

Research Report¹

Hasidim and non-Hasidim in Outremont and Mile End Using and sharing public spaces

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Summary

- **The parks: peaceful cohabitation, despite diverse expectations** – The observations I conducted in the parks, and particularly in the playgrounds, confirm the existence of a peaceful, though distant cohabitation between Hasidim and non-Hasidim. Indeed, peaceful cohabitation is characteristic of these spaces in general, just as it is in the public spaces in Montreal's other multi-ethnic neighbourhoods (Germain et Blanc, 1998). While it is rare, some social interaction does occasionally occur, ranging from small talk to the sharing of toys and playground equipment. The interviews with Hasidim confirm this finding. On the other hand, some non-Hasidim spoke of unpleasant experiences on the playgrounds, which they may have experienced themselves or heard about through rumours. Others expressed their unease at the reserve shown by Hasidim in public spaces, particularly Hasidic women. Non-Hasidic mothers also spoke of their difficulty in understanding the neighbourhood's diversity and explaining it to their own children.

- **"Irritants", problematic publicizing and rumours** – When interviewed, some non-Hasidim (residents of both boroughs, store owners and blue collars) referred to personal experiences that they found disturbing and which coloured their view of relations between Hasidim and non-Hasidim. Most of these accounts were emotionally charged. The problems described and the associated emotions often go back in time; most haven't

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been resolved and cannot easily be discussed in public, except with other people in the neighbourhood who share similar experiences. This kind of problematic publicizing lends itself to the spread of rumours, whether it be among neighbours, in the local media or on social media.

- **Religion and an insular lifestyle as poorly understood motifs** – Most irritants are linked to incidents of a very practical nature (children's toys left in the lane; the incessant noise made by the neighbour's child; cars speeding down the lane); and the same experience may not turn into an irritant for everyone. On the other hand, some non-Hasidim pointed to the Jewish religion and the restrictive manner in which it is practised by the Hasidim, as well as to the insularity of the Hasidic community, in order to explain why they found such behaviour disturbing, or simply very different. The manner in which Hasidim practise their religion and the lifestyle within their community remain largely unknown and misunderstood, and for some people, these are incompatible with a shared communal life in Outremont.

- **The point of view of the Hasidim** – The Hasidim I interviewed were generally positive in describing their experience of living in the neighbourhood. Overtly anti-Semitic incidents were said to be few in number and were always described in nuanced detail. According to some Hasidim, these isolated incidents were the work of a tiny minority, either neighbours who were particularly thin-skinned or agitators intent on provoking trouble. Other Hasidim laid some of the responsibility for the persistence of anti-Semitism on the borough and the police, particularly with regard to certain bylaws whose application appears to affect Hasidim more than others.

- **Working for the borough of Outremont, an uncomfortable position** – What emerged from the interviews conducted with the Outremont borough's white-collar workers and officers was their discomfort at what they consider to be the excessive vigilance – or even intolerance and anti-Semitism – on the part of certain non-Hasidic residents (almost always the same) concerning certain irritants or infractions purportedly

committed by Hasidic people (lack of cleanliness, construction work carried out without a permit, noise made by the children, etc.). While these workers acknowledged that certain residents may feel exasperated and that some complaints were in fact justified, they often found themselves obliged to intervene with the Hasidim as a result; moreover, they felt that they themselves were under surveillance and sometimes suspected of applying a double standard in the enforcement of the municipal regulations, even when this was not the case. The workers also mentioned that an effort needs to be made in order to raise the awareness of the Hasidim concerning matters such as respect for the environment, cleanliness within common public spaces, the aesthetic of the borough and procedures for obtaining a construction permit.

- **Lack of communication and a desire to learn more** – Most of the people interviewed mentioned the lack of communication as a crucial element underlying the tensions between Hasidim and non-Hasidim. Both sides were held to be responsible and any initiative that aims to improve communication, in addition to promoting encounters, was viewed favourably (particularly on the part of non-Hasidim, among whom the desire to learn more about their neighbours is quite widespread). In addition to those activities that are already in place such as the 'Table de concertation' (about which all those interviewed would like more information), other possible solutions were suggested, including the creation of a mediation bureau for neighbours experiencing problems; organizing more activities that bring people together; and creating a community contact that would facilitate liaison between the borough and the various Hasidic groups.