



# Shared Responsibility: Building Healthy Communities in Winnipeg's North End



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with Mary Williams and Larry Morrissette  
and North End Housing Project

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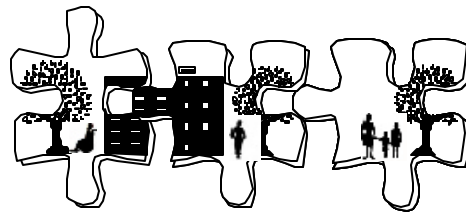
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# Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of inner-city residents and service providers and represent their ideas about building healthy communities.

The term “inner city” is often associated with a variety of urban problems. Though there are clearly problems with the physical infrastructure, including a lack of adequate and affordable housing, in our observations, Winnipeg’s inner city is rich in resident capacity and overall social capital. The multiple barriers residents face to the fullest expression of their talents and abilities are the major threats to community health. Many agencies and community groups in the inner city have been active in addressing a variety of issues. We wanted to find out what was being done from the perspectives of people who live and work in the North End.

The project was a partnership between academics at the University of Manitoba and the staff of the North End Housing Project, with funding from the Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance. The North End Housing Project was incorporated in 1996 and received charitable status in 1999. The mandate of NEHP is to revitalize neighbourhoods in the North End of Winnipeg by renovating and building houses. The Board of NEHP is comprised of local community representatives, NEHP tenants, and professional people who provide technical expertise.

Members of this partnership wanted to recognize the perspectives of people who were rarely asked for their opinions, and learn about the ways they participated in, and enhanced, the social and physical capital of the inner city. We also wanted to identify challenges faced by residents who were building community in North End neighborhoods. To do this we formed an advisory committee that included service providers and residents, to provide direction for the study. Under their guidance, we developed relationships with a group of Aboriginal youth who were ex-offenders,

employed in a housing program and building homes for families in the inner city. Over the course of eight months, they taught us about their lives, their communities, and their difficulties. We also spoke to women who had been involved in the sex trade about their experiences of community in the inner city. As well, service providers in the North End were interviewed, to understand their perspectives on community health.

The final report is divided into four parts. Part one is a review of the literature on housing, resident demographics, and community services in the inner city, with an emphasis on the North End neighborhoods served by our partner agency. Part two is a description of the participatory method used in this study. Part three is made up of three sections including results of our interviews with young Aboriginal men, women who had been involved in the sex trade and agency staff who provide services in North End neighborhoods. Part four of the report includes a conclusion as well as a series of recommendations for involving residents in community building.

# Part 1: Literature Review

What comes to mind in response to the term “inner city”? The literature reflects many negative aspects of inner city communities that include poor housing (Carter, Polevychok, & Sargent, 2003; Distasio, Dudley, & Maunder, 2002; Jargowsky, 2002; Silver, 2003); irresponsible tenants (Distasio et al., 2002), poverty (Carter et al., 2003; Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Centered Prairie Communities Winnipeg Site, 2002; Ross, Scott, & Smith, 2000), violence and crime (Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Centered Prairie Communities Winnipeg Site, 2002; Distasio & Carter, 2003), and limited opportunities for residents (Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Centered Prairie Communities Winnipeg Site, 2002). However, inner-city communities have strengths that are often overlooked. For example, many residents have reported a sense of place (Distasio et al., 2002) and have family and friends in the area (Distasio & Carter, 2003). Close proximity to amenities (Distasio & Carter, 2003) and the presence of non-profit organizations (Lucy & Philips, 2000) are other positive features of inner city neighborhoods.

A community consists of “people who live within a geographically defined area and who have social and psychological ties with each other and with the place where they live” (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997, p. 56). A healthy community is one in which “the physical location; natural environment; social and economic structure; physical and emotional health of the residents; factors prompting spiritual, cultural, and personal growth; and resource and energy use-are all sensitively integrated and functioning with each other in a way that provides for the deep harmony, well-being, and perpetuity of each part of the whole system and the system itself” (Norwood & Smith, 1995, p. 54).

Community participation, including the broad involvement of all sectors of the community and local government commitment, as well as the creation of healthy public policies are elements that are integral to meet this end (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2003.). If these elements are achieved, the following indicators are evident: clean and safe physical environment; equity, and social justice; adequate access to food,

shelter, income, safety, work and recreation for all; adequate access to health care services; opportunities for learning and skill development; strong, mutually supportive relationships and networks; workplaces that are supportive of individual and family well-being; wide participation of residents in decision-making; strong local cultural and spiritual heritage; and a diverse and vital local economy (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2003).

It is important to recognize that each community differs in its perception of healthy community. A healthy community approach involves its members deciding what kind of community they want by developing strategies that direct them to meet their needs sufficiently well in the future (Homan, 2004; Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2003).

In the following review, we briefly describe housing, demographics, and community services in the inner city. The emphasis is on neighborhoods served by our partner agency, the North End Housing Project, located in the South Point Douglas cluster, including William Whyte, Lord Selkirk Park, and North Point Douglas.

## **Housing**

Historically, it has not been clear which level of government was responsible for the development of a national housing policy. Because responsibility for housing has shifted between levels of government with the rise of new issues and concerns, there has been a lack of policy directives or resources dedicated to the issues and a mixture of informal and inconsistently instituted programs. Since 1973, the federal government has cut funding for the development of social housing, which has led to increased provincial responsibility and greater reliance on private housing markets. By 1996, the federal government had devolved all responsibility for off reserve housing to the provinces. As a result, there is nationwide variation in provincial investment and involvement in housing programs due to economic inequalities. Therefore, housing conditions in Canada have worsened with an increase in homelessness and a decrease in affordable housing (Wolfe, 1998).



This devolution of responsibility has limited the development of inner city neighborhoods, which often have the oldest and poorest quality housing stock. Many buyers do not have the financial resources to renovate them, and others choose not to make improvements for a variety of reasons (e.g. holding property purely for speculative business purposes, low area vacancy rate). As a result, many inner city residents live in substandard housing because they are unable to afford quality housing in the private market. The demand for subsidized housing outweighs the supply because there is no funding to build new units.

Winnipeg's inner city has experienced the impact of low repair and replacement of its aging housing stock. The area has three times the population density of the rest of Winnipeg, and a much higher rate of rental housing for its residents at 64% (City of Winnipeg, 2001a). Almost half of the homes were built before 1946, and about half (44%) are in need of repair (City of Winnipeg, 2001a). Apartment buildings less than five stories, row houses, rooming houses, and low-income permanent housing comprise the majority of housing stock that is available to residents. Of the 53,749 rental units in Winnipeg, about two in five (42.7%) are located in the inner city (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2001).

There is limited access to private rental and social housing for families in the inner city. No new social housing units have been built since 1995. The absence of both new private rental and new social housing creates overall shortfalls in rental supply. Given the number and growing proportion of renters paying 30% or more for their shelter, the quantity of private rental and social housing supply is not enough (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2001). In the latest census, core housing need (in which residents spend 30% or more of their income on housing) was experienced by 47.8% of renters and 17.6% of homeowners in Point Douglas South (City of Winnipeg, 2001b).

Within North Point Douglas (City of Winnipeg, 2001c), Lord Selkirk Park (City of Winnipeg, 2001d), and William Whyte (City of Winnipeg, 2001e), 67% of dwellings are rented, and the average cost ranges from \$338 to \$462 per month. Almost half (48%) of the houses are in need of repair, and are worth, on average, between \$36,436 and

\$77,747. The average dwelling value for the non-inner city of Winnipeg is \$105,882. The physical condition of these neighborhoods has been identified by the City of Winnipeg as “Major Improvement Areas”, or, “older areas that have experienced significant decline to the point where housing and neighborhood infrastructure require complete renewal” (City of Winnipeg, 2000, p.1.). It has been noted that these neighborhoods are among those where a high proportion of provincial government transfer income, through social assistance, does not remain in the area (Janzen, Carter, & McGregor, 2004).

### Residents

In Point Douglas South, poverty is a primary issue. According to 2001 Census data, the incidence of low-income households was 58.4% compared to 20.3% for Winnipeg. The median household income was \$18,249, which was approximately \$25,000 less than the Winnipeg median. Residents relied on government transfer payments as a significant proportion of their total income (34.9%) (City of Winnipeg, 2001b).

On average, North End residents had lower levels of educational attainment. Of those aged 20 and over, 23.2% residing in Point Douglas South had less than grade nine compared to 7.8% for Winnipeg. Conversely, only 4.7% residents held a university degree compared to 18.3% of Winnipeg residents. There were also significantly higher unemployment rates in Point Douglas South (16.8% compared to 5.7% for Winnipeg). Neighborhood youth aged 15 to 24 years experienced even higher rates of unemployment (21.2%). Residents who are employed still earn approximately \$10,000 less per year than the Winnipeg average (City of Winnipeg, 2001b).

An examination of population characteristics revealed that it is a youthful community with 38.4% of residents under the age of 25. Compared to the Winnipeg average, Point Douglas South residents are less likely to be married and more likely to be single, separated, divorced, or widowed. These findings may partially explain the high incidence of female-headed single parent households (30.5%). Ethnic diversity was another notable characteristic with 16.2% of the population identifying as a visible

minority. Point Douglas South had a significantly larger Aboriginal population with 37.6% reporting Aboriginal origins compared to 9.6% for Winnipeg as a whole (City of Winnipeg, 2001b).

These demographic measures describe the physical characteristics of neighborhoods and the family and economic situations of many residents. However, it is important to recognize that these data are incomplete (Smylie, 2000), and for different reasons, other residents of the neighborhood, usually those in the most vulnerable of situations, are not represented. Indeed, carefully-collected data indicate that the frequencies of living with friends or family, as well as moving within Winnipeg's inner city neighborhoods is high (Distasio & Sylvester, 2004), suggesting that capturing complete data sets for census purposes is a challenge. The young men and women who participated in our study, due to their frequent homelessness and residential mobility, are unlikely to have been captured in any census data.

We wanted to learn about the perceptions of “healthy community” held by those who would not normally be thought of as experts on the subject. We first met with a group of young Aboriginal men who had previous involvement with the justice system to learn about their experiences and challenges they faced to building a healthy community in inner city neighborhoods. We also wanted the perspectives of women in equivalent circumstances, and made contact with groups of young adult females who were residents that had previous street or justice involvement. In the sections that follow, some background on the two groups, and their connections to the inner city, is provided.

### *Aboriginal Youth*

Historically, the arrival of European settlers disrupted the traditional way of life for Indigenous peoples who relied on a subsistence economy. The introduction of an exchange economy increased dependencies on European trade goods, which led to the exploitation of Indigenous peoples by offering minimal returns (Clarkson, Morrissette, & Régallet, 1992). The language, medicines, and spiritual practices of Indigenous peoples were targets of federal policies designed to systematically destroy their cultures (Neu &

Therrien, 2003). Residential schools separated children from their families and communities, and placed them in spiritually, physically, and emotionally abusive environments. Falconer, Morrissette, and MacKenzie described the legacy of residential schools by stating:

“The destruction of the family unit and traditional child-rearing practices, the fragmentation of the communities and the cycle of sexual, physical and emotional abuse that finds its roots in the residential school as sanctioned by the federal government, has furthered dependency and can best be described as an ‘abuse of power’.” (Clarkson, Morrissette, & Régallet, 1992, p. 42).

Residential school survivors were not only deprived of healthy parenting, but were also at risk of having their own children and grandchildren taken from them and adopted into non-Aboriginal families during a period known as the “60’s scoop”.

Aboriginal people are the fastest growing population in Canada with a birth rate 2x the non-Aboriginal population (Indian and Northern Affairs, 2003). Aboriginal people are disproportionately represented among families living in poverty (Ross, Scott, & Smith, 2000), as well as those with lower levels of educational attainment and labor market participation (Siggner, 2003). In addition, Aboriginal people are more likely to come into contact and remain involved in child protection and justice systems than non-Aboriginal Canadians (Aboriginal Initiatives Branch, 1999; Trocme & Blackstock, 2004). Winnipeg is home to the highest proportion of urban Aboriginal people (Norris & Jantzen, 2003), and has the highest rate of residential segregation of Aboriginal people of all Canadian cities (Maxim, Keane & White, 2003). About half of the Aboriginal population of Winnipeg resides in the inner city (City of Winnipeg, 2001a).

### ***Women in the Sex Trade***

Women who have been disadvantaged because of histories of family violence, poverty, low educational attainment, discrimination, and lack of job experience face similar barriers to economic security. For women, the most lucrative industry in fringe markets is the sex trade. A review of literature examining the antecedents of youth

prostitution revealed that the experiences of childhood physical or sexual abuse and leaving home at an early age were correlated with involvement in the sex trade (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1993). These findings suggest that youth who experience family violence and abuse are pushed to the street as a means of escaping. They are then pulled into “survival sex” because they lack resources, such as education, job-related skills, and adequate social services (Bittle, 2002). In addition, interviews with current and former sex workers in British Columbia revealed that the sex trade was their primary means of earning a living. Researchers found that exited sex trade workers were more economically disadvantaged than active ones because finding a job that offered similar wages was unattainable. The two primary reasons cited for entering the sex trade were being enticed into the industry because of the promise of easy money, and economic duress (Benoit & Millar, 2001). Thus, women enter the sex trade primarily for the same reason men join gangs – economic survival.

The need to survive in the face of homelessness is well described in the following: “Having nowhere to go, most youth who find themselves in this situation are also lacking integral life skills, and have few, if any, chances for meaningful employment. Their situation becomes one of survival, and the deprivation of the basic necessities of life ensures that the exchange of sex for money, food, shelter, or clothing becomes a decision about day-to-day existence. Without safe places for them to frequent and/or live, consistent support from caring individuals, tailored life skills, educational and employment programs, financial support, commercially exploited Aboriginal children and youth have few alternatives for physical and economic survival, and little opportunity to reintegrate themselves into the larger communities.” (Kingsley & Mark, 2000, p.9).

The juvenile sex trade is more active in Winnipeg than in some other Canadian cities due to the higher levels of poverty (Kohn & Selwood, 2004). Most cities have had traditional zones of permissiveness (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1993). Winnipeg’s street sex trade is concentrated in the inner city, where adult businesses are

located, having been “regulated to marginal areas of the city, along with other ‘eyesores’ or dirty land uses, such as pawn shops, slaughterhouses, and junkyards” (Kohn & Selwood, 2004, p. 8). Through zoning and law enforcement, street prostitution is maintained in the North End (Kohn & Selwood, 2004).

### *Community Agencies*

Community agencies are vital for development of low-income neighborhoods (Skotnitsky & Ferguson, 2004). Non-government agencies increase citizen participation, add to community capacity, and stabilize and revitalize neighborhoods by enhancing social capital (Gittell, Ortega-Bustamente, & Steffy, 1999; Temkin & Rhoe, 1998).

Additionally, community agencies are vital links between community residents and outside resources, other agencies, and government departments, which will increase the chances that the voices of residents are heard. However, assisting residents in overcoming multiple barriers requires coordination between agencies offering different services in order to provide the appropriate resources.

In Winnipeg’s inner city, community based agencies are involved primarily in health; education and training; and community economic development, working with families, children, and youth and have materialized in response to the needs of North End communities (Silver, 2002). Although some community agencies have been successful in securing reasonable levels of funding, there are others that have not. Running on inadequate funding makes it difficult for agencies to implement beneficial programs, which hinders change in the community (Silver, 2002).

### **Shared Responsibility**

Within Winnipeg’s inner city, many residents and organizations are working to enhance community health. However, maintaining healthy communities requires a complex and coordinated system of efforts by different individuals and groups. In order for all residents to experience viable opportunities for community participation, and to mutually benefit from their collective strengths, their challenges must be addressed. The

participants in our study exemplify courage and strength, as well as the barriers and service gaps that push them into the margins of the community.

By listening to their needs and challenges and documenting their experiences we hope to identify ways of bringing together the constituents necessary to promote their inclusion, so they can realize their potential and the vision of a healthy inner city community, within which each is a full member.

## Part 2: Method

This research was funded by the Winnipeg Inner city Research Alliance (WIRA), which fosters university-community partnerships in order to promote sustainable inner city neighborhoods. Researchers from the University of Manitoba partnered with staff from North End Housing Project (NEHP) in order to develop a study examining residents' perceptions of what makes a healthy community. Early in the planning process, it became evident that there were several groups in the North End who were rarely asked about their perceptions of community. The team conducted one-on-one or focus group interviews with the following groups: (1) Aboriginal males who were involved in community building initiatives; (2) women in the sex trade; and (3) community-based organizations.

Understanding the “problems” of groups facing multiple barriers has long been of interest to researchers; however, these groups have historically had few connections to the university community through which to influence research agendas (Greenwood & Levin, 2000). As a result, despite being widely studied, they have often experienced little benefit from being researched because the results had no direct application to the realities of their lives. We wanted to design a research study that would yield results that could be directly applied toward improving the well being of community residents.

We used the principles of community-based participatory (CBPR) research to guide this study. CBPR is defined as “a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves, for example, community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process. The partners contribute unique strengths and shared responsibilities to enhance understanding of a given phenomenon and the social and cultural dynamics of the community, and integrate the knowledge gained with action to improve the health and well-being of community members” (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998, p. 175 ). The involvement of community members in setting the research agenda and carrying out the research ensures that the results can be used to lobby for social change (Petras & Porpora, 1993).



A condition of the funding agency was that the research be conducted in partnership with a community organization. We partnered with the North End Housing Project (NEHP), a not-for-profit community agency mandated to revitalize the neighborhoods of Winnipeg's North End by renovating and building houses. NEHP operates the Aboriginal Youth Housing Renovation Project (AYR), which trains Aboriginal youth and young adults in housing renovation and construction. Our research team was composed of two university researchers, a graduate and undergraduate student, the AYR coordinator, and a group of twelve Aboriginal men involved in the AYR. Guided by the original funding proposal, the research team collaboratively planned the research project by brainstorming research questions and methods. Following approval by the Joint Faculty Ethics Review Board at the University of Manitoba, focus group and one-on-one interviews were conducted by the university researchers. Data were recorded using handwritten notes since participants were not comfortable with audiotaping.

As we moved forward in this research, we found that we needed to modify our original plans. Initially, we were interested in comparing residents' perceptions of community health in Lord Selkirk Park, North Point Douglas, and William Whyte. However early in our research, we found that neighborhood comparisons would be difficult since the population in the North End is very mobile. Residents we spoke to lived and worked in different North End neighborhoods and moved frequently, both within and between our original neighborhoods of interest. Indeed, the high mobility of residents within the inner city has been well documented (Distasio & Sylvester, 2004). We therefore spoke to participants who perceived one or more of these three neighborhoods as a meeting places for employment, services or other personal/family purposes. Given this approach, cross-neighborhood comparisons were not possible.

Participatory methods require that community members have an opportunity to influence the research agenda. On the advice of our advisory group, our study explored healthy communities from the perspectives of people who are generally left out of any community mobilization. We worked with two groups: Aboriginal youth and women

involved in the sex trade. The age range of participants spanned 20 years, from 20-40. There was diversity in family composition, including individuals with none to five children, living with partners or not. Some participants had lived in the area their whole lives, others had moved to other areas of the city or other parts of the province. Some participants were very active in the community and others were not. Various economic situations were represented including the receipt of government support or employment by self or others. There was also diversity in sexual identity among participants. Finally, there was a great deal of diversity among participants in terms of cultural knowledge and ethnicity. To further enhance sample diversity, we included the perceptions of service providers.

We planned originally to train university students to complete interviews in partnership with community residents. As we developed relationships with members of our advisory group, we found that this type of student involvement would have undermined the trust we were developing. At the invitation of the advisory group, students' roles developed into planners and facilitators of different events that included our research participants such as a community feast, university campus visit and tour, and a presentation at an out-of-province international housing conference. A community feast was held at Turtle Island Neighborhood Centre for 150 children, adults and seniors, who were residents, service providers, business owners, or policy-makers with an interest in healthy inner city communities. In preparation for this event, several planning meetings took place. One of the meetings was a full day event at the University of Manitoba that included a tour, meetings with faculty members, and a discussion with Elders on campus. Additionally, six Aboriginal youth from the AYR program, their supervisor, two students, and two professors traveled to Toronto to attend a housing conference to give a presentation on building sustainable communities in Winnipeg's inner city. This proved to be beneficial to the students and to the research participants. By learning about other realities and experiences, students and research participants were able to open doors for communication and relationship building, reducing community segregation.

# Part 3.1: Results

## Perspectives of Aboriginal Youth

We conducted a series of four focus group interviews with a core group of between 8 and 12 participants. In addition, we interviewed six focus group participants one-on-one in order to expand the data by probing deeper into issues raised during the focus groups. What made this project unique was that it involved an extensive participant observation component. During the course of this research project, we engaged in the following activities in order to develop the partnership between the university researchers and students, and the NEHP and AYR: (1) holding university classes at NEHP; (2) having members of the AYR present information to or facilitate discussions with university students; (3) having members of the AYR lead neighborhood tours for university students; and (4) hosting an activity day for AYR members at the University of Manitoba. In addition, we collaboratively planned a community feast to honor those who had contributed to housing in the North End. We traveled as a team to an academic conference in Toronto at which the young men from AYR presented. These opportunities to conduct participant observations enabled the university and the AYR teams to develop deeper insights into each other's worlds. As a result, it facilitated the process of developing trust and rapport in order to bridge the gap between different cultures.

The data were analyzed by the university researchers and the graduate and undergraduate students. Participants were invited to review the findings and provide feedback, which were incorporated into the final report.

## Findings

Our participants were between the ages of 21 and 33 years. All had done time during their adolescence and/or adulthood. Between the twelve young men, over 100 years had been served in corrections facilities. Most had spent a significant proportion of their childhood in the North End and only one no longer resided in the neighborhood. All had interrupted or disrupted histories in school and few had gone beyond a grade seven or eight education. The majority of participants had large families with up to five children that included multiple parenting responsibilities for biological offspring, stepchildren, and younger siblings; all of whom these young men cared for as their own.

### *Experiences Growing Up*

Most of the participants in this study had grown up in the North End. One participant described the area as a “big reserve” because it was “full of Indians.” Several said they liked everything about the neighborhood, especially that people in the area knew them because they had lived there a long time. They also reported that knowing the people and the area was an important survival strategy.

*The good thing about the neighbourhood is that it's full of Indians.  
Makes it more accepting for everybody. There's no envy. There's no  
SUVs that you have to be envious of. Everybody's in the same boat.*

*Since I've been born, all I've known is the North End. My family's in  
the North End. My bros are here. I know lots of people.*

*If you are born here, you have to adapt to your surroundings or else you  
won't survive. You get friends to get you stuff. If you need to shop you  
just tell your friends what you need and they come up with it.*

Most of the young men in our study were raised by their mothers and had a deep respect for them. Several reported feeling abandoned by a parent, usually their fathers, which caused some anger and resentment. Some had step-dads who played a positive role in their lives by teaching them about their culture and doing “guy” things with them. Others said they were mistreated by their step-fathers.

*She [mother] taught me how to care for people and look after things.*

*She was the only person I looked up to.*

*It bothers me. I feel pissed off about this. I never had a dad to be there for me. I just had friends and brothers. I had a step-dad for a bit.*

*My step-dad is a medicine man. I go and visit him for a week each winter. We talk and hunt.*

*My step-dad used to beat me up.*

Many had parents who had grown up in the residential school system, which participants identified as contributing to the oppression of Aboriginal people. They said that the residential school system started the intergenerational cycle of abuse and neglect. Some described helping out their families when they were children, by caring for younger siblings, preparing meals, and taking care of the house while parents were out.

*Some people just don't get it. They want to sniff. They want to drink their life away. They're fucked up from the old days. It's a cycle. You can't choose to do nothing.*

*If you don't deal with your issues you just pass it on. Residential schools resulted in lots of anger, grief, hurt. This produces a cycle you can't get out of.*

*I grew up running around. There was no one to tell me what to do. No dad or fuck all.*

All of the young men in our study reported growing up in poverty. They said that “there were too many needs, not enough resources.” At an early age they adopted a personal motto: “You do what you have to do to survive.” For most, surviving required them to supplement their families’ incomes through involvement in the drug trade, which started as early as eight -years-old. These activities often brought them into contact with the youth justice system and many “grew up in the system.” Several participants spent the entire span of their teenage years incarcerated. For example, one participant reported that he was locked up between the ages of twelve and twenty, while another was in from fourteen to twenty-three. Boredom was another reason these young men got into trouble in their youth. They noted a lack of recreational facilities in the area, particularly ones open at night.

*You don't understand how fucking poor we are. If necessary you bend the law in order to survive.*

*I never got birthday or Christmas presents...I was terrorized by my brother who was ten years older than me so I was never home. I found the streets.*

*There was no community centre or place to hang out. Any that were around were too far away. You hang out with bad people at night. That's how gang life starts.*

All of the young men in our study had left school before graduating; some did so as early as grade seven. Most said they dropped out for economic reasons; namely they could not afford the things they needed to go to school and fit in. A few reported that they were not liked by teachers, which contributed to their decision to leave school. Some alluded to difficulties with learning while others reported that school was easy and they got good grades. Finally, being incarcerated was another reason for leaving school although many upgraded while serving time.

*When you're poor, you look shaggy. You've got holes in your pants.*

*You need to feel good about yourself. Lots of kids' quit going to school.*

*They're embarrassed because they're from poor families.*

*I started grade 12 but I dropped out because it was a money thing. I had a hard time because I had no lunch money and no bus money.*

*At school, the teachers didn't like me. They passed me to get rid of me, but the principal stuck up for me. I missed a lot of school. I was stubborn and lazy. I can't read fast and I write slow.*

*I ended up in jail, got a record, dropped out of school.*

For most of the young men in our study, their lack of education and history with the police were barriers to the lives they wanted to lead as adults.

### ***Challenges Reintegrating***

Upon leaving an institution, our participants said that they encountered difficulty in re-establishing their lives. The first barrier they often faced was overcoming their reputations in the neighborhood. They perceived that other community residents did not want them living there.

*People in the neighbourhood think we're pretty bad. They look at us as criminals who kill people.*

Some were worried they would be pulled back into the system because of their records and associates. They were required to avoid contact with others who had justice system involvement; however, since many members of their social networks had records, they were torn between meeting the conditions of their parole and getting the social support they needed.

*I'm looking for freedom and peace and keeping both feet out of the [justice] system.*

*Probation officers separate bros because they're gang associated.*

Several reported that they would not be working without the AYR because their criminal records and lack of education presented a significant barrier to finding employment. They also said that work was needed to breakdown stereotypes between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Racism was cited as a factor that limited their opportunities to find work and education programs. When they were able to find work, it often paid minimum wage, which they said was insufficient to support themselves and their families.

*I feel hopelessness because of my criminal record. I know I threw a lot away. I'm searching for a purpose. I don't know what it is yet, but it makes me want to try harder. I want to give back to my family and friends.*



*We need more interaction with White people because there's a lot of racism. People have to remember that there is good and bad in both camps.*

*The jobs in the neighbourhood are inadequate. Minimum wage just isn't enough to live on. We face a lot of barriers because of our records and racism.*

Without decent employment, many were forced to look at other ways to support themselves and their families. Several said that they had too much pride to “take handouts” and rely on the welfare system because they wanted to rebuild their lives on their own terms.

*Without a job how will I get money? The only way I know is to sell drugs. This is my very first job [AYR]; my first training program. It's a whole new way of being and thinking.*

*The people I used to know are either in jail, in another city, or dead. I feel like my future is pretty limited because I used to do B & Es, jack people, but I didn't steal cars.*

*Welfare is belittling because you always have to answer to someone. You have to beg.*

Often, their female partners received benefits from the income support system, which undermined the young man's traditional role as provider and protector. The women were collecting welfare as single parents, which meant that if their male partners were caught staying or living with them they would be cut off. The young men did not have adequate, stable employment that would enable them to fully support their families

without social assistance. As a result, they were forced to lead double lives in which they sometimes lived as single men with their “bros” and other times played the role of family man with their partners and children. This double life often led to conflicts with partners who resented the freedom the men had while living as bachelors. The instability in their relationships with partners strengthened their bonds to friends who took care of each another.

*The welfare system captures and imprisons you. Poverty doesn't allow the men to provide for their families. It tears you down as a person and family.*

*On welfare you can't have a personal life. She gets cut-off if they [welfare workers] find out the guy is staying there. She gets pissed off and kicks him out. He needs to find someplace else to live.*

*I have to keep my friends because I'm not sure if she [partner] will be with me at the end.*

Despite the considerable challenges these young men faced in their lives, they were deeply concerned with the state of their community and the well being of its residents. Their overall attitude was that they could take care of themselves, but someone had to look out for others in the community, especially children. It was this desire to give back to their community that motivated them to participate in the AYR.

### ***Personal Motivations and Strengths***

A key theme that emerged from our interviews was that the young men regarded their parents' generation as a “lost cause” and their children as the generation that would usher in a new era for Aboriginal peoples. They saw their roles as being “the guardians of the future;” they took personal responsibility for providing for and protecting the

children in their communities. Their own childhood experiences strengthened their resolve to give their children the things they never had. All stated that their children were their motivation for staying out of jail and “going legit.” Participants said that they wanted their children to be proud of their accomplishments.

*If I didn't have kids, I'd be in jail.*

*My kids make me feel better. I don't know what I'd do without them. I take them to school and I pick them up from daycare... It's really hard to keep things going but they're mine. Even if I go drinking, I check on them. I miss them if I'm away all day.*

*I'm trying to be a role model. I can't do anything for my kids in jail. I do the best I can.*

*I visit my kids to get my head straight and refocus. I vowed that my kids would never see me in jail.*

Another resource about which our participants talked extensively was being “rich in family.” When asked to define who made up their families, most included extended family members, stepchildren, and non-relatives. The most important group in the non-relatives category were the “bros.” For many their male friends were among the most stable and close relationships they had. They also discussed the importance of sharing resources, which they said they did freely and with no expectation of repayment. They collectively took on the responsibility of policing the neighbourhood in order to protect those who were vulnerable. It was their contention that the police did not give people in their community the same level of service as White, middle-class communities.

*We're all brothers with different mothers.*

*[My bro] helps me out as an older brother. I live at his place and he looks out for me.*

*The bros share money and everything else.*

*Sharing is important. It's important to know people and keep friends because somebody will have resources when you don't.*

Most participants said that Aboriginal cultures and traditions were resources upon which they drew guidance and strength. Some said that residential schools had robbed their families of cultural knowledge and parenting experience, which prevented them from learning the ways of their people. Several noted that they had to go to prison to learn about their culture from Elders who worked in the corrections system, which they found ironic.

*Tradition is important enough to die for – the ceremony, the tobacco, the sun dance. It's been a way of life for thousands of years that provides direction, but it's hard to maintain.*

*I take the Red Road. I grew up with it, but I chose that path seven or eight years ago. I was jumped and put in a coma for a month. A pipe ceremony was performed that helped me recover. I felt no power with the Christian traditions. When I started following the Red Road and positive things have happened for me. I sought help from Elders and culture in order to get my kids back [from ex-wife].*

*God took my culture away... My mother wouldn't teach me our language because the residential schools taught her it was evil. She was afraid that she would go back to residential school if she learned her language.*

A final resource was the inner strength and determination of the young men in the AYR to seek out different ways of “being” and “living.” The young men embraced every opportunity to interact with people from different backgrounds than their own. For example, they led a discussion about neighbourhood issues with students in a university class on housing. They also spoke with academics and government representatives about the issues facing their community and the resources they needed to make it a better place to live. Participants said that they wanted to stop negative cycles for the good of themselves, their families, and their community.

*I keep me from all that [drugs, alcohol, and violence]. I see what it's done to other people and I'm not going there.*

*I wouldn't raise kids under the circumstances I was. I can't care for myself let alone children. I don't want my kids to grow up in a single parent family like I did. I want them to have a loving family.*

*You have to deal honestly with yourself and other people. You have to deal with yourself and become a straight arrow. You have to make things happen.*

An integral part of the transformation through which these young men were going was the AYR. Not only did the program give them money, work experience, and training in the trades, it also gave them hope for the future and an opportunity to play an active role in rebuilding their community.

## ***Building Community***

Our participants credited the AYR as the primary reason that they were succeeding in re-establishing themselves in the community. They said the program gave them an opportunity to give back.

*We're giving back. We didn't have the best backgrounds, but there were people who helped us. We wanted to give back to the community and look after the kids. Kids are very impressionable. Some people here really want to make change and they can still have an influence.*

*I feel good about giving back to the community. Having a job has built my self confidence and self-esteem. I'm inspired by the accomplishments of the other guys in the program.*

*It's [AYR] keeping me out of trouble. It keeps my mind going on things; stops you from being bored. If you're bored and there's no excitement then you do crime.*

*Working's not so bad. It's close to home. You know everyone in the area. You work with friends. You get along great with the bosses. It's a very tight neighbourhood.*

The men in the AYR talked about the reasons that the program worked for them. They said it was important to work with people who had “been there and done that;” in other words, to have co-workers and supervisors who understood their histories and realities. An important feature of the program was that the young men guided the program by making decisions such as who was accepted into it. The program gave them something to do; boredom was cited as a reason for getting into trouble. It also enabled

the men to earn money in order to support their families. Finally, it acculturated them to a new way of life that they said helped them to transcend “the party lifestyle.”

*I like the job because of the guys. We laugh. It's North End Housing [Project]; it's close by. It's the path I took; it fits. It's carpentry and I have the right training for it. I work with friends and family. It puts money in my pocket.*

*Too many programs are based on timelines, but they have to be portable in order to move with reality. This program works because it's flexible. At most jobs when family responsibilities get in the way, no one asks, “Why did you miss work?” I was at home with the kids because my old lady left.*

*Each person finds a different way to escape from the stresses of and pressures of life. Some people drink. They do drugs. It's no good for the real self. You can't really do that and be part of the program.*

Our participants saw their participation in the AYR as a tangible way of contributing to their community in a positive way; however, their vision extended beyond the revitalization of houses.

### ***Visions for the Future***

Our participants were deeply concerned with the well-being of others in the community, particularly children. It was this characteristic that distinguished the young men from the sex trade workers we interviewed who were primarily concerned about personal safety issues. The men discussed the following as community needs: affordable housing, daycares; activities for children; supervised parks with green space; street lights and crosswalks; higher minimum wage; opportunities to learn culture; home childcare;

community activities, such as barbeques, feasts, or Pow Wows; libraries and computers for kids; university in the neighbourhood where kids can go when they finish school; and a North End mayor or community leader.

*Kids need big brothers; people they can trust. People who will look after them, watch over them, and make sure they're okay.*

*The neighbourhood needs lots of things – daycare, better schools, more work, less cops. There are too many cops around here. They're always riding up our ass.*

One participant described the primary issue in the community by saying:

*There's little opportunity in the inner city. Someone has to give us a chance. We need to help each other out. It needs to go bigger to repair the community.*

The results of our interviews with participants highlighted the need for the involvement of multiple stakeholders in order to remove the barriers faced by inner-city residents in community development initiatives.



# Part 3.2: Results

## Perspectives of Women in the Sex Trade

During the planning phase of this research, we decided that it was important to explore women's perspectives on community building. Initially, we wanted to conduct focus group interviews with the partners of the young men in the AYR; however, the young men had developed a trust with us, and had concerns about sharing information from our interviews. Therefore, we sought a separate group of women who had experienced challenges similar to the men in AYR.

The co-investigator, graduate student, and a female community research intern conducted two separate focus groups with women who were actively or formerly involved in the sex trade. Handwritten notes were taken at each session and later transcribed. Each participant received a \$20 honorarium as compensation for her time and to honor her expertise.

The first focus group was held at Sage House, a community agency offering street women's health, outreach, and resource services. Twelve women, two of whom identified as transgender, between the ages of eighteen and forty agreed to participate in the interview. Most participants lived in the North End, West End, or downtown area. Three lived in a hotel, two were staying at a homeless shelter, one lived with her parents, and approximately four were in rooming houses. The remaining participants did not disclose their current housing situation. Only one participant had completed grade twelve. The majority had between grade seven and grade ten educations. All were actively street-involved.

The second focus group was conducted with the Dream Catchers project at Klinik Community Health Centre. The program aims to provide support for women who have worked in the sex trade in order to heal from childhood abuse, overcome addictions, and reduce isolation. Nine women participated in the session. Only one woman said she was living in a rooming house and one was a homeowner. The rest were renting apartments or houses. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to their

late forties. Four were receiving welfare, three were employed and two were in training programs.

### Sage House

Sage house is a Winnipeg outreach and health resource centre for sex trade workers. Like the men in the AYR, women with experience in the sex trade had faced stigma, albeit of a different form. The women faced the stigma associated with prostitution based on moral and legal sanctions. Approximately half of the women who participated were of Aboriginal descent. All cited low levels of education and a lack of job opportunities as barriers to sustainable employment in the mainstream. The women at Sage House were primarily interested with issues that affected them personally, while the Dream Catcher women cited more community-level needs. However, both groups were less community-focused than the young men in the AYR.

Due to the nature of their services, most of the clients at Sage House were actively involved in the sex trade. Overall, the women said they liked their communities because friends lived there, people knew them, they felt at home, and there were resources. Similar reasons were cited by the men in AYR as reasons for wanting to stay in their neighborhoods. The women did not portray themselves as victims; rather, they saw themselves as survivors.

*When it comes to hardships, we know all about it.*

*Women get what they want. You just have to know how to hustle.*

The results of the focus group support the contention that women engage in prostitution largely out of economic necessity. Those on welfare cited numerous instances where they believed the welfare system had violated their rights. Participants reported that welfare benefits were inadequate to meet their basic needs. In addition, some women said they were denied full benefits without explanation. A common sentiment was that you had to know how to work the system. Most perceived there to be

a lack of respect for, and sometimes discrimination against, them at the welfare office. One participant said that her worker, who was male, made her feel uncomfortable. She perceived that there was no way of rectifying the situation.

*People do abuse the welfare system, but most get abused by the system.*

*It's hard to find a place to live. You only get so much on welfare and it's not enough. I don't want to live in a rooming house. I want my own kitchen and bath.*

*Welfare will pay \$320 for rent, but I only get \$271.*

*The welfare office treats you like a criminal. There's a glass divider you have to talk through, but you don't want to shout out your personal info. If they suspect you are street-involved, they will cancel any emergency money or cut you off.*

*Welfare discriminates based on your street-involvement or race. It's stupid. They shouldn't do that. Treat us the same. They shouldn't discriminate.*

*My EIA [welfare] working is male. He smiles at me and it makes me uncomfortable.*

In addition, discrimination, lack of education and job experience were cited as barriers to finding employment.

*I was denied for a training program because I'm a tranny [transgender].*

*I have a grade ten education, but they pushed me through. I have trouble reading and writing. I feel stupid, but I ask for help.*

*I need to apply for jobs while I'm on welfare, but without references I can't get a job.*

Participants talked extensively about their struggles to meet basic needs, particularly adequate, affordable housing and personal safety. Housing was a primary issue for most women who struggled to find adequate housing that they could afford. Two were living in a homeless shelter where there was a lack of privacy. Many were forced to live in communal settings, such as rooming houses, which they found stressful. Some lived with people who were into drinking and drugs; temptations that some women were trying to avoid in order to remain sober and clean. Many were forced to rent units in buildings in need of major repairs that were operated by slum landlords. Poor temperature regulation, unsanitary conditions, inadequate cooking and bathroom facilities, deficient security systems, and prejudiced landlords were identified as issues for participants.

*I get \$317 [from welfare] for rent. I can't find a place. I shouldn't have to use living money for rent.*

*Hotels will spend money to make the beverage room look good, but the rooms are shit. They only want to make money on liquor sales. They don't care about residents.*

*My room is cold. I need a heater. The shower doesn't work. The walls are filthy. The landlord said it had been renovated, but they only changed the carpet.*

*The hotel I live in is a historical building. You can't cook in your room because you might start a fire. I have to eat at Sage [House], stay with friends, or buy foods that don't need cooking or refrigerating.*

Participants also disclosed numerous issues related to personal safety. Some arose from living in inadequate housing conditions and neighborhoods that attracted undesirable groups.

*The doors to the hotel are locked at midnight and there is no night watchman to let the cops in if there's an emergency.*

*The panhandlers are drunk and they get aggressive. I don't want to go out walking.*

*There are lots of crack heads and crack houses. It's really bad in the summer. They are full of infections. I'm trying to stay away from crack, but it's tempting.*

Participants agreed that working the street was dangerous because they were vulnerable to everything from harassment to assault to murder. The isolation of their work made them feel particularly defenseless.

*Working the street is dangerous. People yell, "You fucking ho!" They throw bottles and pennies at you. People are brave in their cars, but outside... They think you're a crack head. They don't realize we need to eat and survive. When you're working the street, you need a partner to take down the license plate number of your date.*

*The cops beat me up and threatened to kill me and dump my body in the river.*

*I get money by going to the bar and intimidating people. I sort of panhandle in the bar; I play with them a bit. It's dangerous, but less dangerous than working the street because there are witnesses in the bar.*

Many women believed the police did not provide them with the same level of protection because of their profession. Some had been the victims of police brutality; others were reluctant to phone police because of the stigma imposed by others in the community. Finally, some women said that they were vulnerable because people in the area would not offer assistance to those who had been victimized.

*When you are the victim, the police don't show up. You have to wait twelve hours. Then they don't believe your story. They ask you if you've been drinking or doing drugs.*

*If you phone the cops, you're known as a rat on Main Street.*

*The good people in the area won't help you. My boyfriend beat me up. He broke my ribs and I ended up having a miscarriage. I was knocking on people's windows and asking them to call me an ambulance. They wouldn't do it. I had to take a cab to the hospital.*

From the perspective of participants, healthy communities provided residents with access to amenities. These resources included stores with affordable prices and a wide selection of goods, telephone and message services, laundry facilities, and banks. Services were also needed to help participants meet their basic needs, cope with the

realities of the sex trade, and re-establish themselves in mainstream society. They preferred services that catered to or were respectful of women in the sex trade.

*Services are limited at places like walk in clinics and hospitals when you're street-involved. I know people who've died in waiting rooms at emergency.*

*Training programs for adults who slipped through the system. Many adults have low education or are illiterate.*

*We need more anger management programs because of abuse and rape. We need support groups and counselling because it's hard to drop the brick wall – it's protective.*

*We need more places like Nine Circles to be welfare advocates. I got the stuff I get today because of my advocate.*

*I go to the Sex Crimes Unit [of the Winnipeg Police Service]. They are sensitive to transgender and sex trade worker issues.*

The women said that Sage House offered a range of key resources including meals, laundry facilities, and addictions referrals. They liked being “among their own kind” and said there was a family-like environment because they were not allowed to fight. Like the men in the AYR, some women cited boredom as a reason for getting into trouble. Sage House gave them a place to go and things to do.

*I come here cause I don't do anything all day. I come to talk because it's boring at home so I turn to alcohol and drugs.*

A few needs related to other groups in the community were also mentioned, but they were less prevalent than personal issues.

*There needs to be services for men too.*

*They should open drop-ins for youth to keep out of gangs.*

*The city needs to clean the sidewalks better. Old people can't walk.*

Surprisingly, few issues related to children were raised perhaps because almost none of the participants who were mothers had custody of their children. Some said that Child and Family Services (CFS) discriminated against them by removing children if the parent was suspected to be in the sex trade even when the child received adequate care at home.

*My son is fifteen-years-old. He doesn't like to visit because he's into drinking and drugs. I worry about my kids 24/7.*

*When CFS knows you are street-involved, they make you do a program even if you don't need it.*

*ACFS (Aboriginal Child and Family Services) gives you a chance to get your kids back after treatment. CFS tries to adopt kids out.*

Participants in the focus group wanted to be involved in their communities, but felt there were few legitimate ways to do so. Once the women were able to reliably meet their basic needs, they welcomed opportunities to give back to others.

*I want to have more involvement in the community.*



*Sage[House] gives women the opportunity to volunteer. It really helped me.*

### **Dream Catchers**

The Dream Catchers Project provides support, mentorship, and social services to girls and women whose lives have been affected by such challenges as childhood sexual abuse, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, and addictions. The women in Dream Catchers had made the decision to leave the sex trade; however, the process of leaving was not easy because many of the issues that had pushed or pulled them into prostitution were unresolved. Many said they needed to live away from areas where other girls were working because, during hard times, it was too tempting to return to working the street. They continued to face barriers to finding gainful employment due to lack of experience and low levels of education. Welfare alone was inadequate to meet their needs so many supplemented by working in the sex trade.

*I used to live on Ellice Avenue. It was too tempting not to work because it was easy money that I couldn't refuse. I ended up leaving the West End.*

*Women do it [prostitute] to eat and support their families.*

*I was in the sex trade for twenty-six years because Aboriginal people lack education. Employers don't want to hire people in their 40s. I want to get off disability. I want a pay cheque and a Habitat [for Humanity] house. I worked at [local bakery] but welfare takes the money. They should remove the claw back. Working for minimum wage, I'm not able to live.*

Like the women at Sage House, the women in Dream Catchers struggled to afford private market housing. As part of their recovery, many women were working to overcome addictions. They emphasized that they needed housing in which no one used because they feared they would relapse.

*My rent is more than half of my income.*

*Housing costs more than welfare pays so I have to supplement it. I choose to pay more for housing because crack heads can't afford it.*

*We need houses that are drug-free enforced. It's hard to stay sober. You come into recovery but with no money so you live in poor housing.*

Better access to amenities in their communities was also seen as a key component of community building. Resources for children and low-income families were cited as the highest priority needs.

*I live downtown so there's good transportation so it's easy to take my son to daycare. But, there's no place for kids to play because they closed the park.*

*There needs to be recreation activities for low-income people. It keeps them off drugs and builds the community. There's a free tennis court, but you need to have a racquet.*

*The parents in my area can't afford the YMCA. They need to make the park good because the pool is 50% water and 50% piss. There's no ice ring and nothing that's family oriented. There's nothing for kids to do but go to Portage Avenue and sniff or shoplift.*

In addition to services for children in general, the Dream Catcher women said it was important for them to have resources to assist them in raising their own children. Enforcement of child support order and non-punitive respite care were seen as important supports.

*Child support is not enforced. It's important for addictions recovery.*

*You need to be able to get to meetings. There should be non-punishing respite that is not through CFS.*

*Foster parents get paid a lot, but there is not support for parents.*

Personal safety was a primary concern, but these women also discussed unsafe conditions affecting children and other community residents. What was surprising was that the Dream Catcher women were troubled by the negative impact prostitution had on their communities, particularly the presence of Johns and gangs. Like the women at Sage House, some perceived that their race, class, or profession made them second-class citizens when it came to getting resources.

*I can't participate in group activities because there is one bus that services the whole area. It only comes every half hour. I feel unsafe walking. I don't go out past 8:30 pm. I carry pepper spray 'cause I'm afraid someone will hurt me.*

*We need to be able to protect ourselves. They should have panic buttons on the telephone poles as a crime deterrent so you know help is coming. They should be wired to the police and local homes.*

*Crime won't go away. We need to help keep citizens safe. They need transportation so they're less at risk.*

*In my back lane, which is well travelled there are girls doing tricks. There has also been two beatings and gang activity. I saw a man jacked for his clothes. He was badly hurt.*

*The Johns harass women who are walking on the street. It's a big problem because the track is widening past Broadway. They need to make a Red Light District.*

*I'm angry because Johns are targeting kids. I'm a grandmother; I think of my granddaughter and I get scared. On "To Serve and Protect," they show the girls being exploited while the Johns get away. If we were in River Heights, this wouldn't be happening. It's a real issue for Aboriginal females. We need to get ex-prostitutes out helping so cops and gangs are not out harassing them. There should be cameras for the kiddy track and they should announce Johns in the area on the radio.*

Like the men in AYR, the Dream Catcher women wanted to be involved in building their communities but experienced barriers to doing so. Several noted that they would like to find work that enabled them to help others; however, entry level positions in social services are often low paying. Some were forced to work in the private sector in order to make enough money to support their families. The Dream Catcher women also said that they received no encouragement for their efforts to better themselves and their communities.

*We need soup kitchens. I brought my children there so they could see the work they do. I've never had to use them. I would work there, but*

*they only pay \$6.50 per hour. I want to make a living. I want to get off assistance.*

*I'm working, but I don't like my job. I work for a corporation. They are always giving free stuff to executives who don't need it. I want to work in social services, but I'm a single parent so I can't quit my job. Daycare is expensive. I want to make enough money and be able to make a difference.*

*It doesn't make sense. People are paid \$12-20 per hour to take money out of people's pockets. But if you are working to make a difference, you get \$9 per hour. I'm working in a helping profession. It's my God given work, but people mean less than paper.*

*We get no encouragement. We need information so we can work together. There is no community because everyone is fighting.*

For many of the women in the Dream Catcher's group, the transition out of prostitution was often tenuous. Without adequate supports, crises they encountered could result in a relapse.

*I went back to prostitution after having a mental breakdown.*

*I was out of the sex trade for fourteen years. I owned my own business. Then I got divorced and it brought my life to a crippling halt. The legal system is holding things up. My crack head ex-husband is still in the house. I relapsed after eight years of sobriety. I was on disability while I recovered from PTSD. I was forced to work after leaving the sex trade with no support.*

Overall, the women at Dream Catchers wanted to build kinder, gentler communities that welcomed and supported them.

*According to scripture, “It takes a village to raise a child.”*

*We have the biggest hearts because we’ve been through everything.*

*We need to respect each other. We need more compassion and love.*

The perspectives of women we interviewed highlight the necessity of meeting basic physical needs, including food, clothing and shelter, as well as social needs, such as safety, and connection to others. These challenges compound the difficulty they faced when trying to leave the street to meeting their economic needs. Unmet physical and social needs pose significant barriers to fuller participation in the community, and community building activities.

# Part 3.3: Results

## Community Agency Perspectives

Interviews were conducted with representatives from eight agencies who served the North End Community. These agencies represent a broad range of service areas and target clientele. Four of the nine focused entirely or primarily on the Aboriginal community.

Agency Classifications by Primary Service Area

Category	<u>n</u>
Corrections	1
Counseling	2
Cultural	2
Education	1
Emergency Services	1
Family Resources	2

Agency Classifications by Target Clientele

Category	<u>n</u>
Children	1
Youth	1
Women	2
Men	2
Adults	1
Families	2

Half of the agency representatives said that the community they served was a healthy one. They said that people in the community have strengths that are often

overlooked. Respect, love, and acceptance among community members were mentioned as positive features of the community. The other half said the community was not healthy because of issues such as gangs, poverty, unemployment, substance use in the home, and lack of parental involvement with children.

The agency representatives discussed the challenges they faced in empowering clients and building community. A primary issue was developing trust with their clients, which most said took a long period of time; however, funding was often short-term. As a result, the project would end around the same time that the community was beginning to get involved because trust had been established. Pulling the plug on the project because there was no more funding undermined the trust that had been established. In addition, funding agencies expected significant change within that short period of time, which was often unrealistic given the multiple challenges experienced by community members.

*The first challenge is gaining the trust of the people. If they are suspicious of you, you can't expect any strong involvement in the program. You have to be really clear as to why you are doing what you are doing in their community.*

*Community development focused programs are too short with no consistency and the community has come to expect failure from such programs.*

*Funding is a challenge because for a lot of programs, the funding is short-term. The funders expect ambitious results in a short amount of time. A lot of times the program just gets established and the funding ends.*

Agencies noted that community members experienced many barriers to well-being as a result of their low socio-economic status. Lack of education and employment



training, experience, and opportunities were commonly-cited issues. In addition, discrimination and the loss of culture were issues for Aboriginal peoples in the community. A few said that many community members lacked self-confidence, which prevented them from getting involved in community activities.

*The system creates and maintains poverty and that's the biggest barrier to well being. Our government could change and make a minimum annual income a priority so women on welfare could meet their basic needs.*

*A lot of what is being offered now is not realistic even education. At the end of the day, they don't see anything in their future. I would like to see the development of more realistic training programs and education with real employment guarantees afterwards.*

*With our own culture, spirituality is at the heart of everything we do. When this gets lost and family structures break down, we rebuild that... We need to reintroduce cultural aspects that have been missing.*

*People who have little or no self-confidence are not seeking the resources to make the necessary changes in their lives.*

Some said that programs needed to be restructured in order to meet the needs of residents. Many of the programs offered in the community had unrealistic expectations or a judgmental approach. The right to self-determination was seen as a philosophy that needed to be implemented in order for a program to be a success. Accessibility to programming could be facilitated by providing honoraria, food, bus tickets, and childcare.

*The program is not structured to address the core issues in this area. The core is the home. Programs need to be carefully structured without offending the community and the parents. We can't tell them, "Your drinking and drug use is affecting your children." The current way is working from the outside in and we need to look at other program structures.*

*You have to find a way to allow people to be self-determining. Accessibility needs to be provided for people to make changes in their lives.*

*The community needs honorariums and food. That's how to get them out and involved.*

When asked about what a healthy community would look like, most agency representatives stressed the engagement and participation of community members in their communities. In a healthy community, people have built-in support networks and there are positive activities in which to get involved. Community economic development (CED) principles were cited as a tool that facilitated the process of building community.

*A healthy community is one that is safe for its members. Where there is a sense of belonging. Where there is participation of community members for the benefit of the whole community. Where you'd have people who have a sense of pride of where they live and respect each other, not just for their commonalities but differences as well. They have a voice and their community is cared for/looked after.*

*I would say where people have a natural support system of community.  
There's happiness in an independent community when it can support  
itself with its own resources so it relies less on organizations.*

In order to build community, participants said that reforms to the welfare system were needed in order to enable people to meet their basic needs. In addition, opportunities for education and employment, as well as mentors and leadership training were required to assist people in overcoming poverty. Working with families to break the cycle of violence and build positive relationships were cited. Agency representatives wanted to see more opportunities for community members to get involved in positive ways; culture was stressed as a cornerstone of a healthy community. There was a need for organizations to work together and determine programs and services by consulting people at the grassroots level. Overall, the recommendations of agency representatives echo those of the other participants in this study. It appears there is will within the community to effect change, but insufficient resources to overcome structural barriers.

# Part 4

## Summary and Recommendations

As our participants demonstrated, many inner city residents and agencies are working toward building a healthy community. Our research found that people are working to address what matters most to them; including giving back to the community, looking after the children in the community, increasing the stock of affordable housing, and learning cultural values. They have also been involved in changing the broad conditions in which they live - the social and physical environment - to effect widespread behavioral change: renovating derelict homes, volunteering at community agencies, actively involving themselves in training programs to improve their skills, and transmitting cultural values. These efforts promote civic engagement among people in the North End and are directed towards building a healthy community.

However, overcoming multiple barriers in the community that hinder a healthy one is not a challenge that can be overcome alone. Community building requires strong informal networks within the community that provide stability by sharing resources. With support from community agencies, these informal networks may evolve into formal collectives that work for political and social change. In addition, community economic development strategies that increase opportunities for education, training, and employment generate social capital within the neighborhood and improve resident well-being. Inner city communities need amenities such as recreation facilities for children, youth, and families in order to reduce the likelihood of crime. Agencies can play a vital role in community building by serving as a bridge between community and government, which will ensure the voices of residents are heard. Assisting residents in overcoming multiple barriers requires coordination between agencies offering different services in order to provide the appropriate resources. Finally, government needs to consult with inner city residents, collectives, and agencies about funding and policy needs and gaps. This research highlights the need for shared responsibility in building sustainable communities.

Based on this research, the following recommendations are made to support community members in building community:

1. Develop positive activities that provide alternatives to crime and substance abuse, build family relationships, and engage residents in community building. In our interviews, residents and service providers stressed the importance of having activities that were accessible to families and around for the long-term so that people could develop trust and partnerships to organize in their community.

2. Find alternatives to punitive social services policies. Men in our interviews described the situation they faced when trying to be part of their children's and partner's lives. Income support allowances, based on family income, force men to live separate lives so that their partner's benefits are not cut. Clearly, these policies do little to strengthen the family unit.

3. Open up legitimate avenues to income through education and employment training that builds community. The AYR is a stellar example of a program that provides legitimate employment for residents, while training them for future employment outside of the program. Another asset of this program is the product; residents are building homes for their neighbors who would not otherwise have the opportunity to own a new home.

4. Reduce community segregation through "field trips" to see people and places of interest. There are barriers between residents and neighborhoods within the inner city and between the inner and outer city. Our experiences with youth who traveled to the University of Manitoba campus and to an academic conference in Toronto highlighted the growth made by all who participated. Learning about other realities and experiences

opens doors for communication, trust and relationship-building, which are essential for community building.

5. Obtain long-term commitments from funding agencies to support community agencies working to empower community members and build community. Let grassroots level inform services and programs and not funding agencies. Funders play a crucial role in community and program development. However, the nature of short-term funding precludes the development of trust and relationship building with people who are getting involved for the first or next-to-first time. The research suggests that there are groups of residents in the community who are not typically considered to be experts on building healthy neighborhoods. Their inclusion in community-building initiatives would be evidence of enhanced community health.

6. Increase public awareness about the realities of life for ex-offenders and women involved in the sex trade in order to reduce stigma and discrimination. We heard from residents that because of the nature of their past, they faced multiple barriers to inclusion, ranging from finding a residence without recent references, opening a bank account, getting a social insurance number, and finding employment without the right clothing, work experience or telephone for a job interview. Even when these barriers are overcome, participants described being discriminated against because of a criminal record.

7. Engage policy makers in developing social policy that supports inner city communities and their residents in developing and maintaining healthy communities. Participants described the need for policy that is developed from the grassroots up. Neighborhood residents are experts on the issues and must be brought into the fold so that their voices can be heard, and respected by policy-makers. Top-down policies do not work.

8. Across Canada, neo-conservative governments have instituted a number of changes (and cutbacks) in welfare, education, health services, social services, to name a few, that have reduced and restricted income, opportunities and access to services and supports for inner city residents. Government needs to support the creation of healthy and sustainable communities by instituting changes and provide more funding. If governments do not, it will cost them, and society much more in the end.

9. The stories of our participants highlighted multiple barriers to full inclusion. The racism and stigma vary common experiences of study participants. We saw ample evidence that the expertise of residents, when respected and built upon, has an impact on others and vice-versa. Legitimate avenues of status attainment and opportunities need to be created in inner city communities to address issues of exclusion.

10. Men and women we worked with were in transition, from neighborhood to neighborhood, institution to community, social assistance to employment, and single-person to family person (living with a partner and/or children), yet there were no services specific to these transitions. There is a great deal of mobility within the inner city, yet little resources have been specifically targeted to address transitional issues. Research on transitional housing for inner city residents is needed to determine types, accessibility, and action needed to develop this needed resource. Bringing together academics, community residents, service providers, and policy makers to do a series of forums on this issue is needed.

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