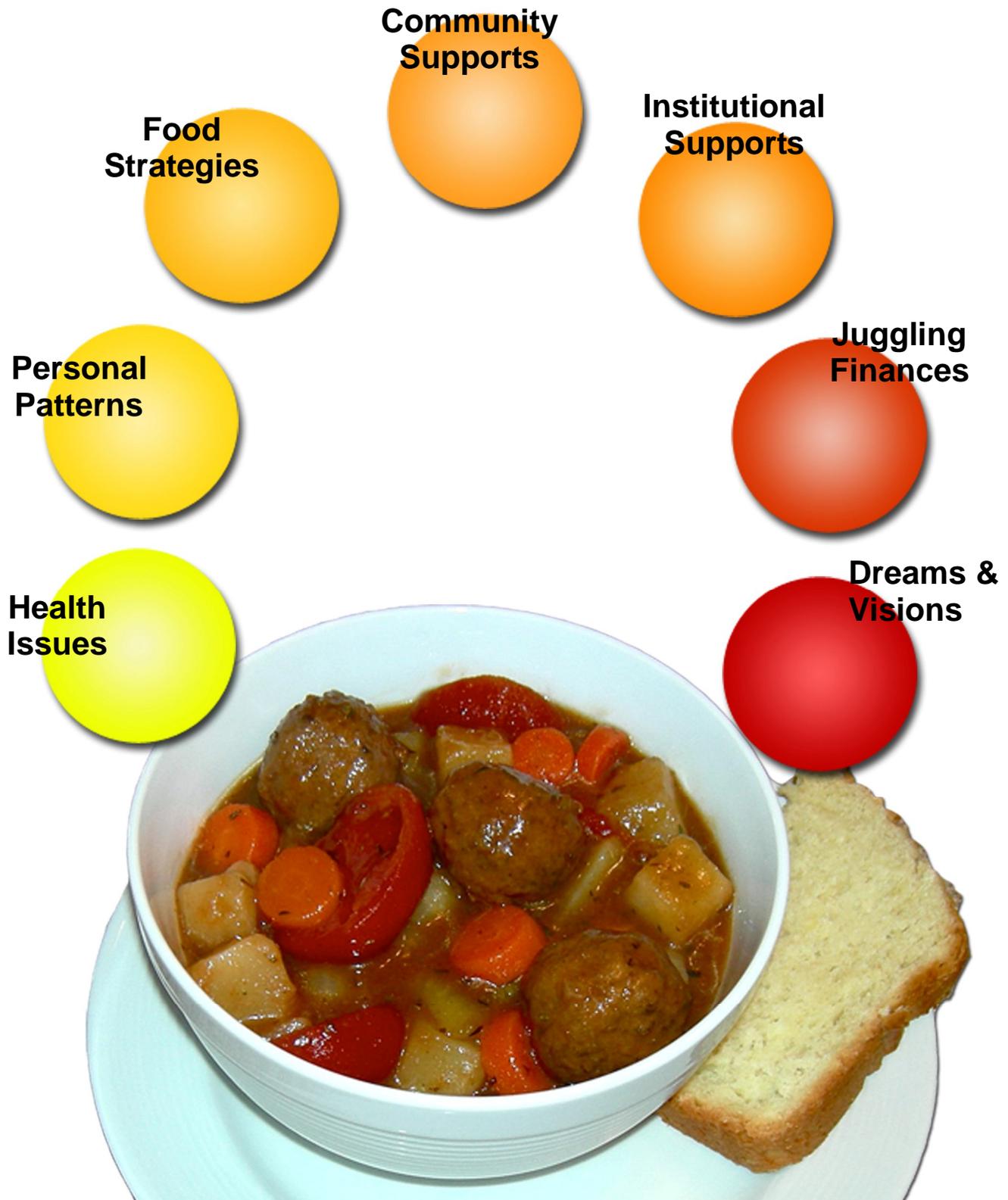


Food resilience, a low income goulash



● Cover photo

One of the discussions we had during this project was about stereotypes and how images are used to represent poverty. We understand that sometimes the goal is to catch the general public's attention towards poverty and, therefore, poverty is shown in images full of sadness.

As you will read in this report, one of the things that surprised us most was the resilience shown by the interviewees therefore, we wanted to capture that resilience through the use of vivid and bright colors.

On April 2nd, 2009 we had a focus group and feast with the interviewees and this photo represents the main course for lunch that had been prepared by the researchers combined by the 7 elements found during the research.

RESEARCHERS

Carolyn Moar,
Gladys Linklater,
Leslie Kwok,
Lynne Sommerville,
Judith Harris,
Marie Baker,
Mike Maunder,
Reilly,
Sandra Leone,
Shena Alcock,
Virginia Hunter.



“Beer and cake...that’s just not healthy!”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As active members of the Community Research Hub (CRH), most of us are low income residents of Spence neighborhood sharing similar characteristics, namely living on welfare, not owning a house, being single moms, Aboriginals or immigrants, people with disabilities or not being able, for a variety of reasons, to access a full time job. Throughout ongoing trainings and support, we are working towards changing our future as individuals and as a group overcoming the barriers imposed by the society that very often relies on prejudices against people living in the Inner City and their skills.

Not only because we are a new business in the research market, but also because of our social enterprise and cooperative-based ideas supporting and trusting inner city residents, we, as a group, have to work harder than well established research business, and be committed to the highest research standard possible in order to gain the trust of organizations that could be part of our clientele.

In that context, we highly appreciate Manitoba Food Charter, not only for hiring us, but also because we were given the responsibility to decide what type of research to implement, and most importantly, to decide how to conduct the research. The level of trust implied in so doing, had an extraordinarily positive result on the CRH and its members: first, it provided us with the opportunity to understand that even though someone can be living on a low income or under financial assistance, given the opportunity through training and appropriate support, it is possible to improve their own situation. Secondly, this unconditional trust received from Manitoba Food Charter, allowed us to walk all the stages of a social research from our own point of view and influenced by our unique backgrounds. At the end, at the CRH, we are mostly low income people living in the inner city and the essence of this project was nothing more than to research and study ourselves.

This project has been possible thanks to a grant from Manitoba Food Charter through the Public Health Agency of Canada's Diabetes Prevention Project.

We also want to acknowledge the invaluable support given by Paul Chorney of Manitoba Food Charter, as well as SNA's executive director, Kate Sjoberg, and the Image/Greening coordinator, Kathryn McKenzie. They showed their confidence from the beginning of this project and were always positive about us being able to finish a good research and on time. Thanks also to the House of Opportunities and their staff for their support and allowing us to use their meeting room, and coffee, and photocopier machine!!

Members of the SNA's Community Economic Development (CED) and Image/Greening committees also dedicated their volunteer time at their meetings to help us brainstorm about this research. We used their ideas and contributions as initial guidelines towards our overall goal. We appreciate their involvement and commitment towards this project.

"Thank you!"

Community Research Hub
April, 2009

INTRODUCTION

When the Community Research Hub agreed to research and prepare a report on food, the first question we had to determine was what would the report be about?

Through a lengthy collaborative and cooperative approach described in the pages that follow, we decided we were uniquely equipped, by the very fact of our membership, to research the realities of food for people with low incomes. The methodology section of this report describes how we decided a narrative approach was our best approach to doing this. Because we are people on low incomes ourselves, we decided we could reach out through our own natural networks of people to find people who would be willing to talk about the realities they face. Because we were trusted by these people, we felt they would be honest in telling their stories. In return, we felt it was important to respect and honour their stories and their struggles by honestly reporting their details, not just conducting a survey and consolidating the results.

This meant that we adopted a fairly open-ended approach to the 13 questions which provided the structure for our interviews. In the end, we were able to conduct 25 interviews, and these form the heart of this report.

As we analyzed the 25 interviews, we were introduced to the concept of food resilience – how people with low incomes are faced with decisions that people with higher incomes do not have to face – and how they approach these decisions with dignity, a solid set of values and a hard-won ability to survive and get by. We found there were seven elements through which people with low incomes demonstrated this food resilience: health issues, personal patterns, food strategies, community supports, institutional supports, juggling finances and their dreams and visions. These seven elements are explained through the voices and stories of the people we interviewed and form the main part of this report.

In addition, we held two focus groups to explore the realities of food choices for people with low incomes – one focus group before the main research of our 25 interviews, one focus group afterwards. The first group focused on the responses that seven of the researchers – all people with low incomes – had given to a preliminary list of questions. The second group consisted largely of people who had been interviewed in the main part of the research and presented them with our seven-element analysis of food resilience and asked them, “Did we get it right.” The results of these two focus groups are included in the final section of this report.

There are conclusions spread throughout the report in the actual voices of people with low incomes, and we do recommend that anyone wishing to develop conclusions read the report carefully and try to capture the action steps that the people interviewed would really want.

In the end, what this report represents is a lot like the goulash that we served at our final focus group. Goulash is considered a peasant dish in the countries where it originated in Eastern Europe. It’s a stew – and even sometimes a soup – particularly rich in meat and meat sauce. But even as our group discussed the use of the word in our title, several Aboriginal members pointed out that goulash in homes of North American people with low incomes often includes a lot more macaroni than meat.

There are obviously lots of styles of goulash – Hungarian goulash served with dumplings, a North End stew served with bannock, (even vegetarian goulash!) – but at least one promise we can make is that the goulash we serve here to you has lots of meat and potatoes to chew on, like the goulash we served to our focus group. One Aboriginal man in that group commented that it was the first time he had eaten meat in a long time. That was partly because of his own budget, but also because – in the goulash style – the meat had been simmered in its own juices for over three hours and was tender enough for him to eat. It turned out that the day of the focus group was his birthday, and so he happily took home a big container of leftovers.

We hope this goulash of a report has been simmered long enough. We hope it has lots to chew on, and lots of different spices as well. Some people might complain the goulash was short on vegetables and fruit was missing. We solved that problem at our feast by serving fruit and vegetable trays at our last focus group. We're sure that this goulash of a report has lots of meat and potatoes for you to chew on as well.

And finally, we hope you'll take home lots of leftovers – lots of ideas to chew on and develop in the future.

METHODOLOGY

The CRH promotes a collaborative environment where diversity is respected and main decisions are taken by consensus. Based on that, two major areas have a huge impact on our work. Since all of our members have been trained in a variety of research techniques, we are able to stop what we are doing and organize a focus group or a brainstorming session immediately to find solutions to a problem, establish goals, or find a new idea for our projects.

Another area that helps us to provide a different approach to research is the composition of the CRH. We are a diverse community-based group and our discussions help us to cover a variety of points of view giving us a big advantage compared to other organizations: we have been or actually are where our interviewees are.

The third factor CRH identifies is that of our research approach which deals with individual and group emotions. Living on financial assistance or belonging to a minority group and going out to interview somebody else living under the same conditions, brings a level of empathy between interviewer and interviewee. This is one of our biggest strengths because people share stories with us that they would not share with somebody else coming from a different background. One significant aspect of this scenario is the ability to find the balance between detachment and empathy to the interviewees during the interview. Clearly this is an asset, but as a research group we are aware of the need to consciously evaluate the effect our own identification has with the people being interviewed.

The main question that we faced before deciding the final methodology that we were going to use was: What can we offer that other groups can not? The answer to that question is that we are able to design the research (and questions) from our own point of view which is a combination of diversity, collaborative environment, and emotional support.

● Finding the goal of this research: long meetings and changes in the agenda.

One of the first activities was a brainstorming session. During one Saturday morning in November, we mapped different ideas that could be researched related to food. Some of the questions identified were, for instance, do organizations such as the Food Bank create dependency? Or do institutions such as hospitals offer the quality of food they promote among their patients? That brainstorming session was planned to run from 9:30 to 11:30 but it finished at 12:30 when one of our members mentioned that she had no money for food that week. At that point, we realized that we had been talking about food during three hours without eating anything. Since then, we included food in our meetings (homemade whenever it was possible), regardless, of the time of the day. (Before that, we only provided food if the meeting was at lunch or dinner time)

The results of that first brainstorming session were discussed at SNA's CED and Image/Greening committee meetings during December, providing valuable input for our project; however, this was only the starting point. We still needed to

find the overall goal for the project that ended up being a long one because, first, food is related to different areas such as health, institutions, prices, locations, cultural backgrounds, quality, and barriers among others which makes it difficult to find one area to research. Each one of these areas would also have a different research approach. For example, to find price patterns we would need to go to grocery stores and record the prices, whereas in person interviews, might be more suitable to analyze whether the cultural background affects people's food habits or not. A second reason for the long process is because we wanted to do the research as collaboratively as possible, meaning that discussions were sometimes longer than planned and the need for consensus guided us many times to explore concepts or ideas that we did not see in advance.

-
- *Diversity*
 - *Collaboration*
 - *Change*
-

After having a few, longer than planned meetings, we decided that we needed to have weekly meetings rather than bi-weekly or once a month as we used to have in the past.

Depending on the circumstances and what had to be discussed, some meetings had an agenda prepared in advance, some others had been informally arranged. The ones that had an agenda were usually not planned to have a discussion, rather, they were mainly administrative and for reporting purposes to help everybody to understand what has been done, and what needed to be done in the immediate future. The second type of meetings were usually brainstorming sessions and therefore no agenda was prepared in advance but only an overall goal of what should be discussed that day.

Independently of the type of meeting, we did have to interrupt them many times and change our procedure to address an important issue that had been raised, and either the agenda of the day, or the discussion of the day, had to be cancelled or postponed in order to discuss what was being addressed at that time.

● Discussions

Discussions were always part of the Community Research Hub mostly based on our idea of following a cooperative and collaborative structure. In most cases those discussions were reduced to disagreements on how a specific activity related to research should be done. The discussion's horizon changed with this project where we were given the opportunity to decide what to research related to food and which methodology to use.

Meetings were interrupted either because of a new point of view, or someone in particular needed to be listened to.

One of those discussions started when one of the members of the Research Hub mentioned that we should interview people the day right before they receive their welfare cheque. In doing so, we could hear the voices of people when they are at their lowest level rather than when they are happy buying groceries. Her intention was honestly community oriented, she wanted to understand what people needed and how can we help them when they are at their lowest level.

Immediately another person, member of the CRH, and living on social assistance let us know that this approach is very disrespectful. We are assuming that everybody living on welfare is unable to manage their own budget and the first thing they do is buy alcohol. The tone of the meeting changed immediately and it

made us all reevaluate and rethink about our stereotype of people living on welfare. As soon as the discussion started, we realized that we needed a more in-depth analysis of our own perception about people living on welfare. Immediately, we stopped the meeting and started a round where everybody expressed their opinion about that... and the meeting ended later than planned. Of course!

Some of the conclusions that we arrived at that day were: yes, we stereotype about people on welfare, and no, we shouldn't meet them when they are at their lowest, unless it is specific research about behaviors on the day before/after payday.

-
- *Community*
 - *Payday*
 - *Respect*
-

Yes, we also discussed the meaning of the word welfare and decided to use a general expression such as payday, without referring to a regular salary or financial assistance.

Another example of our discussion is while we were analyzing the interviews and trying to find common themes, a specific quote "*I don't know what I would do without X*" was classified as "Personal Support" Immediately someone mentioned that sentence means Community Support rather than Personal Support. This discussion ended almost 2 hours later. The main issue was what is community support? From an individualistic point of view, this sentence means clearly personal support as opposed to a non-individualistic point of view where it represents the community. The expression Personal Support was later changed to Personal Patterns.

For example, if someone belongs to a minority, that person will immediately feel closer to someone else belonging to his/her same group even if they never met before, which is part of his/her small community. At the same time, in Aboriginal and some immigrant communities, family is considered part of community. Family represents community support rather than personal support.

If diversity were not to have been part of the CRH explicitly, we never would have had the opportunity to analyze concepts, ideas, stereotypes and even words as we did. In the first example above, we were able to discuss about welfare and payday just because that issue was brought up by a single mom living on welfare. In the second case, the meaning of community and the individualistic/community point of view were discussed because an Aboriginal person with her own perception of community participated in the meeting. Listening to all the voices represents inclusion and respect.

● More on diversity

Diversity did bring us another challenge too. Clearly we wanted to learn about low income people and their relationship with food. Low income is a commonly used expression and we think we have a clear idea of its meaning but people on a low income are never a homogeneous group. There are people with disabilities living on a low income, single moms, Aboriginal, immigrants, and elders living alone on a low income, many times interrelated, such as Aboriginal with disability. All of them have a unique set of challenges that they have to confront.

A similar scenario happens at the CRH where as many as possible different backgrounds, age groups, and gender are represented. What happened during this project is that belonging to the same group that we are researching, we face the same daily challenges as them. Housing, financial problems, depression, and disabilities are only some of the many areas affecting our daily lives and therefore

having a big impact on our work. For that reason, all of our meetings have a different flavour.



There have been meetings purely emotional, others with strong discussions, and the regular ones: those where we were able to follow the agenda. But all of them were influenced by the people present at the meetings.

We are at most a group of 11 people and everyone representing one area of the huge diversity picture. That was noticeable during the meetings. If for example someone with a strong approach to grow locally, buy locally was present, the outcome was completely different when a single mom living on welfare was part of the meeting. As a result, many times we had to revisit a specific issue, according to who was present at that particular meeting.

Nevertheless, all the issues mentioned before, are what helped us design our questionnaire. It was an arduous process where we initially came up with sixty-two questions resulting in twelve identified themes. Further analyzing gave us a questionnaire where diversity is clearly represented, and the questions are formulated in plain language. (see appendix)

● Methodology of this research

Since we define ourselves as people on a low income living in the inner city, we decided to interview ourselves as a starting point following procedure to conduct the actual research in two basic steps:

1. We are also interviewees.

After formulating the basic questions, each of the researchers either answered the questions themselves or interviewed one another. Then one person read all the interviews, attempted to synthesize them into common themes, and presented this synthesis to the group of researchers as a whole in a focus group. This focus group analyzed the themes and added more themes (See Researchers' Focus Group, page 40). This process allowed us to see the shortcomings of the original questions and researchers suggested a few changes— a couple of questions reworded, a couple of new questions, but, most important, the decision not to rely so much on the questions in a survey-type approach, but to use them as guides to allow people to tell their stories in a more intensive interview-style approach. By “snowballing” out into the communities where we were familiar, we felt interviewees would trust us enough to truly tell their stories. We decided that collecting and telling these narratives was the unique gift that the CRH could bring to this research.

2. Interviewing the community

Each of the researchers who participated in step 1 (above) interviewed 2-5 low income residents. We tried to make sure various groupings were represented: young, old, Aboriginal, newcomers, people with disabilities, people with families, people on their own. Once the 25 interviews were transcribed, three researchers

-
- *Brainstorming*
 - *Interviews*
 - *Focus Groups*
-

set out to analyze them in two sessions. For the first session, each researcher read seven transcripts and identified themes. The researchers then met and discussed these preliminary themes. Then, each researcher took another seven transcripts and analyzed them, bearing in mind their preliminary conclusions, but also what they had learned from the analysis by others. Out of this process, in a final meeting of the researchers, the seven elements of food resilience emerged. As the actual writing of the report proceeded, these seven elements were presented to a focus group which included several of the people interviewed, several researchers, and other community members interested in the research.

During the rest of the document, we will present first the interviews with the residents since that is the main piece of the research, followed by the two focus groups, the researchers and the last focus group with the interviewees.

● What is next

From the beginning and supported by the idea of not being only community-based researchers but also people interested on improving our communities we wanted that this report contrary to being an end it should be the beginning of something, even the smallest action would make a difference and having that in mind, we asked our interviewees for their suggestions (see appendix Q # 11 and 12) that is related to the actual food research.

What we did not prevent happening from the beginning was that after almost four months of interesting, surprising, and mind-opening discussions there was a general feeling that this should not finish once the report is done.

Two ideas emerged from those discussions:

The first one, is to start a reading circle inviting people from the community to participate. Since the word collaborative and research has been mentioned so much during this time, it appears to be a natural start to read about collaborative action research and discuss it later. Material for that is already circulating around the CRH and other community members and the first date will be scheduled as soon as we finish this report on April 21, 2009.

The second idea, also based on discussions about words, stereotypes, and commonly used expressions, is to start our own definition from a low income / inner city resident point of view to use as reference every time we go to a meeting or event.

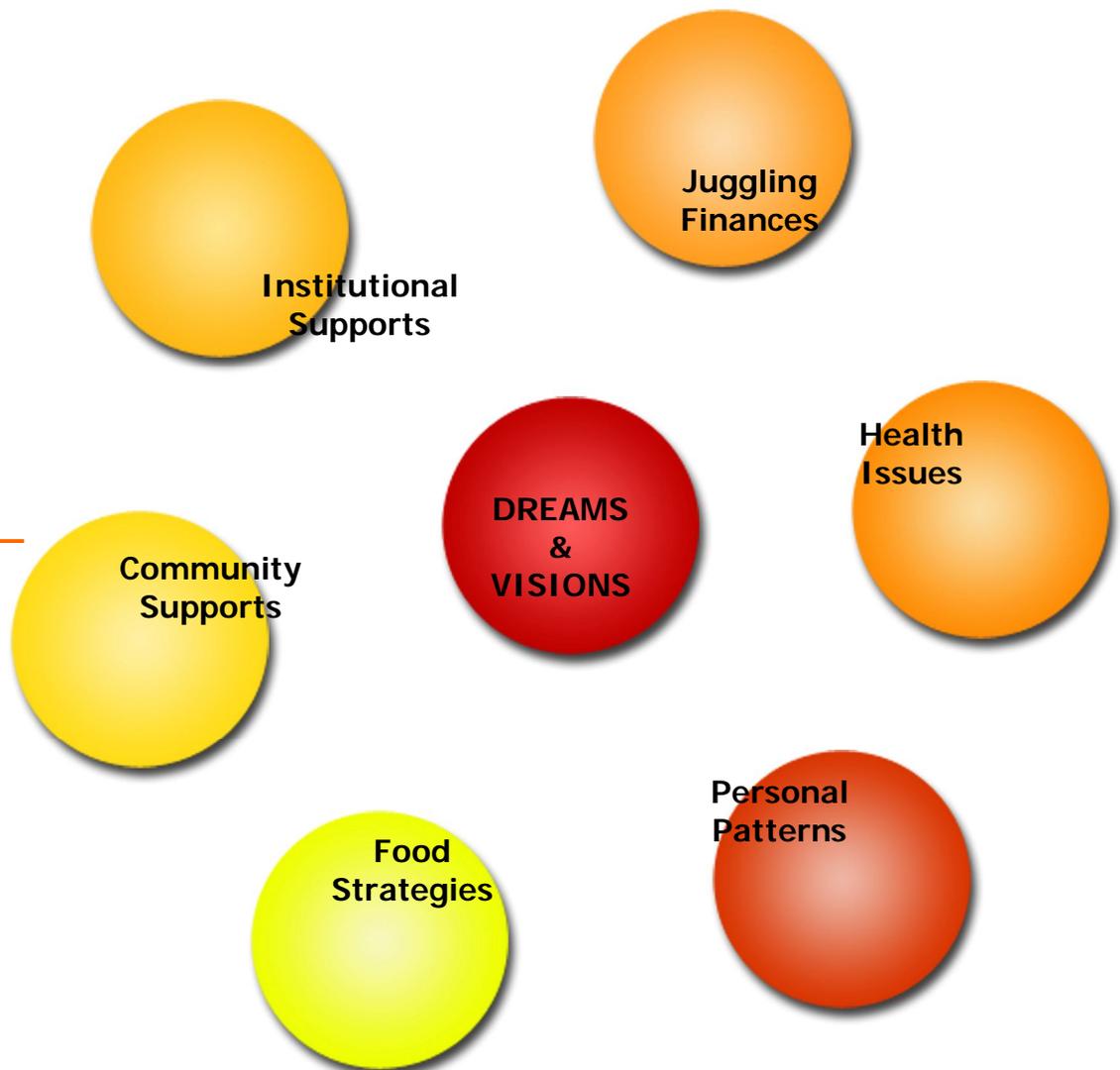


25 INTERVIEWS: THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF FOOD RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL

As researchers read and discussed the 25 interviews which make up the bulk of the food study, the major theme that emerged in several different ways for each of us was the strong resilience and survival characteristics that people showed even when so severely impacted by low incomes. “They know they’ll get by,” said one researcher. “They’re survivors,” said another. “There’s a lot of dignity in these stories,” said another.

A lot of our subsequent analysis of the 25 interviews was to try to find where that resilience came from. We determined that there were seven elements that made up this resilience. We felt these seven elements should not be looked at in a reductionist way (i.e. Element # 1, Element # 2) but more in a circular way – that all related to one another and they were all part of the balance of an individual. Thus we represented them as a circle:

- *Food Strategies*
- *Juggling Finance*
- *Dreams & Visions*
- *Personal Patterns*
- *Institutional Supports*
- *Health Issues*
- *Community Supports*



In the interviews we did with people on low incomes, although these titles did not exist as categories for our questions, these elements emerged again and again. Most people interviewed showed three or four or more. If they were strong in these elements, they were resilient. If they were balanced – i.e. some strength in several of these elements, rather than simply a lot of strength in one element, then too they were resilient.

We have not subjected this theory to a rigorous testing – we note it as the pattern that emerged out of interviews with these 25 people.

In a sample size that small, and with no attempt at more rigorous testing (e.g. double-blind studies, broader surveys) we present these seven elements as elements that need to be looked at in whatever ways might be most useful.

We do not present this as a representative sample. In fact, in one aspect it is clearly not representative – as it turned out, 17 out of the 25 interviews were with Aboriginal people. We do not regret this, since Aboriginal people are so often ignored, and, when interviewed, are often not heard.

The true strength of these results is that, because people trusted the researchers, these interviews were very rich in detail and honesty and passion. This detail is not summarized here, nor have the results – except in a few cases explained in the text, been synthesized into endless details (e.g. five respondents (20%) had access to freezers and froze food.) This is partly because the size of the sample does not warrant this kind of statistical examination, but mostly because researchers felt it was important to capture the flavor of the lives of the people interviewed, sometimes involving a bit of reading between the lines.

To do this and be true to as many of the stories as possible, we present one story in detail for each of the seven elements, and then capture selections from the other 18 interviews that have something significant to say for the different elements.

The result, a series of stories that can help us understand the important place of these seven elements in building resilience and survival among people – those with low incomes, and perhaps the rest of us as well.

HEALTH ISSUES

Two of the most surprising facts that emerged from the 25 interviews related to health and nutrition:

1. There were high levels of sickness and health issues among those interviewed. (17 out of the 25 people interviewed had significant health issues)
2. A significant number of those interviewed showed high or medium levels of nutritional wisdom and understanding.

Nutritional understanding	
High	8
Medium	6
Low	11
TOTAL	25

It is inaccurate to draw statistical information from such a small sample, and there are several ways in which our results could be flawed – we interviewed a high proportion of Aboriginal people and diabetes and other health concerns are high in that community. We interviewed many older people and health issues often become more evident in that age group. But we believe the low income of those we interviewed was the key factor in their overall poor health. All interviews were with low-income people, and “income and social status” is one of Health Canada’s key determinants of health.

It is quite a bit less solid to draw any conclusions on the second surprising fact – people’s nutritional knowledge. We were simply surprised by the number of people who used phrases or information in their answers that indicated nutritional understanding – “...People need a high protein, low glycemic diet. ...My health requires that I watch cholesterol and cut fat. ...Getting one food out of all four food groups”. We did a rough re-reading of the 25 interviews, trying to determine how many people showed a high, medium or low understanding of nutritional factors.

Health Issues	
Significant health issues	17
No health issues	8
TOTAL	25

In some cases, people with health issues showed higher levels of nutritional knowledge, perhaps gained as they have struggled with their condition. But not all with those health issues showed increased understanding.

What many people with health issues talked about was decreased appetite, decreased energy to prepare their food, and the need for expensive foods, supplements and medications, some of them covered by disability, some not.

It’s clear that health and nutrition play a critical role in the food choices that low income people must make – and that they have less income with which to make these choices.

● Healing through community and food

Interview # 1 was a 62-year-old man who has had a chronic disease for many years. Recently a flare-up of the disease resulted in him going on short-term disability from his regular part-time job. He is using the period of disability to begin a healthier diet and lifestyle, but this is only possible because of the financial support of another family member.

“Food is so important to my health,” he explained. “But I could not have changed my basic food habits without financial support from my family.”

He has a condition called Crohn’s Disease – an intestinal inflammation that is

treated by taking anti-inflammatory drugs. The medication costs \$100 a month which he can eventually get back, but which represents a major up-front expense. There are also supplements like calcium, vitamins and Omega-3 which are not covered by any medical plan. But the major difficulty is changing his food habits – both because it is expensive and because old habits are hard to break. “I am going through a process of discovering what food my body will tolerate,” he explained. “I am learning about the foods that trigger my attacks. I have had to get rid of food that was not good for me... and have to purchase food which is more expensive.”

He stressed that his specialized diet and lifestyle choices are not being made because medical doctors recommend them, but because he is discovering what works for him. For instance, breakfast used to be bacon, eggs with cheese, hash browns, juice and coffee. Now he’s trying to eat yogurt, fruit and tea. Other meals now call for more vegetables, nuts and seeds, good quality olive oil, and replacing beef and pork with fish and wild game. Many of these foods are more expensive. He has found he does not tolerate the kind of cheese he has bought in bulk for years. Now, if he wants cheese, he must purchase more expensive goat’s cheese.

“I am a very healthy eater.”

●

“I make soups, and that stretches the food.”

He does some of his shopping at House of Nutrition on Notre Dame where he can get specialty and organic products that he needs. He likes that store because staff is knowledgeable but also non-judgemental. He has access to a car and shops at Superstore and Sobey’s where he can get bulk foods and various specialty brands he finds have helped him. He gets wild rice at Neechi Foods and fish at Gimli Fish. The car also gives him access to a farm in the summer where he can put in some hours working: “I enjoy getting out of the city, and I get fresh produce in return.”

He is trying to prepare more healthy alternatives for himself, but sometimes the fatigue caused by his sickness makes this difficult. He still often makes bad decisions about food. “Food is a great comfort to me,” he explains. “Whenever I feel emotionally drained, or if I don’t have the energy to cook, I will eat in a restaurant... A Sausage and Egg McMuffin at McDonald’s is inexpensive if you don’t want the coffee... If I buy a salad at a restaurant, I enjoy it, but if I make a salad at home, I don’t enjoy it.”

He thinks that making good food choices isn’t easy in our society because of the way the food industry pushes us into bad nutritional choices. “As low income people get information, they need financial support to make better nutritional decisions to maintain good health. For example, don’t eat hamburger; eat chicken and fish.”

When he adds up the costs of healthier food choices, non-prescription food supplements and out-of-pocket prescription costs (which one month totalled over \$200) he wonders how anyone with a chronic disease can make healthy choices on a low income.

His own income is at the top end of what is defined as low-income. When he is working, he estimates his income varies from \$20,000-\$24,000 a year. (The Low Income Cut-Off for a single person is \$21,666. When he was interviewed, near the end of six months on disability, his income had been cut to about \$18,000, or \$1,500 a month.

Without the financial support he received from a family member, and without perks like the medical plan and the disability plan he gets from his part-time job, he would never be able to make these health choices. He feels he would be trapped in ever-worsening health, eventually being unable to work and pushed even further

into poor health and low income.

This is the reality faced by many, many low-income people who live at the lower end of the low-income scale. The combination of low income and poor health creates a vicious cycle driving them further into worsening health.

● Other views on Health Issues

“I am Aboriginal and I grew up with nothing but fresh meat, fish and vegetables.... Now I eat my whole wheat bannock and I would love to get wild meat and fresh fish to eat with it. It was much healthier to eat wild meat and fresh fish. When the diabetes started was when they brought in the processed food and garlic sausage and stuff.”
(Interview # 23)

“You have to read the fat labels. Saturated is really bad. Aspartame is really bad as well.”

“I try to eat a balanced diet and I am steering away from the typical North American approach to food. I am trying to reduce certain common allergens from my diet such as pasteurized dairy products, caffeine, processed foods and food additives.”
(Interview # 24)

● *“You have to read the fat labels. Saturated is really bad. Aspartame is really bad as well.”*
(Interview # 5)

“I am steering away from the typical North American approach to food.”

“I’m not much of an eater. My sister gave me some Ensure. I throw up a lot and I think it’s because of the medication I’m taking. I take 15 pills at breakfast. And if I don’t take Gravol before I eat, I throw up my whole meal.”
(Interview # 6)

“Sometimes due to illness, I can’t cook. There are times when I don’t eat at all, especially when I don’t feel well.”
(Interview # 27)

“I have low iron and Gout arthritis. It is fluid in my knees. I have to take medication. I have to be on a diet. I can’t eat certain food. I have to eat liver for iron but those are the same foods I can’t eat because of my Gout arthritis. So it’s hard for me. I can’t eat liver and I like it. I also can’t eat cauliflower or broccoli because of my arthritis. But I also need those same foods for my low iron. I’ll probably have to drink boosters and they are so expensive. Medical Services may pay for them if I have a doctor’s note. I’m also not supposed to eat tuna or sardines but I still eat them once in awhile. I can’t eat these things because of the oil. It’s not easy to get the food I need for my health condition.”
(Interview # 26)



PERSONAL PATTERNS

As well as nutritional properties, it is clear that food has a strong emotional impact. Among our interviews, food met many emotional needs, including social needs like “nights out” with family and friends, people’s addictions to sweets, the special foods they remember from back home (e.g. the desire for wild meat, game and fish for many Aboriginal people) and much more.

Food is clearly an important part of our personal make-up.

Most significant were the views people expressed that showed the deep values at their core. Although there were no questions in the interview specifically directed to a person’s values, many personal values emerged over the course of the interviews. In many interviews, people talked about strong personal values -- healing and nutrition, love of food, caring for their children, the place of spirit. It is clear that, as part of their personal patterns, many people are quite intentional about strong personal values.

But equally, others may be subject to personal patterns that they have less control over – addictions, poor habits, financial pressures. These too exert strong emotional control over people’s patterns.

People’s personal patterns, values, habits and routines influence their food decisions, and food decisions can help shape their personal patterns and routines. Food plays a role in many of our personal patterns and routines, and is itself, one of the routines that brings us much emotional comfort. It’s not called “comfort food” for nothing.

● Personal values help mom live an organic lifestyle on a low-income budget

Interview # 12 was a 29-year-old single mom from Mennonite roots, attending university and working casual hours to supplement her student loan. Principles and values are important for her – in food, in politics, in economics.

A major personal value for her is food. “I love and respect food,” she explained. “Processed food is offensive (though yummy) and disrespectful to life.... Cooking is number one. I don’t understand why people don’t cook. It’s my passion and perspective.” Despite her passion for food, she said she understood how time was a big issue for many low income people who didn’t cook.

For her, spending two hours cooking a meal helps her unwind after a long day which often includes both classes and part-time jobs. Her passion for food became a major part of her life when her son was born a few years ago. “Food is how I connect with myself. If I didn’t love it I might not cook. It’s been a slow progression. It started with wanting to be more healthy when my son was born. It started with drinking more water. Then I would only buy whole wheat flour. Now I’m at the point where I eat organic. These are small changes in how I eat. It was intentional. Other people have different priorities.”

Living an organic lifestyle on a low income budget is difficult, but she has several strategies. She gets organic food delivered through the on-line store, Fresh Options. She buys different foods at different stores: Safeway for Bothwell Cheese;

*“I love and respect
food,”*



*“Food is how I connect
with myself.”*

the Bay for Vita eggs (cheaper there than in organic stores); the Forks for day-old bread from Tall Grass Prairie. While at these locations, she does the rest of her shopping. She shops at Superstore when she can get a ride. She sees living downtown as positive in terms of being able to get good food without having a car. “Accessing ingredients is not a big issue.” But having a car would reduce the time spent in shopping. Sometimes in the summer, she gets a ride from her mother to St. Norbert Farmers’ Market.

She asks for kitchen stuff at Christmas. She has a freezer which she bought a few years ago when she was living on her own on welfare. She remembers buying it because she was afraid she would run out of money. “I stockpiled because of fear.”

Her major strategy is finding good ingredients and then cooking from scratch. Breakfast is soy milk, Tall Grass toast, an egg, and perhaps an avocado or blanched kale. Dinner with her son is often two versions of the same dish, one for him, one for her. “I build a meal around vegetables and protein.” It often includes salad (each of them has their favourite home-made dressing in the fridge.), vegetables, brown rice, pasta or potatoes, sometimes home-made burgers, either turkey or bison. “I like to eat more vegetables than meat. Things I grew up with were vegetables, cheese for sure, and home made soups.”

“Accessing ingredients is not a big issue.”



“I build a meal around vegetables and protein.”



“My parents gave me my political world view and influence how I cook”



“I work very hard to get the food I want, People shouldn’t have to.”

She got her love of “real” food and food preparation from her family roots. “My grandmothers really cooked.... They always had home cooked food. My parents gave me my political world view and influence how I cook. When my mom grew up, food was healthier and what she ate as a child was ‘real food.’ I have to seek out ‘real food’.”

Her family still offers her support in meaningful ways. “I also go to my parents and stay all day – we have brunch and eat all our food there, a Mennonite ‘faspa’.... You just graze all day.” (“Faspa” is a low-German, Mennonite term used for a typical late afternoon lunch that for generations has been served in Mennonite homes. The lunch consists of fresh, homemade buns, butter, jam, coffee, and cheese. faspa can also include fruit preserves, sausage or other sliced meat, and dessert. On a Sunday, faspa would have been the evening meal, and often relatives and friends would stop over unannounced.)

As well as dropping over for faspa, she gets other support from her family. “My parents give me food – herbs, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers – my father grows them for salsa. One time when my parents were away, my aunt brought me some good foods – chicken breasts and red peppers. I secretly wished she would do it again. It was very special because she brought me expensive foods.”

She does keep a special longing for fancy foods. She used to eat out at fancy restaurants, but now only eats out a few times a month; maybe at an Indian or ethnic restaurant; or to Subway, because her son likes it. Sometimes, if she’s low on energy, she’ll order sushi.

The values she holds – many of them inherited from her family roots – are what drive her to try to provide the best for her and her son. It can be a strain sometimes. “I work very hard to get the food I want,” she explains. “People shouldn’t have to.”

Another example of these values is her decision to pay more for rent beyond the normal subsidy for a two-bedroom apartment: “I think your accommodation makes a big difference in your well-being. My son will remember this – its stability and safety – later on. You live in subsidized housing at a personal cost. You don’t

always want to be ‘clientized’.”

Rent is her major expense. Her income comes from a student loan, money made at several casual jobs, day-care subsidy for her son and rent subsidy. She may have a low income but her strong values are the major factor in her drive to provide the better things in life for her and her son – good accommodation and good food.

● Other views on Personal Patterns

A 37-year-old woman living in a West Broadway rooming house talked about her normal cheque day pattern: “It’s a habit. It’s McDonald’s. It’s fast food, cheap and convenient and it’s right on Portage. I stop in there and have something to eat, then second-hand stores. If I have money after that, I’ll go grocery shopping.”

(Interview # 20)

“I like my sweets,” explained one 64-year-old man with developmental disabilities, who showed a fridge containing some good foods, but a cake, a pie and beer as well. His support worker showed the interviewer a cupboard full of healthier alternatives they’d bought together: “It’s a challenge getting him to eat a balanced diet. We buy good food but it’s rotting on the shelf.... He eats according to habits. The older you become, the more set in your ways you become.”

(Interview # 30)

“People I know who are ill and suffer from addictions – these are illnesses, deep emotional problems they go through.... A lot of us go through these illnesses, but others don’t recognize that there is trauma and people trying to dull things with drugs. People who are really healthy don’t need to numb their minds. It’s all connected to food. A healthy diet is a rejection of drugs. People who have a healthy diet would go for walks and outings. People who are healthy don’t sit in front of the TV. Pepsi and chips give you a high and then good diet goes away.”

(Interview # 33)

*“The older you
become, the more set
in your ways you
become.”*

“I gotta have a cigarette. I gotta have my 2 litre pop and chocolate bars.”

(Interview # 3)

“I do a lot of volunteer work to keep myself busy. My co-board members are not so well, so I have to do most of the work. I help people in my building. I go to the library and read. My other outing is Bingo or slots on occasion. I do it so I will be around people.”

(Interview # 23)

“Being a wife and mother – cooking is a must!”

(Interview # 22)

“My priorities? My son, then food before anything else, then my music.”

(Interview # 25)

FOOD STRATEGIES

The fundamental reality of people with low incomes is that they have low incomes. And food, as well as being nutritional and emotional is economic. No matter how food satisfies nutritional or emotional needs, we need to have the money to shop for the alternatives we want.

People with low incomes have devised a large number of strategies that enable them to stretch their limited resources and find what they want. Many people showed a high level of common wisdom that led to educated shopping choices – clipping coupons, watching for sales, buying in bulk when they can afford it, knowing which stores to go to for particular items. Their inner city location was a challenge for many – many of them complaining that prices are higher and quality lower in the inner city. But others expressed satisfaction with the same stores; and others found ways to get to the places they wanted (most often, a big store like Superstore, on Sargent Avenue) and find the food they wanted.

A partial list of these strategies is listed after this story .

● Sharp reduction in income brings new food strategies

Interview # 28 was a 57-year-old Caucasian man who is now on disability for health reasons and who is faced with the difficulty of living on a sharp reduction in income. “My income for the year is what I used to make in a month,” he explained. “It’s a big change.”

His life has changed in other ways. He’s now living on his own. He was a single dad to two girls but they moved out when they were grown. An indication of his strong personal values is that, while raising the two girls, he never brought any of his own lady friends home with him because he didn’t want the girls to get confused. “So I settled on being a dad.”

It was ten years ago that he first went on disability, at that time for throat cancer. The cancer made it impossible to eat so he started on a liquid supplement, Ensure. With an operation, he survived the cancer and returned to work. But then his health declined because of another condition – Crohn’s Disease, an intestinal disease which can flare up with pain and inflammation. This has made it necessary for him to continue using Ensure, about five cans a day, paid for by disability.

The Crohn’s affects his appetite and the kinds of foods he can eat. Between his health, his reduced income and living alone, he has developed several food strategies.

One strategy has been simply reducing the amount of food he cooks and stores. “I love cooking. I was never one for junk food.... I have all the spices and everything I need to make food taste good. My friends tell me I’m a good cook.” But his low appetite makes him cautious about cooking too much. “I cook stuff and I don’t feel like eating it.... I don’t have much of an appetite anymore. I still cook – I’m used to cooking a bunch of stuff but I end up throwing it out. My vegetables always go bad, such as lettuce. You don’t eat much when you are alone.”

“My income for the year is what I used to make in a month,”

His real staples are meat and his food supplement, Ensure. Once a month he buys \$60-\$80 worth of meat at Cantor's Meats and freezes it for use through the month. "I buy pork chops, steak and lots of hamburger. For breakfast I eat bacon and eggs. For supper I have potatoes and meat. I don't eat lunch – I drink Ensure. I eat a lot of bananas. I don't think I get enough good quality food. If it wasn't for Ensure, there is no way I could keep up."

He has developed a shopping routine of getting the best buys and quality at different stores: Cantor's for meat ("I never buy meat on store shelves."); Superstore for vegetables (weekly – "because they go bad so fast."); Safeway for dairy and sales on canned food; Wal-Mart for toiletries ("they have the brand Equate that is cheaper and good quality stuff."). He never shops at neighborhood stores because the quality is low and the prices high. In his shopping travels, he notices that, at many stores, "they jack up the prices on cheque days. It is ridiculous."

A favorite luxury is coffee. "I buy gourmet coffee beans at the Forks and make my own coffee at home because you pay \$4 for a cup of coffee at places.... It's too expensive to eat out."

He's now very price-conscious. "I look for deals everywhere. When I had money, I never looked for deals. Before I was on disability I always had lots of food. I fed street people."

But now his life on disability means using all his resources to stretch his limited income. One way he has found is using the prescription he has for Tylenol 3 to make a bit of extra cash. "I sell them and live with the pain to supplement my income."

It's just one of the many strategies he's developed to get the food he needs with the reduced income that disability now provides for him.

● Other views on Food Strategies

"Homemade bannock "sticks to my ribs and I like my bannock."
(Interview # 23)

"My building has a free bus to Superstore, but I never have money to shop there."
(Interview # 15)

"My son gets better food because he lives outside the inner city."

"I only buy what I can't get for nothing – ice cream, minute steaks, milk."
(Interview # 3)

"Food is more expensive and not as fresh as in the suburbs. My son gets better food because he lives outside the inner city."
(Interview # 4)

- Buy in bulk, store in small bags and freeze.
- Giant Tiger was mentioned by 14 people.
- Many people talked about the importance of meat, and two stores mentioned were Cantor's and Mirandas.

- Sales mean “cook right away” ; check expiry dates.
- Sharing with a friend enables buying bulk goods like bread.
- One difficulty in a rooming house kitchen is so many people sharing a space. There’s little time and shared pots quickly becomes unsanitary. One man said he bought an electric pressure cooker because it cooks everything, including meat, so quickly.
- Stash away gift certificates as a fall back when you really need them.
- Often people are reduced to buying single rolls of toilet paper or single cigarettes in the days before cheque day.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

Community is the group of people that a person naturally and intentionally connects with – family, friends, neighbours, merchants, co-workers, church, and many other natural groupings. The line can often blur between community supports and institutional supports, especially “community-based” supports. But basically, community supports involve people naturally coming together and supporting one another, not strictly for pay or profit, but because they share natural connections – their neighbourhood, their culture, their family.

Community supports – especially family and friends – were major sources of real, practical support for 22 of the 25 people in this study. (For instance, in two stories already told, one man with a chronic illness said “I could not have changed my basic food habits without financial support from my family; and a 29-year-old university student talked of going home frequently for a Mennonite “faspa.”)

The sense of community is often much higher in clearly connected groupings of people – religious communities like Mennonites or Jewish; groupings like “the gay community”; or ethnic groupings like the Aboriginal community, “new Canadians” or Winnipeg’s many long-established cultural groups. It is significant that in many of these communities, food is one of the distinguishing features – like rituals or music – something that helps the community identify itself.

There are clearly strong social aspects to food. Food brings people together – and that is community – so it is no surprise that community supports play such a strong role in food resilience and survival.

● Food and community help newcomer make a new life for family and children

Interview # 11 was a 34-year-old woman who arrived in Winnipeg 11 years ago as a refugee from war in her African homeland.

She is married, with two young daughters, living in a two-bedroom Central Park apartment and attending university on a student loan. The family’s income is her husband’s \$1,400 a month salary for a job with Manitoba Housing, supplemented by her student loan (\$7,000). Financially it’s a tight squeeze but she has developed many strategies that are enabling her to build a new life for her and her family.

Primary is her ability to cook and plan food. She’s a good cook. “The best thing to do is to buy food and cook it at home – it’s cheaper and you get more for your money than from prepared quick service food.” She prepares 2-3 meals every weekend and has them ready for weekdays when she’s tired.

Her main food shopping for the month is at Superstore. She sticks to a budget: not ashamed to put things back even at the cash register if they are too much. She buys in bulk – a 16 litre container of oil once a year. She gets membership card sales at Safeway; clothes, dry foods and peanut butter at Wal-Mart; and The Bay, because it’s on the way home from university – mostly dairy, cheese and eggs. She only gets two kinds of fruit a week so things don’t go bad.

Much of her cooking relies on African foods from a variety of sources familiar to the African-Canadian community – Aitkin’s International (medicinal plants), Young Trading on Elgin, and Miranda’s on Notre Dame. A friend connected to a local

“The best thing to do is to buy food and cook it at home”

company sells fish, which was a staple in her home country (10 kilos for \$55, enough for 2-3 months). She gets beef from Robert's farm – “a place the immigrant community knows about” – a two-week supply for \$40. She buys it and freezes it in sandwich bags. “At Robert's farm, he provides halal meat for Muslim people in Winnipeg. He does a good business.... It's getting more expensive because so many people want it. But it's still pretty inexpensive.”

“You had grapes last week so this week your sister can have them.”

In the summer, she grows vegetables on two garden plots – one in a friend's yard, another at a garden plot at the University of Manitoba, “a community garden for Central Park people.”

Also in the summer, the Central Park market is a major resource. It provides fun and recreation for the family and meets some of their shopping needs. She would like to freeze Kool Aid in bags and give them to kids in the market next summer.

One farmer was going to sell meat in Central Park last year but it didn't happen because Knox Church – one of the market's supporters – did not have facilities for freezing. Knox provides a variety of services for her community: information for newcomers, a small computer room, a “Mom and Me” program where women and children can get food, and a food bank. She used to use the Knox food bank, but it's on days when she's at university, so now she uses an on-campus food bank, but only infrequently. She steams the vegetables and then freezes them in sandwich bags.

She and her husband are committed to their two daughters. They buy all school supplies first because they don't want the kids to go to school without. Then they pay for rent (\$715). They are usually behind on utilities and make arrangements to pay for them. For entertainment, the kids go to the public library or to the YMCA on a low-income membership. In the summer they go to the Forks and to the Central Park market.

Food decisions also put the children first. Sometimes the two parents skip meals so there will be enough food for the kids. Breakfast is cereal that she buys in bulk, one kilo bags of honey nut cheerios or frosted flakes. Every week they shop for school lunches – juice boxes, pizza pops, sandwich meats, chicken strips, apple sauce. At home, lunch might be pancakes or pasta with a home-made cheese sauce she makes because the kids like it. Main meals have grains (often rice) and a sauce.

Treats are also home-made. She doesn't store sweets like ice cream or cookies at home so the kids will eat better alternatives. She makes treats with bananas and rice. Sometimes, there's not enough treats, like grapes, so she uses this as a chance to teach her children to share: “You had grapes last week so this week your sister can have them.” Juice boxes are for school; at home the kids drink water. They don't eat out because it's too expensive. But once a month, when they get the \$100 child tax credit, they take the kids to Burger King for a meal, ice cream and a toy. The kids eat, but they don't.

● Other views on Community Supports

“In my community where I grew up, a moose was shared... It was a real community. Here, people don’t know their neighbors and look after their own... They’re nice people but it’s not their way of life.” (Interview # 33)

“On social assistance I had a room with no stove. My family bought me a wok, toaster oven, electric frying pan and a slow cooker... My boyfriend bought me a fridge with a freezer... I was given moose meat by a friend.” (Interview # 20)

One 47-year-old woman with developmental disabilities has found her own special community by swimming in Special Olympics. But she has little community support in following through on Special O activities. Often events are far away; she has to take transit and rarely gets offered a ride. “I have to walk to Timbuktu and back and sometimes don’t get home ‘til late at night.” (Interview # 2)

*“I was given moose
meat by a friend.”*

“It is because of the food and needs that my son is temporarily going to his father’s until my health improves and I can give my son better living conditions and get off social assistance because they do not offer real help. I come from a northern community that also does not offer real help.” (Interview # 32)

●

*“Sometimes my
brother from Dauphin
brings me ducks,
deer, meat or fish...”*

“Sometimes my brother from Dauphin brings me ducks, deer, meat or fish... Sometimes my sister phones and brings stuff over for me.” (Interview # 31)

●

*“In my community
where I grew up, a
moose was shared”*

“My husband was working, but he quit his job to take care of me... He’s a good cook.” (Interview # 6)

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS

Being on a low income means there are many institutions involved in a person's life – community agencies that are trying to improve their neighborhood, charitable organizations, church drop-in programs, missions and food banks and, for some people, a number of social workers or support workers trying to help them.

These institutional supports got a mixed reaction in the 25 interviews. Some, like Siloam Mission in the following story, were credited with helping a person turn his life around. (in this case, largely because of the quality of the people he met there). Others (often the same institution) were condemned by other people.

Community gardens are a good example of getting both positive and negative responses. Community gardens were the only institution which had a specific question asked in the interview. Because we asked them directly about gardening, many people said they'd like to try it, but really only three people professed any recent experience in gardening. On the other hand, at least three reacted negatively – “a waste of our effort and time because they're not secure.... I tried to access a community garden but there was no one around.... I've never done it – it would help if I were invited.”

If there's any thread running through the comments about institutional supports, it's that much depends on the quality of the people working there and the personal relationships they establish with people using them. This was particularly clear from remarks about food banks. Several people felt good about a particular food bank because “they've gotten to know me.” But other food banks were despised by patrons because of the prejudiced and rude attitudes of staff and volunteers working there.

Institutional supports seem to be most effective when the attitudes of the people working there make them resemble personal supports or true community supports.

● “just surviving”– food on crack, marijuana and booze

Interview # 19 was a 49-year-old man living at Siloam Mission. “When I came here six weeks ago, I weighed 155 pounds, was into hard-core drugs and eating out of garbage bins behind the grocery store. If I saw part of a sandwich on the street, I'd eat it. Now I weigh 180 pounds.”

The major change in his life he attributes to the people and attitudes at Siloam – staff, volunteers and other patrons. “When I started to come to Siloam. I started to talk to the pastor (and) the people here caring for other people. I used to care for people, write songs for people. I started making friends here, being comfortable, started eating regularly here.”

He has lived in low income on disability for most of his life. He has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, but hasn't been hospitalized for nine years. From 1996 to 2007, he lived in a \$285-a-month apartment in the West Broadway area. In the fall of 2007, he was evicted and at the same time went off disability. “I didn't

have the rent form filled out, wasn't able to move in anywhere." He moved in with his girlfriend in a rooming house near the Main Street strip.

In the year-and-a-half that he lived with his girlfriend, food was not a priority in his life. "When I was living with my girlfriend, we didn't eat nutritious, just ate what was there, just surviving... We didn't eat well, too addicted to hard core drugs and booze. We used crack – it's become an epidemic now."

He ate meals at the Main Street soup lines – Salvation Army, Siloam, Lighthouse. He used food banks: "They keep you living but you weren't the healthiest of people." He felt he was treated well at the food bank, "They seemed more than happy to be doing their good deed."

His girlfriend would buy bologna, hot dogs and sandwich stuff at Main Meats and they'd make sandwiches in their room. "I was doing temp work, and maybe once a month, after drugs and booze, I'd go to Extra Foods (Main and Inkster) and buy about \$150."

They would just cook the basics: rice, potatoes, burgers. They would have liked to have a toaster, a fry pan and a coffee maker. Most of the time they drank instant coffee. Maybe three times a month they'd go to a restaurant or bring food home; the A&W Bacon & Egger is his favorite.

The bulk of his money went to supporting their addictions. His temp work earned him about \$200 a week – four hours a day, four days a week moving concrete. That may change because he recently sprained his hand. He estimated his major expenses each month were: rent (covered by his girlfriend); Crack, marijuana and booze, about \$400; food, about \$250 and cigarettes, about \$150.

His girlfriend's rooming house was closed down for bed bugs by the health inspector a few months ago. He went to another hostel, but found their food too starchy – too much potatoes and rice. He always ate the best at Siloam, and then six weeks before our interview moved into their hostel program.

He's doing well now – "just living the best I can" – thanks largely to more nutritious food and the people at Siloam.

"When I was living with my girlfriend, we didn't eat nutritious, just ate what was there, just surviving"

● Other views on Institutional Supports

On foodbanks: "A lot of the time there's mould on the food... there's very little meat...maybe at Christmas, they may hand out a pound of meat."

(Interview # 6)

One 38-year-old Aboriginal man described several food banks he's used over the last few years: "Food banks vary. At Waves of Glory, they treated us pretty well there; they ask you, "What kind of beans would you like?" – three types, pork and beans, green beans, bean salad. They treat me well because they've gotten to know me. At other places, they kind of herd you through. One place I went, one of the volunteers always asked people, "Why aren't you working?" He didn't understand. He didn't know that, even if you're working, there's bus fare, rent, hydro bill. It's hard to find a good agency to go to without being treated with no dignity."

(Interview # 3)

Two interviews were with people with developmental disabilities who received support in the form of support workers.

One of them – a 47-year-old woman – had only two hours of support workers and would have liked more so she could learn to cook. Instead, she ate most of her meals in a congregate dining program in a nearby seniors' block. This woman had the ability to live independently and partially support herself by working at numerous casual jobs – moving shopping carts, bakery stacking, etc.—when she was not attending her Grade 12 adult ed. classes.

“Sometimes I will eat out at our committee meetings but it is usually things I cannot eat.”

The other – a 64-year-old man – had 12 hours of support a week. Among other things, they helped him shop and prepare a few meals, mainly controlling his money. He enjoyed simply-prepared food: hot dogs, soup, ham, sandwiches, and his favourite – pre-cooked cakes and pies.

(Interviews #2 & 30)

Several community-based organizations provide food at AGMs or committee meetings. A 19-year-old in West Broadway picks up food at Art City occasionally. “Some evenings I go to Art City for a workshop and have supper there, which is awesome.”

(Interview # 24)

“Sometimes I will eat out at our committee meetings but it is usually things I cannot eat. I think more healthy, but they like pizza and chicken and chips.”(Interview # 23)

“All of these gardens popping up are a waste of time.... Getting a bagful of vegetables, I have a problem in storing them. By the time I get to use it, it's gone squishy.”

(Interview # 3)

“Too much food at the soup lines ends up in the garbage – they don't let you choose what you want – everyone ends up with the same food on their plate.”

(Interview # 19)

“I went to a dietician. But it's not easy sticking to the plan when you only have \$45 a week for food.”

(Interview # 30)

JUGGLING FINANCES

Like all of us, people interviewed had many priorities, other than food, for the limited funds available to them. What was different was that their funds were so limited, it often meant choices that the rest of us don't have to make:

A bottle of wine or a treat for the kids?

The hydro bill or the special food I need for my diet?

These are decisions that someone with \$2,000 a month to spend doesn't have to think about. But what if your income is \$1,500 a month – which was pretty much the maximum income for most people we interviewed. Or more likely, \$900 a month. Or even less if you're on EIA.

We came away from their stories with a lot of respect for how they juggled the financial realities of their lives – and a sincere thankfulness that people were honest enough to talk about beer, marijuana, bingo and cigarettes – all important parts of your life when you're living on the edge.

We also came away shaking our heads at the pathetic amount of money provided by the rest of us to people most in need of help in our society

"I would like more money so I can get more variety." (Interview # 2). Raising the welfare rate even a small amount would make juggling finances a lot easier for many people, and proportionately, would not cost the public purse that much.

● Pizza for our son, a gram for me and a bottle for her

- how one family stretches a disability income

Interview # 29 was a 55-year-old Aboriginal man with a wife and child living in West End Winnipeg after many years up North. He has relocated to Winnipeg because of his diabetes and consequently is on disability. Back home, he worked and hunted and trapped.

"I have never been on social assistance before my illness. I have always worked."

For disability he gets \$1,300 a month. \$500 is spent right away on rent and utilities and \$71 for a bus pass. That leaves \$729 a month for the three of them.

"We budget. We get the necessities for our child. Our child is the most important. Even when we were hooked on crack, we still had food all the time for our child."

Addictions used to be a major part of his life. At one time he sold the family's freezer to get money for drinking. But that has changed. He doesn't drink or do crack anymore, and his wife just drinks moderately. They still save a bit of money to support the addictions that make life more bearable – cigarettes, "a gram of marijuana for me, and a bottle of alcohol for my wife" – but the bulk of spending is on food. "We don't spend money foolishly anymore because I don't drink anymore. My wife drinks sometimes and rarely smokes, only if she is drinking alcohol."

His wife is a good cook. She cooks meat, pasta, vegetables and fruit. "I think we eat enough good food. We eat plenty. We never run out of food." His own diet is

"Even when we were hooked on crack, we still had food all the time for our child."

much less than it used to be. “I used to eat lots. Now I only eat one egg and a slice of toast for breakfast. I usually have soup for lunch. I consider meat, potatoes and vegetables at supper a meal.” He needs fruit juices and fresh vegetables for his diabetes. “At times we have had difficulty buying foods for my diet because we only have so much money to spend.”

They use coupons at Extra Foods and a Safeway card at Safeway – both within walking distance of where they live. They go to Food Fare for yogurt, milk and whole wheat bread. “We go to the store looking for bargains...We are satisfied with the stores in our neighbourhood...I have no complaints.”

They usually go to soup kitchens for lunch. At one soup kitchen, Trinity Church, they were giving out clothing. “They are nice people,” he said of the soup kitchens and drop-in programs he frequents.

They also use the food bank at least once a month. There’s one food bank he doesn’t like attending, “because the people who work there are too prejudiced, especially one old man who speaks harshly to people. I told him not to speak to me like a child. He threw my potatoes. I told him not to work there if he does not like people.”

They don’t eat out or order food very often because it’s too expensive. They’re grateful for some of the school food programs; their son has a pizza day the last Thursday of every month.

They occasionally get help from his niece who lives in the city, She’ll help them buy groceries or cigarettes if they’re running low. Sometimes friends from their home community will bring in wild game and fish. “I love wild meat better than beef and pork...I like beef liver. I can live on liver. Moose liver is better. It is not easy to get wild food in the city.”

But despite his love of wild game, he knows he could not live in his home community on the \$1,300 a month income he gets on disability. “If I were in my community it would be hard to live on that amount of money because food is so expensive.”

In the city, the \$1,300 stretches far enough to give the family the essentials of what they need.

“I told him not to work there if he does not like people.”

● Other views on Juggling Finances

“The cost of lunch stuff for my daughter is like an extra utility (bill) – fruit, lunch meat, yogurt and pudding. I provide some of all the food groups... and it’s not cheap.”
(Interview # 5)

“I get so frustrated being so broke, so poor, that I will have a drink with some friends, and that is my treat to me. That’s more like taking money out of the budget to deal with the frustration of being poverty stricken.”

(Interview # 32)

“When the price of oil went up, they raised the price of food and when the price of

oil went down, they didn't lower the price of food." (Interview # 6)

"I wish we could afford better foods, such as whole wheat products, olive oil instead of cheaper oils, lean meats, and more fruit and vegetables. To eat healthy is very expensive, especially for more than one person household."

(Working mom, Interview # 22)

"I consider a meal, a roast with all the vegetables – but this costs \$55 – half of my whole budget for the week." (Interview # 26)

I try to get three meals a day, but I can't afford it, so I had to cut back to just one meal a day

"I try to get three meals a day, but I can't afford it, so I had to cut back to just one meal a day. Most of my adult life, I have had to cut back to one meal a day."

(Interview # 21)

● "I have the need for food banks about once a month. Friends help out, family, Christmas hamper, and I have the need to pawn to get groceries 'til Cheque Day."

(Interview # 32)

"The money never goes far enough because rent, hydro and water are very expensive."

FINANCIAL REALITIES FOR A 45-YEAR-OLD MOM OF TWO ON EIA:

Monthly income: \$759: Man. Housing rent, \$333; Bill payments (est. \$100 – owes hydro and gas \$547 and phone \$148.) Meat at Cantor's, \$100; big grocery shop and cab home, \$65; Eating out with son, \$35; Alcohol and cigarettes, \$200. This Mom uses food banks and sometimes soup kitchens. "My younger son wants to live with his older brother. He is getting depressed because we can't do anything like go to a movie, etc. By the time I am finished paying for everything, there is nothing left. I am tired of my Dollorama lingerie (laughter)."

(Interview # 26)

An interview with a 64-year-old man with developmental disabilities was particularly revealing about finances because a support worker had detailed financial records: Monthly spending, in order of amount: Cigarettes, \$450; Rent/utilities \$370; Groceries, \$200; Spending money (beer and sweets), \$200; Bus pass, \$71; Phone, cable, \$60. This gave a monthly income of \$1,351.

(Interview # 30)

"We buy all of our food first because if Hydro isn't paid, they won't cut us off. The money never goes far enough because rent, hydro and water are very expensive."

(Interview # 33)

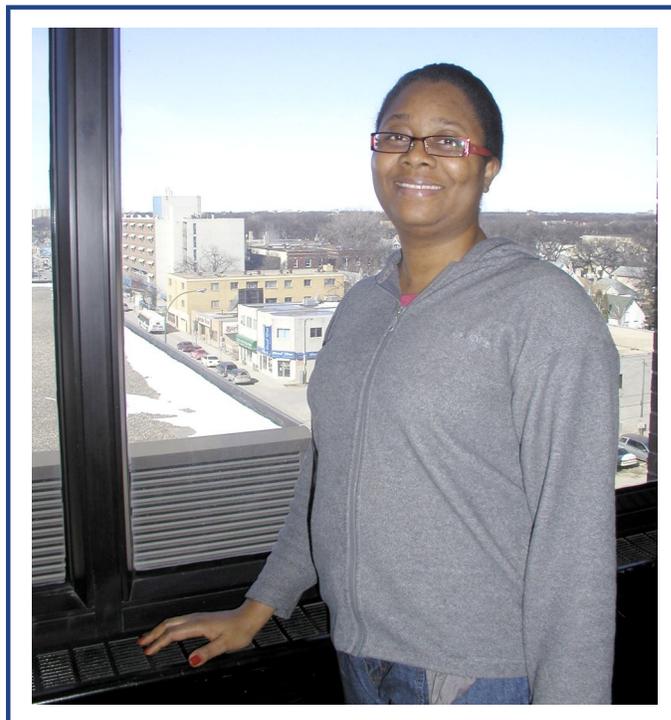
"I work full-time and I'm in debt, because of my student loan – biggest mistake of my life. I rent a house, and my biggest complaint is the hydro and gas, more so the gas...There's also phone, internet, cigarettes, food, gas, car insurance, clothes, personal hygiene stuff, cleaning supplies, money for my daughter's school, field trips, etc." (35-year-old single mom, Interview # 5)

“When I get social assistance I pay rent, utilities and food. If I have money left over, I save it for spending money. I deposit it in the bank for emergency.”

One grandmother described the strain placed on her budget because she needs a big enough space for her, her husband, three grandchildren, and her daughter “who’s having a hard time right now.” Rent for a house sufficient for the six of them is \$650 plus utilities. But welfare only allows \$433. The rest comes from their food money. (Interview # 6)

A 56-year-old teacher who had to stop work because of a sudden illness and move to Winnipeg from her home reserve described her spending: “When I get social assistance I pay rent, utilities and food. If I have money left over, I save it for spending money. I deposit it in the bank for emergency. Once in a while I gamble. I spend Approx. \$40. I don’t smoke or drink...Sometimes I go to a movie at Portage Place. If there is something happening at the MTS Centre I go, such as a Pow-Wow or any traditional things that are going on.” (Interview # 27)

A 38-year-old man described how he made enough doing casual work to get off assistance. But his rooming house had poor facilities for cooking. When he worked late, he preferred to eat at Burger King rather than go to all the trouble of cooking in the rooming house – using unsanitary pots and pans, disturbing others. (Interview # 3)



DREAMS & VISIONS

Two questions at the end of each interview asked people what could be done to improve the food situation in the inner city, but many of their real dreams became clear as they talked about other questions during the interview. Two areas in particular stood out:

“Stores here are prejudiced so I don’t shop at those stores... food banks are prejudiced in the inner city.”

LOCATION / TRANSPORTATION

There were a significant number of people who were satisfied with their local stores or felt that it wasn’t a big problem getting to better stores that were not in their neighborhood. But a constant thread through many interviews was that it was necessary to go out of the neighborhood, by bus, by taxi, or through the kindness of a relative with a car – in order to get to a Superstore with wider selection, to a health store with special food, to a Farmers’ Market, or to a big-box store like Costco or Wal-Mart.

It was not a constant, but having a big store like Superstore in the neighborhood was a definite dream for many people. Perhaps more realistic, given the marketing decisions of large corporations, would be a system of inner city transportation vouchers that would provide some cash to the informal network of people who already give rides to inner city residents – family, friends, even the “informal taxi service” that now exists at Superstore on cheque days.

Ending our own mainstream prejudice is the biggest dream of all.

PREJUDICE IN STORES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Prejudice directed towards Aboriginal people is a regular barrier in their lives – not overt racists but the inability of mainstream people to really see Aboriginal people and their realities. It’s a barrier that was largely unspoken in our interviews, but at least two people did speak of it – “Stores here are prejudiced so I don’t shop at those stores... food banks are prejudiced in the inner city.” (Interview # 4) “Even our community neighborhood groups are not as community-minded as they pretend to be. There are not many people of color or Aboriginal people on the boards or staff. Young students are hired and they only see the surface of the problems.” (Interview # 33)

Ending our own mainstream prejudice is the biggest dream of all.

● **Aboriginal dreams and vision of a new kind of city**

Interview # 15 was a 60-year-old Aboriginal elder who has a unique vision of what life in the city could be.

It is a vision of nature being reborn in the city, of contact with the land and of strong community ties. It’s an overarching vision that encompasses many of the dreams that people expressed.

“I very much want a garden,” she explained. But while other people may dream of a yard with a garden plot and a few vegetables, her vision includes much of the downtown area where she lives. “Usually in commercial gardens, they use imported

plants. We should plant hazel nut trees especially in parks. We should have plants that attract butterflies. We could have wild strawberries, saskatoons or crab apples. These should be planted on city plots. It would help animals, birds or even insects like bees.”

She is a strong advocate for many gardens throughout downtown. “There are lots of empty spaces for potential gardens... We could even use flat roof buildings for gardens. Herb gardens are non-existent. We could be using Thunderbird House... It would enhance our community and maybe be part of a community kitchen program.”

As well as gardens and greenery through much of downtown, the gardens could start to bring people together in cooking programs and much more. “We need a Farmer’s Market in Central Park. Knox Church has space that is not being used and could use a proposal to get something going...We could use more Farmers’ Markets or membership food co-ops.” She visualizes many ways that people could be brought together, joining a food club, bulk food buying, creating a canning club, creating more congregate dining programs like the one she now uses at 444 Kennedy, a registry of old-timers who have special needs, but who also still have the knowledge of old ways.

She visualizes transportation being made available to set up groups to visit farmers to gather food. And she would like a chance for elders and many others to go pick wild foods and traditional medicines. “It would be great to camp out for five days. There are a lot of old people who cannot do that anymore. They need help.”

Included as part of her vision is encouraging an active lifestyle. “Exercise is a big part of my life because I used to be in martial arts. I want to go and lift weights at the YW... I would like to do more camping and hiking in the city. Also, biking.”

This vision of the city by one Aboriginal elder shows a different way of thinking about food survival, food resilience and many urban problems that have been part of this report. It is a different vision that comes from a uniquely Aboriginal way of looking at the world and our connection to it.

Perhaps it’s time we paid more attention to such visions.

“There are lots of empty spaces for potential gardens”

●

“We could use more Farmers’ Markets or membership food co-ops.”

● Other views on Dreams and Visions

“I would like to connect with other women where we cook together and take home food we share. I would like to be sharing resources and eat with others...To get better food, I need transportation to St. Norbert Food Market. Welfare rates have to be raised. Community kitchens need to be set up. At the food banks we need more healthy food for animals or pets...More social housing would help but we also could use a café.”
(Interview # 14)

“I wonder if there is really any effective way to help people who struggle, especially young people who get caught up in gangs. Things are so competitive. We need to change the whole system. In a country as rich as Canada, there should be no starving people or food banks.”
(Interview # 33)

“There’s too many surveys... They talk and talk but where’s the action? Nothing happens. You don’t have a revolution with words – you need action.”

“It would be so neat if mothers and children got together to learn cooking tips.”
(Interview # 13)

“Volunteer drivers to take disabled and low income to the larger stores.”
(Interview # 23)

“Aisles in the supermarket for food like fish, rabbit, deer and bannock.”
(Interview # 21)

“More community gardens and teaching awareness and how it can save you money and it’s better for you.”
(Interview # 5)

“More accessible food banks...and allow us to use the food banks more often.”
(Interview # 32)

“There’s too many surveys...They talk and talk but where’s the action? Nothing happens. You don’t have a revolution with words – you need action.”
(Interview # 3)

2 FOCUS GROUPS

The main piece of the research was the in-depth interviews with 25 people. It resulted in powerful stories some of which we have tried to capture in the first part of this report. The analysis of the interviews also resulted in our main conclusion—the strength and resilience of low-income people. This resilience can be looked at from the viewpoint of the seven elements we've discussed so far.

The two focus groups was the researcher's focus group which was held on February 29,2009, before the 25 interviews took place. This focus group was made up of the researcher's themselves and was based on the researcher's own responses to a preliminary set of questions, which would produce the themes they felt captured the realities of low income food. These 12 themes were not the same seven elements that emerged later when the main interviews took place, but there are many similarities, and also some different insights.

The second focus group took place on April 2nd,2009, after the 25 interviews had taken place and after those interviews had been analyzed by three of the researchers. It was in this analysis that the major theme of food resilience emerged and the seven elements that made up the resilience. The major point of the second focus group was asking several of the people whom we had interviewed, "Did we get it right? Is resilience the correct interpretation of what you told us? Are these seven elements truly relevant to your lives? What did we miss?"

The discussions of these two focus groups make up the second part of this report.

RESEARCHERS' FOCUS GROUP

February 28, 2009

Prior to the 25 interviews, seven researchers “field-tested” the questions, either by answering the questions on their own or by interviewing one another. This process resulted in minor changes to the questions and a decision by researchers to approach the main interviews with an emphasis on a narrative approach.

Sandra Leone read the seven researcher interviews and picked out themes that emerged for her. These themes were presented to a meeting of five of the researchers on February 28, 2009. After Sandra presented the themes, researchers were asked to add their notes or ideas to any of the themes, or create additional themes that had not been covered. There was then a brief discussion of the 12 themes that emerged and some brainstorming of ideas. The 12 themes identified by researchers follow, along with researchers' notes and ideas.

The themes are not arranged in order of importance – no prioritizing was done. There is an attempt to keep related themes together.

● 12 themes identified by researchers

1. CREATE SPECIAL COMMUNITY FOOD PLACES 1. MAKE SURE FOOD SERVICES ARE COMMUNITY-BASED

- **Food banks** need to change policies and practices so they become community-building, rather than centrally controlled and bureaucratic – e.g. we should have a “food depot” in the community where you do not need to have an appointment. (“I feel relaxed at the food bank I go to now. But years ago, I had to go to churches and such places. When I called on Friday, they said we will make an appointment for Tuesday. I said we’re hungry now, not on Tuesday, I will have money by Tuesday. I think it is more degrading and reminding you that you need such services when you have to plan when you are going to be hungry.”)
- **Community kitchens** are good ways to eat properly. You put money “in the kitty” when you get money; then when you run out of money you cook together, buying food in bulk so it’s cheaper.
- **Community Cafés** would be great, maybe a whole series through the inner city moving to different communities. There are many different models – the kinds of feasts that used to be sponsored by the immigrant service community, with different foods of different cultures; “portable” feast where a group moves from place to place for main course, dessert, entertainment, etc.; the kind of nights provided by ICAN (Inner City Aboriginal Neighbors) with entertainment and the youth group running a canteen; the cafés run by the Good Food Club in West Broadway.
- **Community gardens** need people skills, not just gardening skills. Community gardens need to extend a hand of friendship, not make people feel foolish if they don’t know the difference between a weed and a beet. Community gardens need to be community, not just Urban Green Team members being

paid. Why should I work for nothing? “It’s hard to get community gardens started because it’s so hard to measure all of the spiritual, social, health, emotional (etc.) benefits. The work that committed people do (like the Image Coordinator) is just one part of what can be done. For gardens to expand and become an important part of the food security plan, let’s appreciate all efforts, support all initiatives, big and small.”

- Special places for people with illnesses, addictions are needed for food, health care and understanding, e.g. Community gardening is not really accessible to people with physical disabilities.
- Places like food banks, food depot, community kitchens, community cafes, special places for people with illnesses and addictions should not just be for low-income people, but truly community-based for all who want good food.

2. COMMUNITY NETWORK SYSTEM FOR FOOD INFO.

- There could be a weekly “Food For Thought” bulletin distributed to all community food places and regular community places like the International Centre, parent rooms in schools, etc. It would highlight weekly food activities, opportunities, sales at local stores, etc.
- There needs to be ongoing information, tips, education.

3. PLAN FOR THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF FOOD, NOT JUST HEALTH AND NUTRITION

- “As I said, I live alone and do not eat properly. I gamble and smoke so my addictions take 3/4 of my food budget. If I have my coffee with coffee whitener and smokes, I’m happy.”
- “I eat in restaurants because, for awhile, I can pretend I’m part of “normal” society.”
- “I take my grandchildren to McDonald’s to play on the play structures and interact with other children.”
- The food industry and advertising create a lot of our society’s culture of food, e.g. going out for dinner is the norm.
- Food is an important part of all people’s culture. There are obviously special cultural foods, an important part of anyone’s culture is food and friends, and the special occasions when these are shared. Several interviews stressed the social aspect of food and friends, e.g.. “We eat out when friends come to visit.” There is equally a culture that can be created around cooking at home, preparing a good meal for family and friends – but this can take a lot of time and effort. It’s done at Christmas and special family occasions. “But it’s freeing and liberating to eat out – someone else is making the food and doing the dishes.”
- “Food and food-sharing is central to what makes us human – it’s a human right

to be well-fed and to be able to get our food without guilt or embarrassment.”

4. RESPECT, DIGNITY AND UNDERSTANDING FOR LOW-INCOME CIRCUMSTANCES

- “I would like to be considered a human being. I would like dignity. I don’t want to be invisible, in stores, at food banks.”
- “I am a kokum and raised two sons who are big men today. I know how to cook and have the space I need, but now I’m just cooking for myself. Ingredients usually go bad and have to be thrown out. So to cook for one and buy in bulk is out of the question.”
- “I need to be treated with respect at food banks, especially by the volunteers, not given a “mini-sermon” from the preacher.”

5. RECOGNIZE THE SPECIAL REALITIES FACED BY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE THE ONGOING CRISES THEY FACE

- Mainstream society just doesn’t get it – because of years of poverty and racism, Aboriginal people regularly face crisis situations. People who are regularly dealing with crisis situations in their lives have a hard time focusing on food or other things beyond the immediate crisis.
- For instance, we talked about the situations of our research group today (the day of the focus group). Of the five people who arrived on time for the group, four were the non-Aboriginal members of the research hub. The other five members of the research hub who were invited to the focus group—but who were not attending—were Aboriginal. We know they’re not here because each of them is facing particular crises in their lives right now, one moving, one sickness, one a car accident of a friend. This means 80 % of our own Aboriginal members are facing crisis situations today.
- Any food policy must address the crisis in the lives and communities of Aboriginal people in culturally appropriate ways.

6. DIFFICULTIES FACED BY IMMIGRANTS

- “I’m used to different foods, different patterns of eating (e.g. four meals a day, food made from scratch).”
- Immigrants are often not well-informed when they come – there’s an assumption that people have family or members of their own cultural group to consult, but that’s often not true.
- “It’s hard and takes time for newcomers to find the food they are used to and to understand local food habits.”

7. PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- “I’m sick and I need lots of time to plan food, shop and prepare. Often this happens when my sickness is fatiguing me, so I have trouble doing it, and just eat fast food instead.”
- “I am diabetic and do not have the foods I need to be healthy.”

8. IMPORTANCE OF MEAT AND BREAD

- “Meat came up in many interviews. Meat and bread are staples that many people depend on to create a meal. People are used to eating meat. They don’t feel it’s a complete meal without meat.
- “If people are used to eating meat, don’t push vegetables on them.”
- “The foods I want are very expensive and hard to find: deer meat, moose meat, bison, etc. The bannock I can make myself. I would rather eat woodland meat than beef.... I do suffer sometimes with no food or very little to choose from.”
- “We should organize a bakery co-op – where people can learn new skills and fresh, healthy bread without preservatives can be distributed.”
- One commodity that the food bank always seems to have in abundance is bread and baked goods. But equally, food banks rarely have meat.
- Links to farms could provide affordable, local meat.
- “What I miss the most is food made from scratch.”
- “I try to eat one meal a day. I eat mostly sandwiches, or fast-fried foods. I consider meat and potatoes a meal, but I seldom cook that, only when my body really craves it.”

9. TRANSPORTATION

- Inner city “food desert” means people don’t have affordable, healthy choices close to home. Low-income people should have choices.
- “I shop at my corner stores. I have four within walking distance. I don’t do large shopping so don’t feel the need to go to Safeway or bigger stores. I do like Giant Tiger when I need to do more than the normal shopping.”
- Support local markets so people don’t have to use cars.
- There are several ways transportation could improve food choices for low-income people: organized shopping trips to farms, markets or even Superstore; car-sharing and car co-ops.
- Use the social assistance card as a bus pass so low-income people can get

to the places they need.

- The downtown “free bus” service for tourism could be extended to free buses on cheque day to help shopping.
- Handi Transit is becoming difficult to access. More and more handicapped people are becoming housebound.

10. IMPROVE STORES

- “In this neighborhood (West End), the Safeway / Extra Foods are so expensive. This is a walking community and they use this fact to charge more, and they use the excuse that there is more stealing in our community. The corner store’s food is fine for day-to-day shopping and the quality of food is not much different. I do not like the meat at either big store. They closed Bargain Store, the only other store I liked to shop at for dry goods and other things.”
- There is a need for an accurate comparative cost study of stores in the inner city and stores in suburbs.
- Some stores mark up prices at cheque times.
- The Free Press recently ran a story on the “Inner City Food Desert.” What did the story say? Can we obtain it?
- There have been accounts of some people being banned from going into local stores.

11. ENCOURAGE FORMAL AND INFORMAL WAYS TO GET MORE MONEY AND FOOD TO LOW-INCOME PEOPLE

- We talked about corporate control vs. local control. Can we limit big box stores in favor of local markets?
- “I think the big stores should be held accountable for their costs and quality of food that they gain from the poverty in this neighborhood. Also the respect they give to the community. This would make it easier to shop at these stores.”
- Pay community people for participating in community gardening, cleaning up streets and back lanes.
- Job share opportunities so people can develop work skills.
- “I eat at a lot of community meetings or events. I volunteer weekly and monthly. They give me my treats like pizza or healthy food like vegetables and such.”
- Need to improve government programs that provide money for low-income people:
 - a. Lobby for social assistance increase.
 - b. Better ways to transition from EIA to jobs. E.g. Instead of having a \$200 max and then cutting EIA, a higher minimum income should be

guaranteed. Whatever we make, the government tops until the minimum amount.

- c. Too much bureaucracy, paperwork.
 - d. People getting out of jail should have a place to live and be on welfare the day they get out of jail.
 - e. Unemployment insurance should start as soon as people become unemployed.
 - f. “Let’s strike against the food bank.”
- Many responses showed how important family was in providing informal financial assistance, i.e. a single man who received money from his mother when he was sick and needed special food; a large family where different members kicked in their share when they received money.

12. IMPROVE HOUSING OPTIONS

- All interviews showed that the major expense in people’s lives is rent and utilities. It is hard to come up with money for food, when so high a percentage of income is taken up by housing.
- People’s housing situations often do not include adequate refrigerators, freezers, stoves, kitchens, etc.
- “People should not have to choose between rent and food.”
- Secure housing is needed if we want to expand the role of backyard gardening in food security.

FEAST AND FINAL FOCUS GROUP WITH INTERVIEWEES

April 2, 2009

Food assessment interviewees were invited to a feast and focus group. After the feast, the research process was discussed with 7 interviewees, 5 additional participants and 5 Community Research Hub workers. The key themes identified by 3 CRH reviewers were presented graphically as a circle of 7 related factors that influence food survival and resiliency: health issues, personal patterns, food strategies, community supports, institutional supports, juggling finances and dreams. Each element was described and represented by the collected stories. Direct quotations from the interviews were used to further illustrate each element of food and resilience.

Three small discussion groups were formed, each with a note-taker, to answer the question, “what appears to be missing?” from the synthesis as presented. Participants responded to the question and also revisited each of the 7 themes.

What follows is a synthesis of the concluding ideas presented in the focus groups and some overall conclusions on what was communicated, during this food assessment research, to the Community Research Hub researchers. Supporting quotations from Focus Groups 1, 2, and 3 serve to illustrate more clearly the views of the participants.

● Overall Results

The CRH researchers were happy to hear the general comment that “they got a lot of information and they go it right.” Participants thought that more attention should be paid to transportation which did not seem to be reflected in the 7 categories. From the discussion in the 3 groups and the larger group synthesis, we might conclude that an additional category on Aboriginal People and their values, their views on food, and the challenges they face should be added.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS:

There is a general feeling that business, government, and non-government organizations do not understand the challenges people face in meeting their food needs. People feel that grocery stores take advantage of low-income people and should at least be fair, not raising prices on cheque days but lowering them. They should be aware that items like “cheese ends” are a necessity for people who otherwise would not have cheese. Regarding specialty foods for the sick, those in particular should not be expensive (e.g. for the lactose intolerant). Store staff could go even further and provide information on how to store foods to keep them bacteria free. The monetary system that pushes credit cards on people is setting a trap for the poor.

Government workers need to get out and talk to the people they work with in order to understand their circumstances. Food banks and meals on wheels are an important part of the food system for many people but there is a sense that these services could be provided in a more respectful and equitable way, not allowing

*It takes a
community to
provide food
security to all.*

some to take the best in advance and not keeping people waiting for hours. When you are taking classes to improve yourself you can't spend all day meeting your food needs. Low income people need to speak up to inform institutions and to protest against unfair practices and lack of respect.

"We have enough infrastructure for the wrongs (e.g. CFS) and not enough for the rights (e.g. prevention)." (Focus Group #1)

"The people who destroyed the planet shouldn't be the people telling us how to save the planet. The rapist becomes the healer." (Focus Group #1)

"Institutions live off the misery of the alcoholics." (Focus Group #1)

"If I had someone who could help me cook that would help. Contaminated food is an issue. Stores should have directions on boxes and meat packages about storage of food. Tell the stores to think about low income people." (Focus Group #3)

From a woman living with a disability, "Why do I have to fill out forms every year? For income tax, I have to show that I have a disability. It makes me feel very uncomfortable and it doesn't seem fair." (Focus Group #3)

JUGGLING FINANCES:

It is clear that rent and clothing compete with food for the income that comes into the household. Changes, such as children moving away from home or getting a job have a huge impact on how well people in the household are eating.

Life is precarious when there is little money coming in so every change in welfare rates and rent subsidies affects the amount of food money available and this in turn puts the burden of poverty on the children whose health is affected by poor nutrition and stress. Transportation costs prevent people from taking the bus or taxi, since it's an extra \$5 or \$15 that could be spent on food.

"If men are dropped from welfare, then women have to support them. Women are more at risk of violence. Its scary and the children pay the biggest price". (Focus Group #1)

"People hang around at the Superstore or Food Fare on cheque day and give you a ride, instead of taking a taxi. This is how they make extra money." (Focus Group #2)

HEALTH ISSUES:

Obesity has many implications for health and is part of a vicious circle of "overeating – lack of exercise – overeating". This situation is made worse in that high sugar and high starch foods are cheap while foods that promote health are expensive. If people could afford more vegetables and fruit, they would suffer less from poor health.

"Many people have digestive problems." (Focus Group #2)

Life styles used to be healthier but welfare, religion and booze (Focus Group #1) have all demoralised people. The youth today are following the same patterns.

Many low-income people are aware of the need to eat fresh foods and to exercise. They talk about cutting back on processed meats and buying fresh vegetables. Freezers are important for those who plan ahead and portion out their foods in freezer bags until the next pay cheque

“We used to spend more time preparing and eating food with family”.
(Focus Group # 1)

“When I was healthy, I hated fruits and vegetables but now that I am sick, all I eat is fruit and vegetables. I don’t eat meat”. (Focus Group #2)

“If you give a young person a hunting gun, they will sell it for alcohol.”
(Focus Group #2)

COMMUNITY SUPPORTS:

Low-income people are often looked on with disdain by their neighbours and even by their family. As a result they don’t get help and they may have too much pride to ask for help. They sometimes see the churches as unfriendly places. The youth are growing up selfish, with expensive tastes. So if you are a low-income person you may not have community or family supports.

Many people feel isolated and lonely and this can affect how motivated they are to make good meals. There seems to be a vicious circle here as well: you spend money on food and rent - you can’t afford to go out - you become lonely and don’t make the effort to eat regularly or in a healthy way – you can’t work – you have less money for food and rent.

There are still some hopeful developments such as the neighbourliness that still happens within the Aboriginal community and organizations such as the Community Cupboard and the Family Farm. In the end, people have mixed feelings about community as a source of support. They contrast how things were in the past and how things were done in rural communities and on reserves with modern, city life.

" Food is a good connecting value." (Focus Group #1)

“Nobody visits any more. In the city, if you go to visit people, they ask, “What do you want?” (Focus Group #1)

“We borrow from neighbours, sugar for example, and they also let us use their phone.” (Focus Group #2)

“My family helps me out but I try to be independent because they might criticise me.” (Focus Group #3)

“Churches aren’t that friendly. This city is not like that. You need small groups in bigger churches.” (Focus Group #3)

Aboriginal People

The elderly are seen as a group that is very isolated and in need of support. The life of elders on the “rez” was very different. The elders were strong and the

“When I was healthy, I hated fruits and vegetables but now that I am sick, all I eat is fruit and vegetables. I don’t eat meat.”

traditions were strong. The attitude and practices regarding country foods was that these foods were shared and mealtimes were important for family. Aboriginal participants in this research urged the larger community to work together as allies to preserve and protect us all, so no one takes advantage of us.

“We (Aboriginal People) live in two communities, one we understand, and one we have to adapt to. We can’t get in touch with our people.”

(Focus Group #1)

“We (Aboriginal People) live in two communities, one we understand, and one we have to adapt to.”

“People don’t look at the good things that we (native people) offer.”

(Focus Group #1)

“We don’t separate people. This is our time. We’re all hungry.”

(Focus Group #1)

“Reciprocity is giving without expecting anything in return. When you have caribou meat, you don’t sell it, you give it away. Bad luck will happen if you sell wild meat. But you can offer tobacco instead of money.” (Focus Group #2)

“Back in Argentina, we had 4 trees with figs and lemons. If neighbours need a lemon, they take it.”

(Focus Group #2)

DREAMS:

When you are poor it’s hard to dream but there were many who pointed to small pleasures that would make a difference, like sharing meals with others. People in the focus group were concerned that some people are so rich and single mothers, children, and the elderly struggle to meet food needs.

Local organizations like a Good Food Club, Food Not Bombs, the Community Cupboard, and St. Mathews Maryland should be supported. Freezers are needed at St. Mathews Maryland. But the group also saw the need for people to stand up and protest, believing that being able to feed our families and ourselves is a human right.

“We have to get over being scared of being scared.” (Focus Group #1)

“Everyone is entitled to a standard of living. There is a wage gap between the executive directors and the single mothers who live in poverty.” (Focus Group #2)

Conclusions

Participants in this focus group did not want to cover up the serious problems that face many low-income people: Aboriginal people, the elderly, single mothers and the sick and disabled.

They were concerned that community is not as supportive as it once was and that the young will grow up not knowing that their community was once caring, rather than greedy and self-interested. The Aboriginal community remembers the way things were done in the past and these ways of sharing food with others may provide guidance in changing attitudes so that the inner city might become a place

where people share food and care about their neighbours. This would make the food situation more secure.

Institutions such as grocery stores, government service providers, non-government organizations and even churches could make a difference by being fair, providing helpful information, and treating people with respect.

If people do not have a living wage, their lives are stressful and necessitate juggling debt and making use of very creative strategies to put food on the table. They cannot provide a healthy life for their families and themselves if they cannot afford healthy food. They cannot escape from vicious circles of poverty. Without money the very poor often cannot maintain their health and without their health they do not have the motivation to eat well or the capacity to make money.

Participants in the focus group were enthusiastic about meeting together on a regular basis. They were also interested in joining the CRH in the research that it has been conducting. Many of those who attended this focus group are determined to follow up by organizing learning circles around food issues.

It takes a community to provide food security to all. There is a sense that people should stand up and speak out for their rights – especially the right to have healthy, affordable food. If people can get together, go house-to-house to meet each other, and provide some support for the elderly and others then “we can take back our community”.

● Notes taken in the Focus Group

The following comments, made in the focus group are organized according to the circle of 7 elements. The experiences of Specific Groups, Aboriginal People and the Elderly, is an added category. Finally, the group made comments on the research and on dissemination of the results.

● INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS:

- Places that serve free food have limited hours and the alternative – “meals on wheels” is a service you have to wait for, sometimes for hours.
- Prices of foods at the stores should be reduced on cheque days instead of increased. Stores should be fair in pricing foods. Some foods for those who have health issues are especially expensive – for lactose intolerant.
- Now that Safeway is renovated, there are no cheese ends.
- Online resources for low-income people: how to prepare and store foods.
- Breakfast TV and APTN could have TV for low-income people. Stores could provide directions for preparing meats and other foods, similar to tear off sheets found in produce departments. Meat packages could have additional information on preparation and safe storage. Community kitchens, people who can give guidance and mentoring re-cooking.

- Sometimes people buy things they can't afford and when they get home they want to take it back to get their money back.
- We don't know if the government knows what we go through so it's important that the CRH include the personal stories of those interviewed. Government people need to do some footwork and talk to low-income people so they understand how it is.
- Orientation of institutions: We have enough infrastructure for the "wrongs" lets get some for the "rights". The people who destroyed our planet shouldn't be the ones telling us how to recover.
- Speaking up: We have to get over being scared of being scared. Welfare demoralizes people. Welfare, religion and booze – the great oppressors!
- Credit cards are pushed on people over the phone, are sometimes used for food, put people in debt. People need protection.

Food Banks:

- The Freight house is good. But at the Adult Ed. centre, it's the students who have first pick and then there's nothing left. There needs to be a fair numbering system.
- They come in handy.
- Corner stores and convenience stores are good to have, sometimes sell single cigarettes.
- Noodles are cheaper in the oriental stores.



Time:

- Service providers should be aware of the time it takes to go to institutions and to wait for meals on wheels. You might miss a class in school while waiting. This will get worse if the recession results in cuts to social programs and fewer volunteers.

Food facilities, housing, and knowledge:

- People's knowledge of how to store and keep food safe is a key concern. Sometimes people get coupons to buy basics but then they don't know how to prepare food in a safe way and they get sick from bacteria. So it might be better for poor people to eat at soup kitchens. TV programs could offer poor people information on how to cook and how to prepare foods. For example how long to keep foods before they go bad.

● JUGGLING FINANCES:

- People spend clothing money on food.
- The rent subsidy (\$35) is unfair so food money goes for rent.
- When your finances improve, you put more money towards food.
- Parents eat better when the children grow up and move away.

The family and welfare:

- If men are dropped from welfare then the women become more at risk.
- Women get credits when there's children involved – its scary and children pay the biggest price.

● HEALTH ISSUES:

- Obesity causes mobility problems and reduces peoples' ability to get to grocery stores and other sources of food.
- The cheapest foods are high in starch or sugar.
- There is a vicious circle – the more you eat, the less you exercise, the more you eat.
- When I was healthy, I hated fruits and vegetables; now that I am sick, all I eat are fruits and vegetables, I don't eat meat.
- Many people have digestive problems.

● PERSONAL PATTERNS:

- Personal patterns lead to obesity.
- Walking does not work.
- People who are obese are stereotyped.
- On the reserve we biked and exercise was fun.
- If you give a young person a gun today, they will sell it for alcohol
- Alcoholism is a problem.
- Values around food have changed – we used to be involved in food preparation and would enjoy foods with the children.

● FOOD STRATEGIES:

- People use President's Choice points.
- People shop in bulk and divide up food in freezer bags.
- People should cook from scratch.
- People should cut back on processed meats and buy frozen vegetables.

● COMMUNITY SUPPORTS:

- When people are poor, their community supports disappear or their family relations are not good.
- Family helps me out but I try to be independent. Family might criticise me. Sometimes you don't want family supports.
- People look down on the poor and on people with disabilities so they don't help and there is less community support.
- Some people even take advantage of the poor; the poor take advantage of each other.
- Not everybody has community supports – its infrequent. “In fact people are lonely. For Aboriginal people there are 2 communities: one (Aboriginal) we understand. The other (white) we have to adapt to. We can't get in touch with our own people. After you pay for food and rent, you can't afford to go out and be with other people.
- People hang around at the Superstore and offer rides on cheque days giving rides to shoppers.
- People borrow from neighbours and exchange food.
- The West Central Women's Resource Centre's Community Cupboard is useful if you just need a few diapers.
- You can join the Family Farm in West Broadway for \$10 to get food from the farm in the summer.
- Often people don't know their neighbours so there is no community support.
- The Churches are often not friendly. People are not kind here.
- The city is not like that – not churchgoers. Also the kids coming up are greedy like my nieces and nephews. They have expensive tastes.

● Experiences of Specific Groups

Aboriginal People:

- On the “rez” our elders are strong.
- People next door, other neighbours are considered family. Native people understand those values. Other people in Winnipeg don't look at the good things that Aboriginal people offer. Aboriginal people themselves want to learn more about their own culture. We need to get more elders out to meetings like this.
- Country foods are important in the North – fish, moose, duck, cranberries, caribou etc.
- Caribou is not sold – that's bad luck to sell wild meat, it should be given away.
- People can give tobacco in return but not money.
- This is similar to Argentina – if people need lemons from the trees they just

take them and people pick food from community gardens and don't pay.

- Back home we eat and then relax at the table to digest our food.
- We can go back and get ideas from the past, from what we used to do.
- Canada liberated Khartoum in Sudan so can it be so hard to liberate the Aboriginal people?
- Aboriginal people know how to navigate the waterways. They don't separate people. This is our time. We're all hungry. But corruption has divided our families. We have to sensitize people. The best way to win a war is to make your enemy your ally. We're out to preserve and protect. We have to protect ourselves too. We have to prevent being taken advantage of.

Elders:

- It's hard especially for the old people. It's hard to get motivated to cook when you are by yourself. Nobody visits any more in the city. Instead when people come you ask, "What do you want?" A good idea is a "hug patrol". It's not so good here. People are isolated.
- We have to be delicate in how we engage people. We need to balance how we do this family thing. There is a lot of elder abuse.
- In Lion's Manor if someone dies, they replace that person with a student.
- Ombudsman's office needs to know about this. Advocacy is needed.

● **DREAMS:**

- It was hard to get this group to think of dreams, beyond having more money for food.
- More fun is a dream – getting together for more meals, being able to afford more meals and more things.
- We need to go back to the liberal theory that everyone is entitled to a standard of living.
- The wage gap is a problem – the difference between the executive and others and between male and female.
- This is important for single mothers who live in poverty
- Information for low income people.
- We can take back our community by reaching out and going house to house. Food is a good connecting value.
- Spence Neighbourhood needs a "Food Committee."
- Support good groups like "Food not Bombs."
- Volunteer pick up service for elders.
- Purchase some freezers for St. Mathews Maryland.
- Organize a good food club in Spence Neighbourhood.

● RESEARCH:

- A focus group like this or in any research – don't start by looking at one issue – you alienate people that way.
- Do not start by putting an issue down – you alienate people?
- We're sick of surveys in our community.
- Have a press release at the Legislature.
- Take information to Income Assistance and to the Winnipeg Social Planning Council (they just completed but have not released their report).
- We could take a group approach and all go to the Legislature.
- They need to read the stories because stories pull at the heartstrings.
- We could have a press release at the Food Banks.
- We could release the results at the West End Cultural Centre.





A final note to you Dear Reader:

Dear Reader, we thank you for picking up this brief report and taking the time to consider the very real experiences that are recorded in these pages – these are the day-to-day and generation-to-generation struggles of inner-city families and isolated single men and women to provide sustenance for today and to build hope for tomorrow.

It is our honour to present to you the heart-felt stories, the heated debates, the happy discoveries, and the painful realities of resilience and, yes, of hunger of mothers and children, of Elders, and of newcomers who are our neighbours.

We hope that you will find our efforts to bring this unique and honest collection to the greater public, useful in your work and informative in your discussions with others.

You can understand, dear reader, that our conversations in the homes of people with low incomes, have been a privilege for us ... to be allowed into the very private spaces of those who organize their modest meals with great care, keeping true to the values of ancestors who came before, and sheltering the young ones from that wider, colder world that shapes their wide-eyed reality.

We are shining a light on those sacred worlds, so that the dedicated people who serve in the public realm, people who are bound by rules and accountability, might see what we have seen and hear what we have heard.

We believe that our modest efforts, our organic method of study and observation and of group reflection and detailed review will in some way foster understanding – whether you our reader, find the very human narrative stories or alternatively, the more directed focus group discussions most useful.

In any case, we thank you for your time, attention, curiosity and interest in this Low income Goulash that has been our labour and our gift during these long, persistent winter months. As mother earth awakens, we are reminded of her own resilience and offer this work in appreciation.

The Researchers

APPENDIX

FOOD ON A LOW INCOME

A Research project for low income people in Winnipeg

We are asking you to take part in a study of food for low income people in Winnipeg. Often, low-income people do not have the same kinds of choices about food that people with higher incomes have. We want to find out what the reality of your situation is so it can be included with the stories of several low-income people. We think it is important to hear the real voices of real low income people.

In Canada, low-income is determined by a statistic called the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO). We are using this statistic to determine which people might be given a chance to voice their opinions and tell of their experiences. You qualify to take part in this study if your annual income is lower than the following LICO standard:

Single person household	\$21,666 or less
Two-person household	\$29,972 or less
Three-person household	\$33,159 or less
Four-person household	\$40,259 or less

If you agree to participate in this interview, it will take from 30 to 60 minutes. We would like to offer you a \$20 gift certificate. Your identity will remain anonymous – your name will not be recorded on any documents other than this permission form. You do not have to answer any of the questions asked and can request that the interview end at any time.

This research is sponsored by the Manitoba Food Charter and conducted by the Community Research Hub of Spence Neighbourhood Association. The director of the study is Sandra Leone, Coordinator of the Community Research Hub. You can contact her at 783-3772 if you have any questions or concerns about how the study is conducted.

I agree to be interviewed

Name (Please print) _____ Date of interview _____

_____ to be referred to as INT # _____
Signature

Signature of person conducting interview _____

INVITATION TO FEAST AND FORUM -- April 2nd

We would like to invite you to a community breakfast and consultation on April 2nd, 2009 during which you will have a chance to see our preliminary conclusions and make comments on whether or not we are understanding the issues about food for low-income people in a proper and respectful way. The April 2nd gathering will be held at Magnus Eliason Recreation Centre, 430 Langside. Come at 12:30 for lunch, then focus groups. Your participation is important and will be appreciated!

Do you mind if I contact you to get your RSVP for April 2nd? _____

FOOD ON A LOW INCOME

A Research project for low income people in Winnipeg

INTERVIEW # _____

We may use the following questions to help prompt your answers. But what is important is not these 12 questions — what is important is you feeling free to tell us your experiences of food. What's important is YOUR story of what food means to you and the changes you think might make things better. These questions are simply a guide. You should add anything at any time that you think is important, particularly your personal experiences.

1. Tell me a little about yourself, roughly your age, home and family situation, finances.
2. What do you eat in a normal day?
(What do you consider a meal?)
(Do you think you eat enough and that you get good quality food?)
3. Do you know how to prepare meals or to cook foods?
(Do you have everything to cook a meal, such as pots, pans, dishes, a good kitchen space, working stove, fridge, enough cupboard space and the extras you need to make food taste good?)
4. What stores do you usually shop at when you buy food?
(Why do you shop there?)
(Are you satisfied with stores in your neighbourhood and the quality and cost of local foods? Why or Why not?)
5. How often per month, do you get take-out or restaurant food?
(Where, what do you get?)
6. What other sources do you use to get your food?
(If free food, where, why, and how do you feel using these sources?)
7. Do you have access to gardening space?
(If so, where? – community, backyard)
(If not do you wish you did?)
8. Do you have any special food needs because of your cultural background?
(If so, can you easily find the food you ate when you were back home?)
(What difficulties do you have?)
9. Do you have any health conditions that mean you need special foods?
(If so, how easy is it for you to get the foods you need?)
(What difficulties do you have?)
10. Everyone has many needs other than food: rent, utilities, entertainment, cigarettes, alcohol. If you feel comfortable talking about it, can you say what are the things that you spend money on when you receive it?

11. Do you have any particular food strategies or tips you can share with us?
12. What do you feel should be done to make it easier to get good food in the inner city?
13. Is there anything you'd like to add about food in your life or in the inner city?

THE COMMUNITY RESEARCH HUB (CRH)

The CRH started two years ago as a project of the Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA). The original idea was to train people of the inner city and the Spence Neighbourhood on research and data collection of the form of Focus Group facilitation, interviewing, and surveys and work towards building a self sustainable social enterprise.

Now, we are not only offering on going training, part time and casual work at above minimum wages, we are also involved in our community working together with its residents to improve our community and therefore our own lives.

If you are interested in knowing more about this report in particular, or the Community Research Hub, please contact us at 204-783-3772



Email: crh@spenceneighbourhood.org

Phone: 204-783-3772



The Manitoba Food Charter

Email: Info@mbfoodcharter.ca

Phone: In Winnipeg at 943-0822 or Toll Free 1-800-731-2638



Neighbourhoods Alive!

Email: nalive@gov.mb.ca

Phone: 945-3379 Toll Free: 1-866-479-6155



Spence Neighbourhood Association

Email: liaison@spenceneighbourhood.org

Phone: 783-5000