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# FAST FACTS

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## Step by Step: Turning Things Around in Winnipeg's Inner City

The third annual *State of the Inner City Report* was released December 4, 2007, to a full house of 200-plus inner-city residents and community workers at North End Winnipeg's beautiful Thunderbird House. Those in attendance heard an overwhelmingly positive account of inner-city developments from the author and publisher of the report, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. Both the news that was reported and the manner in which it was received were positive, even enthusiastic.

Why would this be the case? Isn't Winnipeg's inner city plagued by poverty and despair; drugs, gangs and violence; stolen cars and burning houses?

Yes, it is. In fact, in many respects the situation in Winnipeg's inner city is worse, by far, than most Winnipeggers realize.

But at the same time there is much going on that is positive, most of it driven by a significant number of relatively small community-based organizations (CBOs) that manage to be highly creative while staying in close touch with the day-to-day realities of inner-city residents.

The *State of the Inner City Report 2007* tells some of these stories.

In Lord Selkirk Park, a large public housing project in Winnipeg's North End and one of the city's lowest-income neighbourhoods, recent

efforts coordinated by the North End Community Renewal Corporation have led to the creation of a broadly-based Community Advisory Committee, and a local Resource Centre that has become a hot-bed of community-building activity. There is also a locally-based adult learning centre, established in September 2007, that is offering the mature grade 12 certificate to about 20 enthusiastic local residents. Plans to develop a large childcare centre in the middle of the housing project are well underway—it will create 15 local jobs and will enable many more residents to seize new opportunities being created. Efforts are being made to have Red River College deliver their Early Childhood Education program on site, thus creating still more educational and job opportunities. The community is now embarking upon a comprehensive five-year plan, based on the principle of re-building the community from within with full community engagement. A new more positive mood has emerged, and Lord Selkirk Park is increasingly—and remarkably given where it was just two years ago—being called a 'community of opportunity and hope'.

A second section of the *State of the Inner City Report 2007* is a detailed economic analysis of a program in Lord Selkirk Park designed to provide young girls aged 8 to 12 years with the tools and skills necessary to avoid being pulled into the



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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widely pervasive sex trade. The sophisticated economic analysis concludes that the costs of keeping children out of the sex trade are far less than the costs of having children working in the sex trade. The costs associated with someone working in the sex trade accrue not just to the individual, but to society at large. Societal costs include higher lifetime health-care costs, and lower educational achievement that leads to lower lifetime earnings, leading in turn to lower tax revenues. The program pays for itself if fewer than two children are deterred from entering the sex trade. In other words, such programs are *exceptionally* good investments, both from a human and an economic point of view.

A third section of the *State of the Inner City Report 2007* offers an analysis of the results of work done by eight inner-city organizations that do community-level preventive work with children, youth and families. These organizations have long believed that their efforts were producing positive results, but they have been frustrated by the fact that existing indicators have not been subtle enough to identify these positive outcomes. Using an innovative methodology, developed in close consultation with the eight organizations, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has been able to show that great gains are being made by inner-city residents who participate in these organizations' programs. People develop self-esteem and self-confidence, begin to volunteer in their communities, function better at home with their families, become better parents and partners. Again, from the point of view of society as a whole, public investment in the work of these CBOs produces very positive outcomes, reduces long-term societal costs, and represents a highly productive use of our tax dollars.

Three conclusions can be drawn from the *State of the Inner City Report 2007*. First, many inner-city CBOs have figured out how to work with inner-city residents to improve their lives, so as to give

them a renewed sense of hope and real prospects of a better future. Second, investments in these non-profit CBOs are, from a societal point of view, highly productive investments. They produce benefits for all of us because the kind of poverty that prevails in Winnipeg's inner city not only severely damages its victims, but also produces higher costs for society. Third, it follows from the first two points that governments should invest much more of our tax dollars in this highly productive way. Doing so produces both social and economic gains.

At the moment, some efforts are being made to invest in inner-city CBOs. For example, the provincial government's Neighbourhoods Alive! program is highly effective and makes much good work possible, and United Way of Winnipeg and the Winnipeg Foundation are investing more in recent years in such initiatives. But the investment is not yet on a scale large enough to turn around, to transform, the deep and complex problems of the inner city. More is needed.

We would all benefit if our governments—pursuing the goal of prudent, long-term management of our tax dollars—were to invest a great deal more in the kinds of community-based solutions that are described in the *State of the Inner City Report 2007*. All Manitobans would benefit. All Manitobans should insist that this be done. These kinds of investments represent a much more forward-looking approach, and a much more prudent and long-term approach, than the current fashion for tax cuts.

—*Jim Silver and Shauna MacKinnon*

*Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, and the coordinator of the CCPA-Mb's annual State of the Inner City Reports. Jim Silver is a CCPA-Mb Board member, Chair of the Politics Department at the University of Winnipeg, and Co-Director of the UW's new Urban and Inner-City Studies program. The State of the Inner City Report 2007 can be downloaded from the CCPA.*



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