

**TALKING TOILETS**  
**Assessing the accessibility of public toilet provision in Ottawa, Ontario**

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*“[...] a lot of people just can't wait, and it stops people from really engaging in services in their communities because they don't want to be embarrassed or humiliated, or just simply not to have to worry, waiting the next 20-25 minutes until you can get home or to a Tim Horton's somewhere that you can use a washroom. I think that in a fully rounded community you want to see services for everybody so that everybody can participate.” (Participant)*

### **Introduction**

This study identifies key issues related to public toilets that may serve as reference and guidance for improved policy design. The report also provides a basis for further research, to ensure that Ottawa lives up to its expectations as an accessible and modern city in terms of its public toilet provision for people of all walks of life, abilities, challenges, and socio-economic backgrounds.

This research project sought to determine how public toilets in Ottawa impact the lives of its citizens and how accessibility to public toilets affect the ways in which the city is used. The term ‘accessible’ will be used to describe toilets free of barriers (be they physical or mental) that people are able to enter and use, while the term ‘available’ will refer to toilets that are physically present and can readily be used. Certain biological processes govern all human beings, including eating, drinking and the requisite excretion of such nourishment, functions that are essential for survival and optimal performance in daily activities. Such basic biological requirements are important to note because although it is common knowledge that, as the saying goes ‘everyone poops’, testimonials from local residents might suggest that Ottawa citizens are the exception to this rule due to the apparent lack of safe, open and accessible public toilets. As one Ottawa resident claims, “as far as I’m concerned there [are] no public bathrooms in Ottawa”. However, the citizens of Ottawa (obviously) have the same basic needs as all other human beings, including the need to perform the essential process of evacuation with dignity, in a safe, and private yet publicly accessible space.

To deny people of basic infrastructure to support this bodily necessity is an injustice: it confines people unnecessarily to their homes for fear of embarrassment; thus, a lack of public toilets in cities negatively impacts quality of life. As Professor Clara Greed, a recognized world authority on public toilets, so succinctly stated, “public toilets are a necessary component for users of the built environment in enabling user-friendly, sustainable, safe, equitable and accessible cities” (Greed, 2003). Ottawa is Canada’s capital city and as such should aspire to be a model for the rest of the nation.

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This report, prepared in conjunction with the GottaGo! Campaign ([www.ottawapublictoilets.ca](http://www.ottawapublictoilets.ca)), begins with a literature review of secondary sources to situate this study in terms of current knowledge. This is followed by a summary of the methods and steps taken to conduct this research and an analysis section discussing the main findings and themes of the primary data. A conclusion section includes recommendations from participants for future action. Direct messages, from participants to the City of Ottawa Councillors, have been added at the end of this report unaltered from their original testimony.

### **Literature Review**

One hundred percent of the population, everywhere, requires the use of a bathroom. There are those within the population who are particularly vulnerable when it comes to the provision of public toilets. People with health concerns (such as overactive bladder, Urinary Tract Infection, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), Ulcerative Colitis, diverticular disease, Crohn's and Colitis), pregnant women and women in general, children, elderly people, homeless people, and people using wheelchairs, walkers or crutches are highly vulnerable when toilet provision in cities is inadequate (Greed, 2003; Improving Public Access to Toilets, 2008; Kitchen & Law, 2001; Solomon, 2013). These subpopulations each have individual and specific sensitivities, but their needs are all equivalent: sufficient provision of clean, safe, and accessible public toilets. The following discussion will highlight some of the reasons why certain groups of people are more vulnerable than others to an absence of public toilets.

Bladder problems are more common than generally acknowledged, and certainly rarely spoken about. One in three women have post-birth incontinence (unwanted, inconvenient, excessive or uncontrollable urination), 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men have some form of incontinence and 1 in 3 men over 50 years of age report some bladder problems (Greed, 2003, p. 98). In addition to the physical issues, the under-provision of public toilet facilities can generate enormous social costs. From a public health perspective it is essential to provide adequate public toilets for not only those with urological, gastro-intestinal, and reproductive complications, but also for healthy men, and for healthy women who are menstruating or pregnant, which will serve to prevent future development of the above conditions (Greed, 2003, p.103). A study from the patient's perspective of living with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) found that the perpetual anticipation of the next flare-up or episode, and the need for immediate access to toilet facilities often led to the subject's withdrawal from social activities and isolation (Bertram et al., 2001). Many studies have proven that social isolation is related to negative impacts on health and wellbeing and can lead to depression-like

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symptoms (Campbell et al., 2011). In a study focused on elderly people, Campbell et al. (2011) found that social isolation is negatively associated with the health status and health-related quality of life of senior citizens. As the proportion of older people in the population continues to increase, more people will be at risk from the effects of social isolation.

To find oneself in a situation where you are unable to relieve yourself without breaking the social conventions that surround the act itself is a denial of the right to participate in social life with dignity. Kitchen and Law (2001) found that full participation in civic affairs depends upon the material environment, which determines the degree to which people are able to participate. In their study, the authors found that existing toilets in Ireland are poorly designed for people with disabilities, thus limiting the spatial range of people with some disabilities. Therefore, people with disabilities must carefully plan where they shop, work, and socialize around access to usable toilets (Ibid).

Government policymakers seek to create more sustainable cities by encouraging people to walk, cycle and use public transport instead of private vehicles. In order for these mobility patterns to change, it is imperative that a concurrent increase in public toilet provision takes place (Greed, 2003, p. 3). In one study conducted in the United Kingdom, 94% of young adults aged 16-19 years-old said they would be encouraged to use urban green spaces more frequently if more public toilets were installed, 87% of disabled people and 81% of 56-65 year-olds (Improving Public Access to Toilets, 2008). Installing more toilets could act as a means for achieving more inclusive and sustainable urban environments.

### **Methodology**

#### Theoretical Perspectives

This study drew from the theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, existentialism and realism. Existentialism is concerned with the ways in which individuals ascribe meaning to their world and values to objects (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). To understand a population's needs we must first look to the individuals that comprise a population and discover what values or meanings they harbour and why. Existentialism recognises that the world and reality are created by human actions, and as such, the behaviour of an individual is a product of their subjective thoughts or reasoning (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). An individual's experience of the world shapes their values, which then affects their thoughts and actions in a continuous cycle of cause and effect. Phenomenology postulates that an individual's behaviour can be understood by talking to them about their life experiences to see the world as it appears through their eyes. Correspondingly, realism suggests that the social world does

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not exist detached from knowledge and that an individual's knowledge, though it may be partial or incomplete, has a direct effect on human behaviour. Realism is concerned with identifying the building blocks of reality through the investigation of underlying mechanisms and structures of social relations (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Using a realist frame of reference, this study hopes to highlight how human choice is both restricted and stimulated by the urban infrastructure and built environment within which decisions are made. This theory also looks at the empirical regularity of a phenomenon and seeks to understand what forces or causal mechanisms are behind it.

Existentialism, phenomenology and realism were drawn upon in this study to discover what role public toilets play in the lives of Ottawa citizens, how toilets affect people's lives, and in particular, what experiences with toilet availability have affected their choices and behaviour.

### Methods Used to Generate Data

This research began with a literature review, to provide a basic understanding of human knowledge and practice of washroom habits, and to refine the research topic throughout the study. Similar studies and articles on toilets were requested from renowned authorities and were analysed for applicable research methods and/or relevant information.

### Instrument

It was decided that an interview guide would provide sufficient flexibility to capture the views of participants in their own words, while at the same time, offering the consistency needed for comparability among respondents. An interview guide was formulated consisting of 15 open-ended questions that were reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Research Ethic Board Council on July 21<sup>st</sup> 2014. Questions include: Do you think that Ottawa has enough available or accessible public toilets? Are you able to find public toilets when you are in an area unfamiliar to you? Can you describe a situation in which you, or someone you care for, had need of a public toilet but none were available to your knowledge? (See Appendix A for a copy of the full questionnaire). The interviewer kept to the interview guide as far as possible. All respondents were asked the same questions in the same sequence in almost all instances, except when an interviewee's response encompassed more than one question or where the natural progression of conversation led to questions being asked out of order, and interviews lasted approximately half an hour.

Twelve interviews were conducted face to face, and all, but one, were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcription was then sent to the respondent for verification and clarification as needed. For the one interview not recorded, detailed notes were taken and returned to the respondent as above.

### Sample

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A sample purposeful population (Patton, 2002), of 15 Ottawa citizens, was selected on a first-come-first-serve basis. Participants were alerted to the study by a flyer distributed in prominent locations at various Community Health Centers in Ottawa, and through the Crohn's and Colitis Society. Some were referred by social service or other professionals, others by word of mouth. Anyone interested was asked to contact the researcher directly to schedule an interview and informed that they would be remunerated with a small gift of twenty dollars to acknowledge the value of their time and knowledge.

### Summary of participants interviewed

The following is a brief summary of the people who were interviewed to help readers understand the specific demographic perspective that each interviewee contributed to this study. I interviewed the following participants:

- 3 elderly; 9 middle-aged; 3 young-adult
- 11 women and 4 men
- 3 had a medical condition that affected their toilet needs
- 12 had children
- 2 were in a wheelchair or used a walker

Participants were briefed on the extent of the interview and informed consent was required before the interview began. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or, on three occasions, by telephone. All participants gave consent to be audio-recorded except for one participant when the researcher took extensive hand-written notes of the conversation. The analysis was conducted entirely by the researcher, in collaboration with her supervisors. All names and identifying characteristics have been changed or left out of this report to protect the identities of the participants.

### Methods Used to Analyze Data

Interview responses from each participant were first amalgamated under question headings and read through carefully in their entirety to get a sense of the whole. An inductive content analysis was used to discover patterns, themes and categories in the data (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Key phrases or words were then highlighted for each set of responses, and in an iterative process between the raw data and emerging patterns, a set of themes was gradually formulated. Recurring themes were identified and colour coded to facilitate ease of analysis<sup>2</sup>. Each question, with its corresponding answers, was reviewed for quantitative analysis and later for qualitative analysis. Once patterns

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<sup>2</sup> In some instances participants chose not to answer specific questions, which accounts for the discrepancy in the statistical analysis whereupon some results were drawn from a sample of 14 responders instead of 15.

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themes and/or categories emerged through inductive analysis, a final stage involved testing and confirming them, including examining cases that didn't fit (Patton, 2002, p. 454). A final set of themes was then developed.

### Summary of Themes Identified

Many common themes emerged in conversations with the participants; each theme has been listed below, and a more in-depth discussion of the themes will follow.

- Cleanliness
- Health
- Gender
- Wheelchair accessibility
- Money
- Location
- Signage
- Operating Hours
- Public transit

## **Findings**

### **Quantitative Findings**

When asked whether Ottawa has enough available or accessible public toilets, 12 of the 15 participants (86%) responded that no, Ottawa does not have enough of them. Similarly, when asked whether they believed their (public) toilet needs were met by the City of Ottawa, 12 participants (86%) responded “no”, and 3 (14%) responded “yes”. One of the respondents who did believe that Ottawa has enough public toilets mentioned that when she was travelling with her small children, she always planned ahead to find out where public toilets would be available but that she did occasionally come across areas, such as restaurants, that did not have toilets that would be accessible to wheelchairs. Another participant stated that although she believed that Ottawa does have enough public toilets, she doesn't use them a lot.

Respondents were asked whether they thought that there are an equal number of men's and women's public toilets in Ottawa. About half (50%) responded “yes” and 40% responded “no”. The remaining 10% did not respond or did not know.

Fourteen respondents were asked whether Ottawa had enough public toilet facilities in areas such as parks and children's playgrounds, and 12 participants (86%) replied that “no” they did not.

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Of those participants who were asked if they, or someone they knew, had ever been refused the use of a toilet in a private restaurant or business they had entered for the purpose of using the facilities, 9 participants (64%) responded that “yes” they had been refused, and 5 (36%) responded that “no” they had not been refused.

### **Qualitative Findings**

#### Cleanliness

Every participant (100%) raised some form of concern about the cleanliness of public toilets. The resounding consensus was that more attention should be paid to the maintenance of public toilets, to ensure that they are clean. One woman said of public toilets:

*“I myself stand up to pee, and when I have to go for number two, I have toilet seat covers that I take with me everywhere I go. Even going into community centres such as Centertown, Somerset West, the Rideau Centre, anywhere I go, I always carry seat covers, or I stand up to pee if I don’t have any. I think they (public toilets) are disgusting, they’re nasty, they are very unsanitary.”*

To some participants, cleanliness was a barrier to their use of the washroom, one person stated: *“many of them are not clean so it makes people not want to go into them.”* Another woman claimed: *“sometimes it’s because of the cleanliness of the washrooms that makes me not want to go out.”* Speaking of the public toilets at Mooney’s Bay and Britannia Beach, a participant said: *“I would rather let my children pee in the water, for crying out loud, than go into those. They’re nasty.”* However, people with physical illnesses and disabilities do not always have the option of passing up a toilet based on its state of hygiene, as one man grouched: *“I’ve used the worst of the worst bathrooms just because I had to.”*

Cleanliness also relates to accessibility. To the respondents, cleanliness can be a large determining factor in the accessibility of public washrooms, and can act as a barrier to their use by those who deem certain toilets too “dirty” to enter. Bathrooms considered unclean also provide a negative experience for people who have no other option but to use them. It also can reflect poorly on the city, and even a country, for as Clara Greed says “you can judge a nation by its toilets” (2003, pg. 81).

#### Health

Public bathrooms play a significant role in both the physical and mental health of the citizens of Ottawa. The City’s population is aging, and when bodies age, they require more frequent trips to the bathroom for simple acts of evacuation in addition to the multitude of illnesses to which the elderly are more susceptible. This requires additional time in toilets. One woman said:

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*“as people age, you really can’t mess around with that [going to the washroom], and when you have an illness like Irritable Bowel Syndrome, you can’t say ‘hey I’ll just hold it’, you can’t.”<sup>3</sup>*

There are many people who suffer from different illnesses, which demand the use of a washroom more often and that are made worse by the unsatisfactory provision of public toilets. There are also many people who require that toilets be equipped with certain design features that make them accessible to wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers. Despite this obvious need, most participants were dissatisfied with the provision of public toilets, especially for those with special needs. A young woman with cerebral palsy had this to say on the issue:

*“Going to the washroom is not an option for anyone. Especially with my disability, I try to have a really strong bladder. I have brain damage, so my level of anxiety is directly related to whether or not I can hold my bladder, that’s why I just leave places, because I don’t want to deal with the anxiety. That’s inhumane in a way. I don’t understand why bathrooms are not a priority... You’re ignoring a fundamental human need.”*

One woman asserted that the lack of public toilets in Ottawa worsened the condition of her bladder infection and caused her constipation. Another woman claimed that holding her bladder so often, due to the unavailability of public toilets, has caused her multiple kidney infections. The struggles of dealing with physical illnesses are compounded by the lack of available and accessible public toilets, where sufferers may relieve themselves of some of their discomfort.

The scarcity of public toilets in Ottawa has also prevented respondents from leaving their homes and exercising. Walking and cycling are two simple forms of activity that could easily provide many people in Ottawa with daily exercise, however, many find that an absence of public toilets makes them apprehensive about embarking on long walks or bike rides. An avid cyclist informed the researcher that his wife won’t go for long bike rides with him anymore because of the lack of public bathrooms. Many of the participants complained that cycling, walking or jogging in the fall and winter months is complicated by the fact that public toilets are often closed during these seasons, which in turn restricts their level of physical activity. Two women reported giving up cycling and running all together, because of the combined factors of increased metabolism that they experienced while exercising and the fear that there would not be an available public toilet when they needed one. A mother of four explained: *“trying to go for a long walk isn’t really even feasible anymore, because I have to plan it around bathroom stops.”* Some respondents even reported taking such measures as limiting the amount of fluids that they consumed in order to extend the length of time that they could remain in a location before having to leave to find a toilet. One

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<sup>3</sup> Irritable Bowel Syndrome is not an illness, like Crohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis,” but a syndrome

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respondent told of how she frequently “dehydrates” herself in order to go places she knows will not have accessible bathrooms, while another man prohibits himself from drinking while away from home because he does not want to have too many fluids in his body. Not only does deliberate dehydration of oneself have emotional consequences, it is also a dangerous practice with deleterious impacts on a person’s physical health and wellbeing. Among healthy young adults, dehydration has been shown to increase the perception of task difficulty, lower mood states, decrease concentration, and impair cognitive function (Kempton, 2010). In addition to the importance of drinking plenty of water, physical activity is essential to increasing and maintaining one’s health. To encourage residents of Ottawa to develop valuable exercise habits, more public washrooms should be installed in parks and trails – a recommendation that will be further detailed in subsequent sections.

There is a great deal of stigma and taboo surrounding the toilet, and, as a result, the simple use of a toilet in a public setting has many psychosocial implications. Many participants said that they often felt embarrassed about needing a toilet or felt guilty when they used one in a private business or restaurant. One woman who expressed such a sentiment said: “[when] you walk in and ask for a bathroom, I feel so cheap sometimes; it’s an embarrassment that’s what it is, but it’s something that nobody talks about.” An elderly grandmother stated:

*“it always feels like you’re stealing the use of the space, so it’s hard to do it, and I think, particularly for elderly people, it’s somehow worse because you spent your whole life paying your way or being respectful, and then all of a sudden, you’re faced with having to steal space because you need a toilet. And I think a lot of people just don’t go out because of that.”*

Many participants said that they would often choose not to go out in public because of the lack of toilets available in Ottawa. Seventy seven percent of participants (10 out of 13) said they had been prevented from leaving the house by the insufficient provision of public toilets in the city. A woman with ulcerative colitis stated that she would not leave her house during a flare up if she was unfamiliar with the territory or was unsure that public toilets would be available. This same woman said:

*“when I was really sick I just refused to leave the house in general, because I had no control, and I was horrified by the thought of being stuck in traffic and not being able to get to the facilities... there’s nothing more humiliating than running through the hallways of a hospital trying to find a bathroom in the hopes that you find one before embarrassing yourself.”*

Another interviewee recounted to the researcher:

*“I had diarrhoea one day, and went to [mainstream coffee shop], and asked them if I could use their bathroom, it was urgent and they said no, and I was almost in tears.”*

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Another participant, when asked to recall a time that they could not find a public toilet when they were in need of one, said:

*“It’s just horrible, there’s nothing you can do. I just get upset and I go home. I’ve had accidents. This happens. I don’t like to talk about that but what am I supposed to do? I’m not a robot. I have tried to have the strongest possible bladder on earth but I can’t hold it forever.”*

As these testimonials illustrate, the mental and emotional stress of being unable to locate a public washroom when one is in need has prompted many participants to restrict themselves to certain parts of the city, or quite frequently to their homes, in order to avoid putting themselves into situations where they might feel helpless, embarrassed and/or uncomfortable.

When asked whether the installation of more public toilets would impact their health, most respondents replied that it would relieve them of their constant worry, anxiety and obsessive planning, and would help them to relax, engage more in the city and their communities, increase their participation in activities like walking and cycling, and decrease their amount of kidney and bladder infections. One man said that more public toilets in Ottawa

*“would take away something that I genuinely have to worry about. So, if I know that there’s going to be something accessible where I am going, all the time, then I just don’t have to think about it anymore, you don’t have to worry about being able to get to the bathroom in time or to leave something early. You just go, and live your life, and use the bathroom when you need to use the bathroom.”*

A young woman in a wheelchair, when asked the same question, expressed the following:

*“I think it would just make me feel more normalized. That’s probably a bad word to use, but the fact that I have to think like this and plan like this, and not just me but other disabled people, makes me feel like I shouldn’t want to leave as much as I do, shouldn’t want to do as much, shouldn’t expect as much from people and places, you know it kind of instils this idea that I don’t matter as much as able-bodied people. I know that sounds like an extrapolation but when you’re dealing with this over and over again, I feel like it’s just easier to stay home and it’s just easier to give up and that’s a toll over time.”*

### Security

7 out of 9 participants (78%) believe that security is an important issue in terms of public toilet provision. The concern stems from a fear of bathrooms being places of drug use and potentially vulnerable locations for violence to occur. However, the type of security that deters vandalism, the kind that utilizes locked doors and key-holders, was viewed as yet another barrier or hindrance to the use of public washrooms. One woman characterized this type of security measure not as public access, but rather as “restricted access.” In fact, many participants described situations where they

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were anxious to find a toilet only to discover that it was locked. In contrast, participants viewed vandalism as something that could be easily reversed, and would thus be of little consequence. One woman suggested putting security guards in public bathrooms in parks in the interest of the safety of the children who frequent such locations.

Despite these claims, security was not found to be of very high concern to many participants as one woman said: *“I just don’t think that security concerns are necessarily enough to strip certain members of the community of their right to engage fully in the community.”* Others even took up the opposite side of the argument, explaining that bathrooms could offer a “safe haven” for people in distress. Participants made suggestions on how to minimize the likelihood of crime in public washrooms by locating them in well-trafficked, open areas, directly facing a well-lit street without a vestibule in front as opposed to locating them in “basements and dark corners.” One woman pointed out the safety hazards that are also associated with locating bathrooms downstairs, while referring to an aunt she cared for, she explained: *“stairs are a real barrier for people with balance issues, and I couldn’t take her to half the places she wanted to go to, in fact most of them.”*

A detailed public toilet strategy and design guide has been published by the Frankston City Council, which identifies many best practices regarding safety and security. The guidelines assert that placing well-lit public toilets in high traffic and pedestrian areas, visible from all or most direction, and which face public areas (such as footpaths or roads) reduces unsafe and unwanted activity, and that artwork can assist to deter graffiti. City Councillors further recommend building exteriors that are clean, well managed, as well as welcoming and that toilets have signs, which indicate the direction and distance to toilets when not obvious, and take into consideration language barriers and visual impairments (Frankston City Council).

### Gender

Although equal in their rights to the city and to public services, males and females clearly have different needs. Women, due to menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and general physical anatomy, often use toilets more frequently than do men.

For some women, giving birth can result in a prolapsed bladder, which provokes symptoms of urinary incontinence (i.e., involuntary release of urine) and difficulty urinating (WebMD, 2014). One participant disclosed:

*“my mother had a prolapsed bowel from the birth of my brother, and it informed our lives, because she has urgency issues, and so we were always conscious of when you could actually go out, what you ate, where things were.”*

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In some instances, surgery is required to alleviate symptoms of urinary incontinence, but surgery isn't always infallible, as one woman explained:

*"[...] because I had four children, I had to have a bladder lift done, but even with that, once I decide I have to go to the washroom I have to go to the washroom so if I stray too far from home or washroom facilities, like trying to go for a long walk, isn't really feasible anymore because I have to plan it around bathroom stops... and anytime I stop somewhere if there's a washroom, I'll use it just in case, because I don't know when the next one might be. And I have had accidents, which is not fun or comfortable. And as an adult, especially, it's embarrassing too, but sometimes you just can't stop in the middle of the street and go and sometimes there's no bush place and it's all residential and you're stranded..."*

Participants also mentioned how females are particularly tethered to bathrooms during their 'time of the month' when it is difficult to anticipate when it will be time to change a sanitary napkin (tampon or pad) and often results in more frequent trips to the washroom just to "check." Participants of both genders referenced the physiological differences between men and women. Males stand up to pee, and this allows them to go just about anywhere they please (behind a tree, in an ally, or in a dark corner), while for women who, as western society dictates, sit down or "hover" to pee, the need for public washrooms is felt all the more acutely. Researchers have argued that, because of this habitual difference in how toilets are used between males and females, women take twice as long as men to use the toilet, and therefore need twice as much provision as men (Greed, 2003, p. 5).

Many female participants stressed that they felt they required a toilet more often than their male counterparts due to changes in their bodies that resulted from strictly female ailments, and several recalled times when they felt they had to resort to using the men's washrooms because the provision of the women's washrooms was inadequate.

In addition, women often act as primary caregivers to the elderly, disabled, infirm, and children, which again requires that they make supplementary trips to the restroom. The needs of the stereotypically female role of caregiver were expressed by a woman who, on the topic of public washrooms and women with strollers, said: *"none of these washrooms are gunna be accessible for women with children. You need changing tables at these places... who's gunna lay their kid on the ground to change its diaper, I know I wouldn't!"* Even men take note of the difference in provision, as one man described the situation as: *"far worse for females than for males. In my view, I expect the city is far worse for females than for males. As a matter of fact, my wife doesn't like to go for long bike rides with me because of that."*

Some participants believe that the installation of more unisex toilets might be a solution to equitably provide public toilets for all citizens regardless of gender. While one mother remarked

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that family washrooms had come in handy to her in the past, another participant suggests installing porta-potties in parks, playgrounds and splash-pads.

### Accessibility

The perception of virtually all participants is that there are not enough washrooms for people with disabilities in Ottawa. There are not enough such washrooms just about everywhere - in parks, in restaurants, in shopping centres, in the downtown core, in bus shelters and along the transit ways. A young woman in a wheelchair expressed her frustration at following signs, on multiple occasions, for a disabled toilet only to discover once inside that the design was flawed in some manner that rendered it unusable to her. Another participant shared a similar sentiment saying: *“I think what’s actually worse is when they [toilets] give the impression they are accessible and they’re not.”* One participant in a wheelchair highlighted two key issues, the first: *“able-bodied people are the ones that build the bathrooms”* and the second: *“people’s disabilities vary immensely.”* This person went on to tell of

*“one time, I was in a bathroom and everything was in such close proximity that there was a heater, or some sort of vent, sticking out from underneath, and I had nowhere to put my feet in between my chair and the toilet because I park perpendicular. It’s just things like that I guess people don’t... why would they think of them right? Something like doors that swing outward and then don’t have a handle on the inside so you can pull the door in.”*

In regard to accessible port-a-potties, one respondent reported:

*“they are totally inaccessible; I don’t understand how anyone uses them. They don’t have a bar or anything to grab onto, they’re just more spacious and the toilet is really high off the ground and you have to be really tall to sit on it.”*

People with special needs in terms of toilets have different degrees of accessibility. In order for “accessible” toilets to truly be accessible to everyone, planners must consider the ways that disabilities differ, accommodate those specific needs into one universal design plan and integrate this design into all disabled toilets across the city so as to provide good, sustainable access.

### Monetary Issues

As with most services provided by the municipal government, the cost of installing and maintaining clean, functional toilets is an issue for decision-makers in Ottawa. Most of the controversy in terms of operating costs is focused on where the money to run toilet facilities will come from. One response to this issue is to install pay-per-use toilets that are available to the general public, and which require a small fee (usually between twenty-five cents to a dollar). However, this fee does not always appear small from the perspective of those with limited disposable income. When asked

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whether they would like to see more pay-per-use toilets in Ottawa, 4 participants (27%) said that they would like to see more, 7 (50%) said that they would not, and 3 people (20%) were ambivalent, believing that this solution would benefit some of the population but not all. Participants felt that pay-per-use toilets are not accessible for people on fixed incomes, disability, welfare, and pensions because these people may not be able to afford the luxury of paying to use a toilet, and therefore the fee acts as a barrier to many. One participant reported:

*“there’s this systemic oppression aspect to it where people with disabilities are generally much more poor than the rest of the population. So, to pay to go to the bathroom is just another thing, just another social issue.”*

Another said: *“I think it’s kind of a basic thing that people need and that money shouldn’t be a barrier to accessing it.”* This was a common theme amongst respondents, and, when asked about pay-per-use toilets, they replied: *“something gets lost in society in that translation”* and *“[pay-per-use toilets] certainly cuts some people out from using a toilet, and maybe the people who need to use the toilet the most, for instance homeless people.”* One respondent stated simply: *“I think that pay-per-use has all sorts of social justice issues that are really serious. There are people who always have money and there are people who don’t.”*

By the same token, many restaurants now have signs reading ‘restrooms for paying costumers only’ that creates the same financial barrier for some people as pay-per-use toilets. Asked if they had ever been refused the use of a restroom in a private business or restaurant, 9 participants (60%) replied that they had. One participant noted: *“if you’re not buying anything, they [restaurants] really don’t want anything to do with you”* while another found:

*“[...] it odd that a business would turn people away who are in need like that. And I’ve seen things like they say ‘it’s for costumers only’ and they make them buy something and the person will just end up asking ‘OK what’s the cheapest thing you have?’ and the coffee shop might sell them a forty cent cookie, and it’s funny that the barrier to that person, who really needed that toilet, was forty cents to that business and as soon as you pay that forty cents it’s fine to go use the toilet.”*

Four participants (27%) said they had not been refused.

One participant strongly believes that having public toilets in central locations, such as downtown Ottawa, “would be a boon to businesses” because it would encourage people to visit the area and stay longer, and thus provide more time to spend money on the varied products and services that downtown has to offer.

Participants also suggested the City improve upon the hydrologic efficiency of public toilet mechanics so as to conserve water and thus reduce operating costs.

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### Location

Where public toilets are located is an integral aspect of their design that can determine whether they are accessible or not. Participants made note of many locations in Ottawa that they considered to be either satisfactory or unsatisfactory in terms of toilet availability and accessibility. Participants recalled that they had visited more locations in Ottawa where public toilet provision was more commonly found to be unsatisfactory than satisfactory in their distinct views.

Many participants expressed conflicting opinions of public toilet provision in Ottawa as several locations were described as both unsatisfactory and satisfactory, in terms of accessibility and availability, by different participants. The inconsistency in these findings could be a result of location specific differences in design layout, operating hours, and/or maintenance as well as individualistic standards and requirements for each participant as a result of different life experiences. This information, although valuable for its revelation that participants feel there are more unsatisfactory than satisfactory public toilets in Ottawa, is beyond the scope of this study and it is suggested that further research is conducted to discover where toilet availability and accessibility is found to be unsatisfactory and why.

One statement that strikes a cord was from a woman with ulcerative colitis who referred to Tim Horton's as:

*"the beacon in the dark for us because they are always safe, the hours are extended (so you usually are able to get in after 6 pm or 9 pm) and they don't require that you purchase anything, and I have never had a hassle there in terms of trying to access the public washrooms. In terms of municipal or city services, I cannot recall one that would have been in an area that I would have needed to use one."*

What this reveals is that in Ottawa, the capital city of one of the most prosperous, countries in the world, citizens put more faith in the reliability of restrooms in an iconic Canadian donut and coffee chain than they do in government provision.

### Signage

Signs, indicating the location of public washrooms, are an important feature of public toilets for many of the participants interviewed. Citizens insist that most public toilets are not sufficiently indicated by way of a sign, and most reported that they must ask people nearby where public toilets are located because signs are either non-existent or difficult to spot. As one woman explained:

*"if you don't know the Rideau Centre, if you don't know the St. Laurent Shopping Centre, if you don't know the Bayshore Shopping Centre, you could pee yourself by the time you got off the OC Transpo bus to get into anywhere because you can't find the toilets... this is supposed to be the nation's capital, but it ain't as far as I'm concerned."*

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So desperate to find public toilets are many people that one woman remarked: *“I’ve come short of knocking on somebody’s door, but I think that’s coming soon.”*

### Operating Hours

Many participants complained of public toilets that were closed during certain times of the day, and during particular seasons – specifically, public washrooms were found to be less accessible during the early spring, fall and winter months. One interviewee explained that

*“accessibility is not easy if you’re homeless, like I am, Rideau closes at nine: no washrooms. A lot of centres close at six, seven at night: no washrooms. What are you gunna do? You’re gunna pee in a bush.”*

Even those participants who were not homeless described the constraints that the public toilet hours of operation have had on their lives. One woman reported she couldn’t go out in the morning before 9 am because no toilets would be open. Most participants expressed that, while provision of public toilets was more satisfactory in the summer, they would like to see efforts to provide facilities during the winter months as well. Participants also suggested putting in 24-hour toilets as opposed to the standard operating hours.

### Public transit

Participants described situations in which they had need of a public toilet while using public transit in Ottawa but none were available to them. One respondent said frankly: *“peed my pants, yep. It happened more than once.”* Another told the researcher:

*“[...] my son and I were on a bus, and we were at an OC Transpo bus shelter at Hurdman station, and there was a public toilet there, but they would not allow my son to use it because it was for the OC Transpo bus drivers and they could not be opened to the public in an emergency. My son almost peed himself, he was ten years old, he had to go, he had to literally get off the bus and he had to go then, they wouldn’t let us use the toilets so my son had to go run across the street at ten years old and pee and go for a poo, because he had the runs, and he had to go into the bush. Ya, and it was disgusting. Good thing I always carry a roll of toilet paper.”*

Multiple participants expressed the inconvenience of having to get off the bus while in between destinations because they needed to disembark in order to find a washroom and then have to pay to get back on the bus. Another person thought that in Ottawa *“there is a lot of people who won’t take public transit precisely because they are afraid of getting caught short.”*

All the participants, 15 (100%), replied that they would be more likely to take public transit, cycle, or walk, if more public toilets were installed in the City of Ottawa. As part of Ottawa’s

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sustainability plan, the city hopes to encourage its citizens to use public transit in lieu of personal vehicles, so as to reduce carbon emissions and create a sustainable city that has the least impact on the natural environment as possible. This survey suggests that one way to increase ridership on public transit would be to install more public toilets in bus and LRT stations. Another participant had this to say:

*“I think it’s just ridiculous that there’s no toilets, and the costs would be negligible, if it’s part of the initial construction, and operating costs compared to the ridership – it’s not a lot.”*

### LRT (light rail transit) project

At present (Fall, 2014), there are plans for public washrooms only at the two terminus stations of the LRT project. None are planned for the stations in between. When asked about the current LRT design plan, which includes public toilets only at the two terminus stations, and none in between, one man said:

*“this makes the city more unfriendly for tourists, for example, strangers to the city from more Canadian cities or abroad, or for its own citizens who the city is attempting to get to use public transit more frequently.”*

Every participant suggested that the City of Ottawa should install public washrooms in all LRT and OC Transpo stations. One man put it in plain terms when he said:

*“it seems logical that you might want to put in facilities for users of the transit system and for people who are just regular pedestrians and people in that area where you know there’s a public toilet in there and you can use it.”*

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study found, from in-depth interviews with 15 participants, that the City of Ottawa is under-provisioned in terms of public toilets. Most respondents felt:

- there are not enough public toilets in the City of Ottawa;
- public toilets are not clean; mental and physical health concerns are created by improper or non-existent public toilet provision;
- women and children require extra provision of public toilets;
- there are not enough accessible public toilets for people in wheelchairs, walkers and with strollers; and
- installing pay-per-use toilets is not a favourable solution to the issue of the cost to build and maintain public facilities.

### Recommendations

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Participants of this study recommended the following to the City of Ottawa:

- build more public washrooms, including in parks, children’s playgrounds and along the transit way; and
- invest in the good maintenance of public washrooms to meet cleanliness standards and encourage usage.
- install porta-potties in parks and splash pads,
- build more washrooms along the transitway, particularly in all major stops and transit stations, including light rail stations, so as to make public transit more user-friendly.
- install more signs in Ottawa indicating the location and proximity of available and accessible public washrooms;
- install more accessible toilets for people in walkers and wheelchairs, and families with strollers;
- Locate toilets in places that are neither isolated, in basements, nor upstairs;
- Make public toilets accessible 24/7 in all seasons
- Provide for security issues

### **Messages to City Council**

Participants were asked how they would respond if given the chance to communicate one core message about public toilets in Ottawa to the members of Ottawa’s city council, here are some of their responses:

*“City planners need to realize that when people need access to bathrooms, whether they are children who simply can’t wait or people with medical conditions, we need to be able to access these bathrooms and not necessarily just between nine and five.”*

*“But writing policy for the majority I think implicitly excludes the people who are relatively in the margins, whether they are disabled, elderly, suffer from medical illness, and children are just not thought of in the policy writing process and it’s the majority of the population. There is no real consideration paid to the people who may have special needs.”*

*“Sick people already have a pretty raw deal, and we struggle with a lot of different things, depending on what is going on in our lives from day to day. I mean, this is so simple a thing that I think people just don’t think about it, and my message would be when you’re planning something or your looking at the possibility of changing something to benefit the residents of the city, that you look beyond things that are necessarily cosmetic and aesthetic and really try and think of ways that we can improve the community to increase usership of all of the community for everybody who lives here. Sick people want to participate and go out and be part of the world. There are things that people just never give a second thought to that are just never really considered.”*

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*“Just that they are not an option. Like if you ever had to choose between going out and going to a place of business, or trying to work somewhere, and realizing half way in that they don’t have an accessible bathroom, you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t choose. Going to the bathroom is not an option. I don’t really understand why that’s forgotten. I don’t use accessible toilets for fun, I use them because I need them, I use them because I don’t have the option of using a regular stall and it’s a fundamental need. It’s not an option.”*

*“Everybody needs to use the bathroom at some point, it’s a basic human need, and it should really be accessible to everybody. Nobody should have to worry about having to find a toilet. Everybody needs to use the bathroom and I’ve witnessed it as a problem, both for myself and for other people, having trouble finding a bathroom or being denied at a business or being in an area where there is no public toilet at all. Yeah, I don’t understand why, especially it is really mind boggling with the LRT project how they didn’t just go ahead and design that into the plans from the get-go. And those can serve not only the transit users, but also just the people that are in that area, to know that the stations are all gunna be signed well people are gunna know how to get to the stations if you knew that every station was gunna have a bathroom. There are just so many positive things about why it makes sense to put bathrooms in those stations.”*

*“Public toilets are absolutely essential, are an essential part of our responsibilities to the public and to the environment. The provision of toilets for people is an essential part of our humanity and of our ability to take care of one another, and if we don’t do that, then we are doing what Keller Greed called ‘organized irresponsibility’.”*

*“If we could all just have more conversations about public toilets, we would all be better off. Nobody talks about it because nobody wants to admit that they ever need a bathroom, but that’s just silly, because my gosh everybody does it!”*

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### **Appendix A:**

#### Interview Guide

- 1. Can you please tell me a little about yourself (specifically in relation to your experience with public toilets)?**
- 2. Do you think that Ottawa has enough available or accessible public toilets?**
  - Does it have enough toilets for persons with disabilities?
  - Where have you found toilets to be easily accessible?
  - Where have you found toilets to be largely inaccessible?
  - What makes the toilets inaccessible?
  - Are your toilet needs sufficiently met by the provision from the City of Ottawa?
- 3. In your experience, is there an equal number of men's and women's public toilets in Ottawa?**

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- 4. Does Ottawa have enough public toilet facilities in areas such as parks and children's playgrounds?**
  - What has been your experience
  - Can you expand on that please?
- 5. Can you describe a situation in which you, or someone you care for, had need of a public toilet but none were available to your knowledge?**
  - Has this situation occurred often?
  - Can you tell me about one instance please?
- 6. Have you, or someone you cared for, ever been refused the use of a toilet in a private restaurant or business that you entered for the purpose of using their facilities?**
  - Can you describe the situation?
  - Has this happened more than once? How often?
  - What types of businesses in particular?
- 7. Has there ever been a time when you, or someone you cared for, were using public transit in Ottawa, had need of a toilet and couldn't find one?**
  - Can you tell me what happened?
  - How did you manage?
- 8. The City of Ottawa has plans to put in a new LRT line from Tunney's to Blair. At this point the plan is to only have public toilets installed in terminal stations instead of ALL stations. What are your thoughts about this plan?**
- 9. Are you able to find public toilets when you are in an area unfamiliar to you?**
  - How do you, or a person you care for, manage when you are unfamiliar with the location of public toilet facilities in the area?
- 10. Has a lack of public toilets in Ottawa ever prevented you, or someone you cared for, from leaving the house or embarking on outings with friends and family?**
  - Can you tell me about any particular situations?
  - What is the time frame that you are restricted to when you are in a public setting and no public toilets are accessible?
  - If yes (to the above question), what could be done to encourage you, or a person you care for, to leave the house more and/or participate more in Ottawa?
- 11. Has the lack of public toilets in Ottawa had any effect on your health, either physical or emotional?**
  - How would the installation of more accessible public toilets in Ottawa affect your emotional/physical health?
  - Would you be more likely to walk, cycle or take public transit if more public toilets were available in Ottawa?
- 12. Who do you think policy-makers and city planners envision as the "average" toilet user?**
  - Does this constitute the majority of the City of Ottawa's population?
  - Do you consider yourself an "average toilet user"? Why?
- 13. People and politicians expressed concern about a number of issues related to public toilets. What are your thoughts about the following:**

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- Cleanliness?
  - Security?
  - Cost?
14. **One option for Ottawa could be to install pay-per-use toilet facilities in Ottawa, what is your opinion on this?**
  15. **If you could leave Ottawa's planners and public policy decision-makers with one core message about public toilets in Ottawa what would it be?**
  16. **Are there any other issues that you consider important?**