

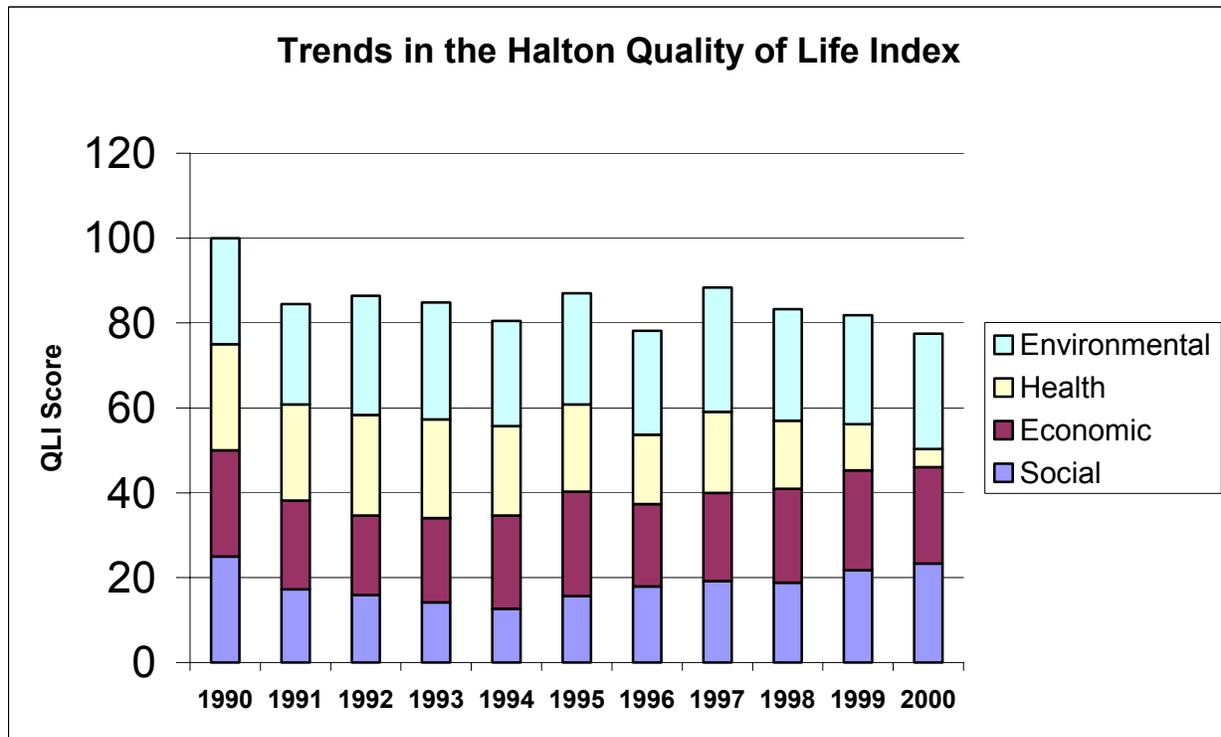
# Community Dispatch

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## THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN HALTON – SNAPSHOT OF A DECADE



The quality of life in Halton, as measured by the Quality of Life Index (QLI), has remained below that of 1990 throughout the course of the decade, as revealed in a new report entitled *The Quality of Life in Halton – A Snapshot of a Decade*. We analyze the results of changes in the quality of life by looking at which of the twelve indicators that form the QLI are showing progress and which are showing setbacks over the time period from 1990 to 2000. The QLI score for 2000 (77.4) is one of the lowest during the decade. There has been progress in some areas – lower rates of bankruptcies, fewer toxic spills, fewer low birth weight babies and reduced unemployment. Also, there have been setbacks – poorer air quality, more elderly waiting for long term care placements and

continuing high, yet declining, social assistance caseloads. While there is reason for celebrating our progress in certain areas, we must also renew our efforts to address the areas in which we have setbacks in order for the quality of life in Halton to improve and move beyond 1990 levels.

Community Development Halton (CDH) is using the QLI to monitor and measure living conditions that have a significant effect on the quality of life in Halton. CDH is part of a province-wide project, co-sponsored by the Ontario Social Development Council and the Social Planning Network of Ontario, to use the QLI for reporting on how changes in public policies have affected our quality of life.

This report, *The Quality of Life in Halton – A Snapshot of a Decade*, is the fourth in this series. We published our first report in 1997, as did other partners in communities across Ontario, the first local reports of this kind in Ontario or Canada. The purpose of this report is to measure and monitor changes in living conditions which affect the quality of community life. It is a snapshot of a decade. It is a tool for community dialogue to contribute to the public discussion about important issues. It is not intended to be a definitive statement.

Using 1990 as a benchmark, Halton's main areas of progress are the environmental indicators, one health indicator, one social indicator and one economic indicator. There are shortfalls where we have yet to reach our 1990 QLI in important areas such as social assistance caseloads, child welfare, long term care, new cancer cases, and bankruptcies.

Our quality of life has been the subject of public debate from many different points of view. The trends and issues we have identified through the Quality of Life Index provide a basis for raising issues around which we can create community awareness and build a consensus on community needs and solutions.

The **social indicators** have continued to show steady improvement since 1994. Progress on this indicator is heavily influenced by the decrease in the social assistance caseload in Halton, which has been declining steadily since the mid 1990s. The number of social assistance beneficiaries decreased once again in 2000 after a slight increase in 1999. Changes in eligibility criteria since 1995 have resulted in fewer applicants qualifying for benefits. The public housing wait lists began to level off from 1996 onward, although this only measures part of the social housing picture in Halton. Affordable housing has been identified as an important social concern in this community and with the provincial downloading of social housing to municipalities, the situation will require further

monitoring. There has been a decrease in the number of child welfare admissions, which is an improvement. However, in the future, the data will not be comparable as changes in legislation have been introduced that will affect the definition of child abuse, the reporting criteria and the service requirements. These changes will likely start to affect the number of children admitted into care.

The **economic indicators** continue to show improvement. The number of bankruptcies is on the decline again in 2000 after having increased in the previous two years. We have also seen continued decreases in the unemployment rates in this region although we do not have current data for Halton. The release of the 2001 Census information over the 2002-2003 period, will allow us to update employment information in order to create an accurate economic profile for this region.

The **health indicators** have shown the least improvement from the 1990 levels. The exception to this is the number of Low Birth Weight babies born in the region. These rates declined significantly in 1998, the year for which the most recent data is available. The number of elderly waiting for Long Term Care (LTC) beds resulted in an overall decline in the Health composite score. In fact, the number of applicants on the LTC Waiting List increased by more than 175% from 1991 to 2000 with a doubling of the number on the list from 1998 to 2000. While money provided by the provincial government for long-term care beds has resulted in more long-term care facilities opening in Halton, we are still faced with an aging population as the recent 2001 Census data illustrates. This will have an effect in the Halton community.

The **environmental indicators** continue to be positive in the Halton QLI. The decline in spills reported continued in 2000, although this may be partly due to changes in provincial regulations. Blue box recycling continues to keep pace with population growth, and the

number of poor air quality hours declined significantly in 2000.

### How Will It Be Used?

The Quality of Life Index will be used to monitor and report on significant changes to the conditions that affect the quality of life in Ontario, and in their specific regions and counties. The QLI can be updated and be reported in the media in a similar way to economic indicators, such as the Consumer Price Index (CPI). In this way, the public will be kept informed about how their quality of life is being affected by public policies.

To ensure that the index is usable and easily understood by the public, the overall index is converted to a score of 100, so that any change in the index would show either a “positive,” or “negative” movement, or no movement at all. The index would allow a user to see that, for example, “the Quality of Life Index went down in 2000 by half a percentage point.”

The movement of individual indicators would affect the movement of the overall index. For example, an increase in the number of social assistance caseloads from one year to another would show as a “negative” movement on the overall index. Likewise, a drop in the rate of low birth weight babies from one year to the next would show as a “positive” movement.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR HALTON?

Halton has its own Quality of Life Index. The Quality of Life Index, consisting of valid and time-sensitive indicators, has a number of

valuable applications in Halton Region. These include the following:

- allows for comparison of Quality of Life trends with other regions and Ontario overall
- allows policy makers and funders, among others, to track the movement of individual indicators and/or “bundles” of certain types of indicators, e.g. health indicators
- provides complementary information for existing studies contributing to knowledge of our community (e.g. Halton Social Profile)
- contributes to the procedure of monitoring the impact of government budgetary and social policy measures on people’s lives
- provides information for use in policy briefs, funding proposals and submissions to governments at all levels
- allows users of the Quality of Life Index to measure their own personal, or “intuitive” assessment relating to their own quality of life with negative or positive movements of the Index
- promotes debate within the community on the steps necessary to build and secure a healthy community

The quality of community life in Halton and Ontario is changing dramatically. Governments at all levels are making major changes to public policies. How will these changes affect our quality of life? This Quality of Life Index provides a way for communities to monitor and measure these changes and focus on issues that affect them. The full report is available from Community Development Halton.



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