

KATHI WILSON

CAG Award for Scholarly Distinction in Geography

Over the course of more than 20 years, Professor Wilson has established a highly successful internationally recognized research program examining the links between the environment and health. Through a community-based research lens, and innovative research methods, her research has had a major impact on the field of Health Geography, and more specifically, on understanding the health of Indigenous peoples and immigrant populations in Canada.



Research Contributions

As PI/ co-applicant, Professor Wilson has secured over \$5,000,000 in funding from the tri-agencies (i.e., SSHRC and CIHR), government, international funding bodies, and the University of Toronto. This funding has supported an innovative research program that has produced over 100 publications, including 90+ peer-review papers, book chapters, reports, and a co-edited book. Professor Wilson's research has been published in high impact and leading journals, spanning topics such as geography, environment and health, Indigenous studies, immigration studies, and population and public health, such as *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Health and Place*, *Health Policy*, *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, *Political Geography*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *Urban Planning*, etc. In terms of impact and influence, Professor Wilson's work has been cited over 7,000 times and has an h-index of 43 (Google Scholar).

While such metrics are important for demonstrating a sustained contribution to the field of Health Geography, most impressive is the transformative nature of Professor Wilson's scholarship. Her work has established the importance of geographical perspectives and approaches to understanding the complexity of Indigenous health as well as immigrant health in the Canadian context. In fact, Professor Wilson's scholarship on Indigenous health has been credited for the development of the *Geographies of Indigenous Health* subdiscipline.

During her doctoral studies and early in her academic career, few to no geographers were examining issues of Indigenous health in Canada. Thus, the role of geography in shaping Indigenous health was not well understood. The limited geographic scholarship that existed was either historic in nature or comprised of quantitative research that was reductionist in its approach to measuring Indigenous health and its reliance on settler-colonial perspectives of the determinants of Indigenous health. Professor Wilson's early work was among the first to demonstrate the importance of geography, particularly the land, for Indigenous health. In 2002, a quantitative paper published by Wilson and Rosenberg disrupted and challenged long-standing conceptions of the social determinants of health for Indigenous peoples by incorporating culturally specific variables as determinants of self-rated health and chronic conditions. As Richmond and Big-Canoe (2018) note, this paper became "one of the seminar pieces in Indigenous health geography" and is regarded as one of the first papers to identify and demonstrate the importance of culturally specific determinants of health, including traditional activities, for Indigenous health in Canada.

Professor Wilson's dissertation, regarded as a seminal piece in the field of study, challenged predominant views of Indigenous health, which tended to be biomedical in focus and overlooked the importance of connections to land and traditional territories as determinants of health. Using qualitative in-depth interviews, Professor Wilson examined the intricate and critical link between land and health for Indigenous peoples. Emerging from her dissertation was a 2003 paper published in the journal *Health and Place*, which demonstrated, through Indigenous voices, the importance of land for the holistic well-being of individuals and communities. In doing so, this paper revealed that conceptualizations of both 'health' and 'place' in Health Geography at that time were partial in that they failed to consider culturally specific understandings of place. In this paper, Professor Wilson stressed the "significance and validity of considering other ways of knowing" for a more fulsome understanding of the link between health and place. This paper has been cited over 700 times and is a transformative paper in the discipline of Health Geography. In fact, Richmond and Big-Canoe (2018) assert that this seminal paper set the context for the development of the *Geographies of Indigenous Health* as a subdiscipline (Richmond and Big-Canoe, 2018).

Over the course of her career, Professor Wilson has continued to transform the way geographers think about Indigenous health. While over 50% of Indigenous peoples in Canada live in urban settings, government legislation, including health policies, along with most scholarly research, remains focused on reserve-based Indigenous populations. Thus, little is known about the unique challenges of urban spaces to supporting Indigenous health and wellbeing. Professor Wilson's novel body of scholarship on urban Indigenous health, which includes both quantitative and qualitative research, has drawn important attention to disparities in health and access to care for Indigenous peoples living in urban settings across Canada. This important work has included a range of community-level studies on access to health and social services in urban settings, including Toronto, Winnipeg, and Prince George. Settler-colonial policies and legislation, including the Indian Act, fail to recognize that the majority of Indigenous peoples in Canada are connected to urban spaces, and they limit the majority of rights and services for Indigenous peoples to the artificial boundaries of reserve spaces. In contrast, Professor Wilson's novel scholarship on urban Indigenous health reveals that the spaces Indigenous peoples occupy in cities are not static and that movement within and between cities and between reserve and urban settings creates both opportunities and challenges to health and wellbeing and access to health and social services. The mobility of Indigenous peoples within and across geographic spaces at various scales is not reflected within existing health policy, legislation, nor in most care systems. Professor Wilson's scholarship in the field is not only important for drawing attention to the lived experiences of health among urban Indigenous peoples but also for demonstrating a critical need for all levels of government to recognize and uphold Indigenous rights to the city to support health and wellbeing and equitable access to culturally appropriate services among this growing population.

In the field of immigration and health, Professor Wilson's scholarly output and contributions are exceptionally prolific. Under a framework of community-based research, the overall goal of her research program is to promote the health and well-being of immigrant populations by seeking to better understand the role of built, social, political, and institutional environments in shaping disparities in health and inequities in access to health and social services across intersectional immigrant identities (i.e., gender, race, length of residency, etc.). Professor Wilson has built strong collaborative research partnerships with local organizations to support her research program. In

building partnerships with local organizations, health service providers (Trillium Health Partners), and local and regional governments (e.g., City of Mississauga, Peel Region Public Health), her research program is committed to knowledge mobilization at the local level to inform the development of inclusive and accountable health and social services institution. Professor Wilson's scholarship in this field has highlighted the uniqueness of place and the environment in shaping health and access to health and social services among newcomer populations. Her research in Peel Region was among the first to focus on the role of the built, social, and political environments in shaping immigrant health outside the main major gateway cities of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. In doing so, Professor Wilson's research has identified the unique challenges suburban environments pose for the delivery of and access to health and social services, promotion of health, and successful integration of newcomer populations.

As a reflection of the importance of Professor Wilson's scholarly contributions to the fields of the Geographies of Indigenous Health and immigration and health, in 2020, she received the *Desmond Morton Research Excellence Award*, which recognizes outstanding career achievement in research and scholarly activity by faculty members of the University of Toronto Mississauga. In addition, at the 2024 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Professor Wilson received the *Melinda S. Meade Distinguished Scholarship Award in Health and Medical Geography*. This award "seeks to recognize individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the advancements of health and/or medical geography research."

Contributions to Mentorship

Over the course of her career, Professor Wilson has demonstrated an exceptional track record in attracting and training highly qualified personnel (HQP). She has supervised over 30 research opportunity program students (ROPs)¹, 14 honours thesis students, 19 MA students, 7 PhD students, and 6 Postdoctoral Research Fellows, and has served on over 35 graduate supervisory committees. Professor Wilson has also incorporated and mentored several community-based and peer research assistants (PRAs)² into her community-based research programs. Professor Wilson's current and former students are highly successful in securing external funding and publishing high quality output. Her former students have earned success in securing positions in academia (including at the University of Waterloo, McMaster University, University of Nebraska Omaha), government, and community organizations. Professor Wilson's research and teaching philosophy is grounded in the importance of training and building capacity for graduate and undergraduate students to conduct research. Students form an integral part of her research activities. Her track record clearly shows that Professor Wilson sees her role as a mentor and supervisor as one that seeks to support students in their development as scholars and/or researchers. As evidence of this, over fifty percent of her peer-reviewed published articles are co-authored with her trainees, and additional papers have been co-authored with colleagues' trainees. In recognition of Professor Wilson's superlative teaching and mentoring skills, she was awarded the *Canadian Association of*

¹ROP students at the University of Toronto are undergraduate students who earn a full course credit by participating in faculty research projects.

²PRAs are research assistants who hired from within communities/population groups that are the focus of community-based research studies. PRAs bringing lived experiences and knowledge to research projects, thereby providing critical firsthand perspectives that shape research design, interpretation, and knowledge dissemination/mobilization.

Geographer's Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Geography and the *UTM Teaching Excellence Faculty Award* in 2011.

Of particular note, Professor Wilson has achieved this research excellence while also serving in administrative roles. She was the Chair of the Geography Department (now GGE) for seven years, followed by another five years in her current role as Vice-Dean, Faculty. Maintaining an active research program is typically challenging while serving as an academic administrator, yet Professor Wilson has continued to train HQP, publish in high-ranking journals, and further her research program while making important contributions to the field of Health Geography – this is truly impressive.

In closing, Professor Wilson is an outstanding and influential scholar in the field of Health Geography whose work in the field of Indigenous health inspired the development of a new subdiscipline. She has established a strong international reputation as a leading scholar in the fields of Indigenous health and the health of immigrant populations. She is widely known for prioritizing a commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice in her teaching and training of HQP, in the various administrative positions she has held, and in her research program. Over the past two decades, she has established a highly successful (as measured by publications/output, funding, training, contributions to the field, local level partnerships, etc.) community-based research program focused on identifying and addressing geographic disparities in health and inequities in access to health care/social services for historically marginalized populations and those living in vulnerable circumstances and is clearly deserving of recognition by the CAG for *Scholarly Distinction in Geography*.