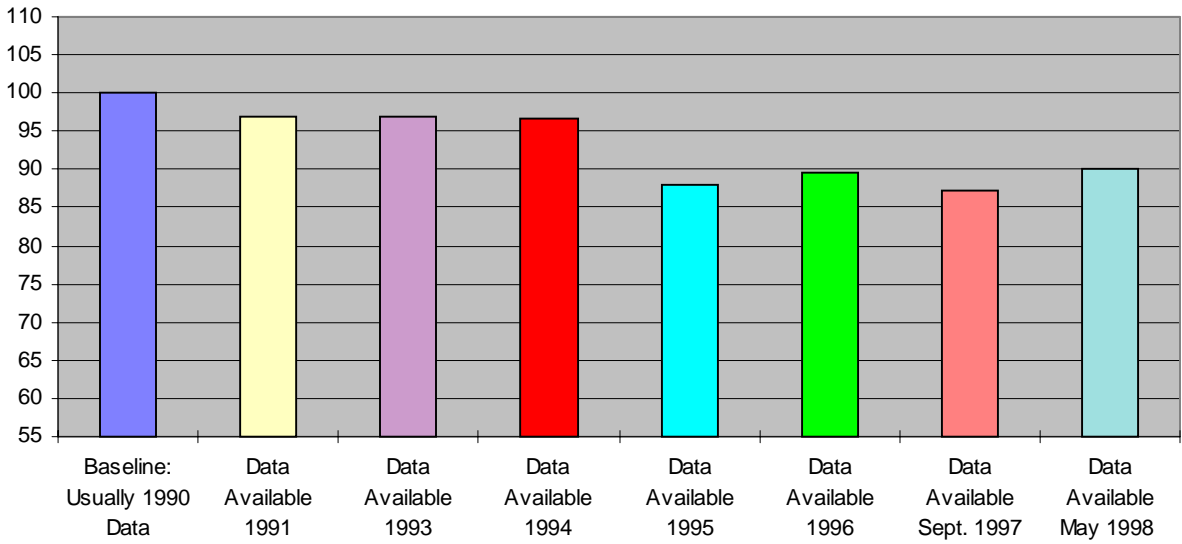


## *TRENDS IN THE QUALITY OF LIFE*

The recent upturn in the QLI since 1997 is driven by a strong showing by the environmental indicators and improvements in labour force participation. More people are working and fewer are unemployed. However, the social indicators bring mixed messages. We have fewer social assistance beneficiaries, but longer waiting lists for public housing and long term care, as well as children admitted to care by child welfare authorities.

In order to look at the trends for each indicator in the QLI, we take the % change from the chart and put it onto a graph for easy reading (see next page). This allows us to make more detailed comparisons about the performance of each indicator.

**ONTARIO'S QUALITY OF LIFE INDEX**





## *PROGRESS AND SETBACKS*

**Social Assistance Beneficiaries** - The data shows recent improvements, since the number of social assistance beneficiaries is declining. This is partly the result of major changes in social assistance, including restrictions in eligibility, which have forced many off of welfare. Some have found low-wage jobs in an improved economic climate. Others have been forced into shelters or onto the street. Though fewer people living in poverty are collecting social assistance benefits, there is a growing number of working poor.

**Child Welfare Admissions to Care** - More children are being admitted to the care of child welfare authorities, often due in part to economic hardship endured by their families. During the same period, funds for children's aid societies have been cut by millions of dollars over the past several years.

**Public Housing Waiting Lists** - More and more people are on waiting lists for public housing. They are driven by rising market rents, stagnant pay cheques and lower welfare cheques. Social housing stock has been frozen since the election of the Harris government in 1995. Much of the stock of public housing is in need of improvement. With the downloading of responsibility for public housing to municipalities and a sizeable cut in grants from the province, the further decline in public housing stock is anticipated. There is no new public housing being built to cope with rising demand.

**Labour Force # Working** - There is some good news on the economic front. Ontario's economy is growing at a healthy rate of 3.8%, which is "booming" by media standards. There are more people entering the labour force, after a major drop in 1992, and a slow recovery. While there are more jobs, many are low-wage, with no benefits, and often part-time. This is the labour force which people are entering from the social assistance system.

**Labour Force # Unemployed** - The number of unemployed people is on the decline, after peaking in March 1997. This is good news for people who have been looking for work. Some will find low wage jobs that offer little hope of elevating them out of poverty.

**Bankruptcies** - The number of personal and business bankruptcies has receded from record levels in 1996. But there has been a steep rise compared with the pre-recession year 1990. This is a volatile indicator that reflects the economic conditions in the 1990s.

**Elderly Waiting for Long Term Care** - There are more elderly people waiting for placements in long term care facilities than there were in 1997. This is a growing problem, driven by cuts to health care and social housing. The commitment of the Ontario government for this sector in its new budget is recognition of the problem. But the amount of money committed, and the 8-year timespan, is not likely to keep up with rising demand.

**Hours of Moderate to Poor Air Quality** - There has been significant improvement in air quality since, 1990, a trend which continues to 1996. The Ministry of Environment and Energy has not yet released the 1997 data. Recent reports from the Ontario Medical Associations express concerns about a crisis in air quality.

**Spills** - There has been a steady decline in the number of spills reported to the provincial government from 1990 to 1997. This is a good news story. There is concern that cutbacks in the public sector may weaken the capacity of the government to monitor and regulate environmental spills.

**Tonnes Diverted to Blue Box Recycling** - There has been a steady increase in the diversion of materials to the Blue Box recycling program during the 1990s. This is reflected in a positive impact on the Quality of Life Index. However, there have been major changes in the roles of municipal governments, with the downloading of responsibilities for recycling and the loss of provincial grants. The future of the Blue Box program is currently being debated by municipalities looking at major budget pressures while facing a broader range of responsibilities for our living conditions.

## **ISSUES ARISING FROM THE QLI**

*\* Problems with data access and availability, resulting in lack of information about key indicators.*

**Low birth weight babies** - The data for low birth weight babies which we reported in 1997 was not accurate due to problems with the information system used by the Bureau of Vital Statistics in the Ontario Government. The result was that the number of low birth weight babies was over-reported. The data that was available was only as recent as 1995. We are now involved in a process to get the corrected data. But it is not available for this report. We also explored alternative sources of the data, such as the Canadian Institute for Health Information, which has current and accurate information reported directly from hospitals. However, a hefty fee is required to access the data. Because low birth weight babies are a concern as a matter of public health, the absence of current and accurate data is hard to understand.

**Air quality** - The number of sites for monitoring air quality has been reduced from over 34 to only 27 in 1997, due to cuts in public sector funding. This leaves many communities out of range of a monitoring site and without information about their local air quality. The trend in the sector to deregulation and voluntary compliance with environmental standards leaves the door open for declining air quality and inadequate tools to measure it. Since there is no local data for some communities, it raises the question of finding an alternative environmental indicator, such as water quality for use in the QLI.

**Labour force participation** - Statistics Canada conducts a monthly survey of labour force participation using a small sample of respondents in 25 Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) across Canada. The results are assumed to represent the most current data for the number of people who are employed and unemployed. The widely reported unemployment rate is based on this survey. The problem arises when local groups want to know about employment in their communities. There is no local data from these surveys. CMAs are defined by Statistics Canada in a way which lumps together many cities and regions, without provision for breaking out the data for municipalities. The size of the local survey samples would be too small to be useable. Even large cities like Toronto are lumped into an even larger CMA. Suburban regions like Peel and Halton are included with neighbouring cities in CMAs. Consequently, there are serious limitations in the availability of local data about labour force participation. Municipalities

concerned with economic development do not know how many people are working and unemployed within their jurisdictions. Unemployment is a critical indicator for which data is inadequate as the basis for making social and economic policies at all levels of government.

**Suicides** - Data is not current - latest year available is 1995. The trend in suicides from 1990-95 is very stable, with no significant fluctuations. This is surprising, considering the economic upheavals of the early 1990s. Local data is small, or even non-existent, making it an unsatisfactory indicator for the QLI. There are problems with reporting that lead to speculation that the unofficial rate of suicide deaths is higher than the reported rate. We plan to replace this indicator in our next report in the Fall of 1998.

**Child Welfare Admissions to Care** - Data collected by the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) is suspect because of inconsistent reporting from local agencies through area offices. Discrepancies have been identified in data collected directly from the local CASs by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS). Problems with information systems for children's services are long standing. New initiatives have been announced to develop a comprehensive information system for child welfare, which will produce accurate and timely information. The first phase to connect CASs to do prior contact checks on all cases referred for protection will be initiated in 1998-99. A recent announcement in the Ontario budget of an infusion of money into the child welfare sector is good news. It is earmarked for staffing, training and foster care.

**Public Housing Waiting Lists** - The most current data available is for 1997. The downloading of responsibility for all forms of social housing to municipalities has created major changes in this field. It is expected that waiting lists for all forms of social housing (public, non-profit, municipal, co-ops, rent-geared-to-income) will be integrated by next year. This will mean that more comprehensive information will be available about the need for social housing in many communities.

Governments don't have current and accurate information about important public issues on which to base policies or actions. As a result, they are always reacting to hot issues, rather than looking ahead. Cutbacks in the public service have also reduced the capacity of governments to measure and monitor key indicators. Where non-government organizations, such as provincial associations, are collecting the data, cuts to social programs have also reduced their capacity to collect key information. This also results in a reduced capacity to co-ordinate services, based on current and accurate information.

*\* Quarterly updates have been very difficult.*

We had planned quarterly updates, but have been unable to keep to this schedule. Data for some indicators is not current. There is also a serious time lag before data is released. We'll have to report twice a year.

*\* Costs of data*

Fees for reports on air quality, low birth weight, blue box, and suicide could become barriers to access as governments intent on cost recovery neglect public access to information. Information

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systems are not designed to provide basic information in response to public requests. Electronic access to information would make a big difference in access to information, by e-mail and websites. It would eliminate the costs of printing, photocopying and mailing, traditional barriers to access. The tools of the information age should increase access to public information.

*\* Methodological problems affecting local access to data have arisen.*

Labour force sample sizes and CMA boundaries are not coterminous or comprehensive. Air quality monitoring has been reduced, leaving many areas of the province uncovered. Long term care placement boundaries are based on “catchment areas” which do not correspond with real geo-political boundaries, i.e. municipalities. This raises a major obstacle to co-ordination of community-based health services involving two levels of government. Suicide data is too small to be meaningful; problems with not reporting sudden deaths as suicides results in unreliable data.

*\* Downloading is affecting indicators and reporting.*

The downloading of responsibilities to the municipalities from the province affects several QLI indicators, including Blue Box recycling, social housing and social assistance. This raises serious questions about who will be collecting the data and what capacity municipalities will have to maintain information systems for these purposes.

*\*Urban and rural variations*

Differences in the availability of data have emerged in air quality and labour force participation, raising questions about how flexible the QLI should be in adapting to local situations without compromising the comparability of a common data set used by all communities.

*\* Need for co-ordination of reporting initiatives*

There are several projects underway that involve quality of life indicators:

- > QoL reports for neighbourhoods (Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto)
- > QoL Reporting system for municipalities (Federation of Canadian Municipalities)
- > Software for measuring sustainable communities (Central Mortgage and Housing Corp)
- > United Ways doing research on context for community needs

Conscious efforts must be made by all involved to work collaboratively as much as possible.

*\* Context for QLI*

While the QLI seems to be generally accurate in assessing overall quality of life, there are limitations in describing the plight of disadvantaged people in our society. Reports of Ontario’s “booming economy” mask growing disparities, and people left out of the economic recovery. Other indicators, such as real income, poverty rates, and income disparities provide important information about our quality of life, but are reported much less frequently. We are planning to add a section on the current context for our report in the Fall of 1998.

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## *Conclusion*

The Quality of Life Index provides a good picture of changes in living conditions that affect our health and well being as a society. The value of the QLI as a tool for community development will be increased with more involvement of different sectors in taking action on the results. One of the challenges for OSDC and the SPNO will be to promote the involvement of people from the social, health, economic and environmental sectors to work together to improve the quality of life in our communities.

Watch for our next report in the Fall of 1998.

Appendix 1 - Partners and Associates

Appendix 2 - QLI Background Reports and Website

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May 31, 1998