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STAR EXCLUSIVE

Fire crews slower to respond in Toronto's low-income neighbourhoods, data shows

Toronto Fire Services met its target response times at lower rates in areas designated as struggling with inequity and lack of public investment.

By **Ben Spurr** City Hall Bureau

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Toronto Fire Services takes longer to respond to emergency calls in disadvantaged areas of the city compared to other neighbourhoods, according to new data from the department, and councillors warn the pattern could be putting residents in vulnerable communities at risk.

A Star analysis of TFS data detailing more than 425,000 emergency calls across Toronto's 158 neighbourhoods between 2020 and 2022 shows the department met its response time target at lower rates in areas of the city that have been designated as struggling with inequity.

The designated communities, officially known as "neighbourhood improvement areas" (NIAs) and "emerging neighbourhoods" (ENs), generally have higher portions of low-income and racialized communities, and newcomers.

According to the data, on average the department met its target for a key metric called "total response time" in just 70 per cent of incidents in the city's 33 NIAs and 10 ENs. For neighbourhoods not identified as disadvantaged, the department met its target 80 per cent of the time. The National Fire Protection Association benchmark is 90 per cent.

Councillor calls numbers 'unacceptable'

Coun. Jaye Robinson (Ward 15, Don Valley West) said the numbers are "not acceptable."

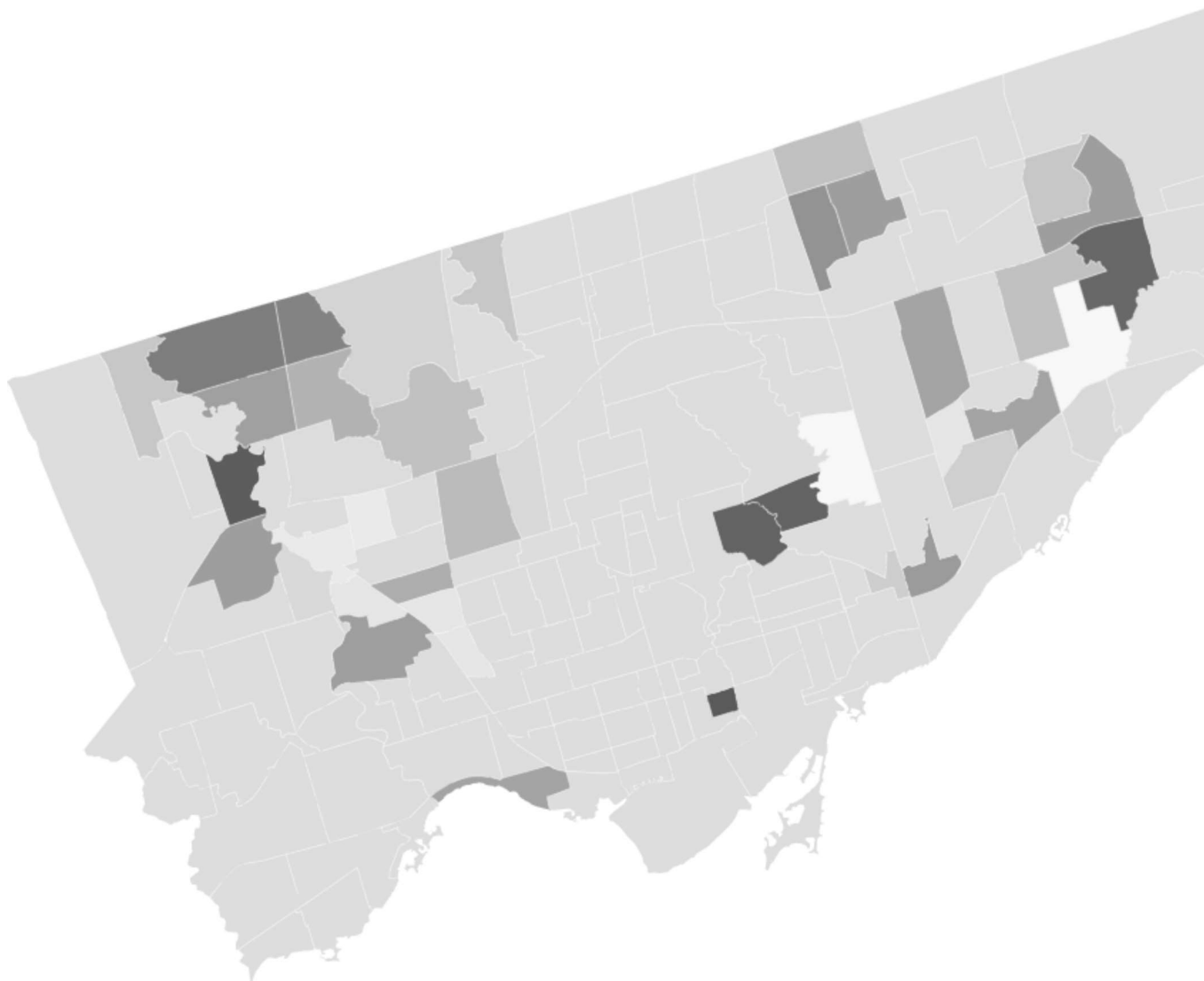
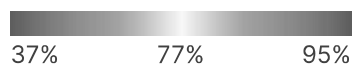
She represents Thorncliffe Park, a dense apartment neighbourhood in East York that is one of the areas where fire department response times were worse.

She recalled that last year there was a three-alarm fire on the 42nd floor of a building on Thorncliffe Park Drive. No one was seriously injured, "but with these type of response times it could be a different outcome," she said. "So I think that's why it's important we understand what's going on."

She said she has requested an urgent meeting with fire Chief Matthew Pegg to discuss the issue.

Toronto Fire response times

The fire department met its total response time target in 77 per cent of emergency calls citywide between 2020 and 2022, but rates were below average in most of Toronto's 43 disadvantaged neighbourhoods.



SOURCE: STAR ANALYSIS OF TORONTO FIRE SERVICE DATA

TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Fire department measures response time by ward

In an email to the Star, Pegg didn't offer an explanation for why the analysis showed the department's performance was worse in marginalized areas. He said that TFS typically measures response time by ward, and cautioned the smaller sample size of neighbourhood data could make the statistics unreliable.

He said that in general, response times are affected by factors like call volumes, traffic, weather and construction, and noted TFS concentrates equipment and firefighters in high-density parts of town because of "the greater associated life safety risks" of incidents in those areas. Most neighbourhood improvement areas are in the northwest or eastern part of the city, outside the core.

Pegg said that TFS "works to optimize fire protection services across Toronto on a daily basis," and the department is taking steps to improve response times, including strategically redeploying resources and hiring more staff.

“These additional personnel will assist TFS in maintaining and improving response time performance in the face of rising emergency call volumes and increased growth and density within the city,” he said.

Different ways to measure fire department’s performance

There are different ways to measure a fire department’s performance. One important one is total response time, which is defined as how long it takes for the first truck to arrive on scene after the department receives an emergency call. The National Fire Protection Association benchmark is to have a vehicle arrive within six minutes and 24 seconds, 90 per cent of the time.

The metric applies to all types of calls, including fires, traffic incidents and medical emergencies. More than half of the calls TFS responds to are medical emergencies, while roughly a quarter are fires.

In the 10 neighbourhoods where TFS had the worst total response-time percentages — over the three years covered by the data — the department responded to between 32 and 49 per cent of calls within the benchmark time. Six of the 10 neighbourhoods were NIAs: Elms—Old Rexdale, Thorncliffe Park, Flemingdon Park, Morningside, Humber Summit and Black Creek.

NIAs and ENs also fared poorly according to another metric called “effective firefighting force,” which measures how long it takes to deploy the number of firefighters required to complete each critical task at a fire.

The average percentages at which TFS met the benchmark for that measure were lower in NIAs and ENs, and in 2022 the designated neighbourhoods made up seven of the 10 areas where the department’s scores were the lowest.

For the three years covered by the data, NIAs on average had higher emergency call volumes than neighbourhoods without a designation, while ENs had fewer.

Fire crew response times show need for improvement

Jin Huh, executive director of Social Planning Toronto, a progressive think tank, said she was disappointed but not surprised by the statistics. Although it’s well documented that residents in NIAs and ENs lack adequate access to services like health care, public transit and community spaces, she said this is the first time she’s seen an analysis that indicates they also have worse fire service response times.

According to Huh, it’s the responsibility of TFS and all city departments to implement “a citywide, cross-division approach to addressing neighbourhood inequity and inequality.”

In 2021, TFS began implementing recommendations from an operational review that aims to improve response times. They include strategically redistributing trucks and other equipment to react to changing call volumes in different parts of the city. Pegg said the department is monitoring the results of the changes instituted so far.

The department also plans to add 52 new front-line staff in each of the next three years, and is exploring building a new fire station in Flemingdon Park.

Coun. Jon Burnside (Ward 16, Don Valley East), who represents Flemingdon, said the neighbourhood is cut off from other parts of the city by the Don Valley and can be difficult to access for emergency vehicles, a problem that’s been exacerbated by traffic headaches caused by construction for the Eglinton Crosstown LRT.

He said he was “heartened” that TFS is considering building a new fire station in the community, but “in the meantime, we need to figure out how we can improve things.”

“Communities shouldn’t be ignored,” he said. Flemingdon residents “deserve the same service as everyone else in the city.”

With data analysis by Andrew Bailey



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