

Research for communities

Participation and its impacts

Success has many meanings

In 2007, as part of its *State of the Inner City Report*, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba partnered with eight community-based organizations (CBOs) to explore the meaning of successful outcomes for participants of community-based programs. Participants include individuals who are users of the services and programs of the community organizations studied. In some cases, they are also volunteers.

The eight organizations, known collectively as CLOUT—for Community-Led Organizations United Together, and the CCPA-Manitoba undertook an extensive research project that interviewed 91 people who participate in CBO programs and activities.

For this project, the research team was interested in the narrators' perception of what participation in the program has meant to them and the impact on their families, the neighbourhood and the broader community. We also wanted to know if individual participation has contributed to a greater understanding of the effects of colonization and systemic oppression and

whether this knowledge has had any impact on participant perceptions of self and hope for the future.

Eight community researchers were hired and trained to conduct interviews for this study. Once interviews were completed it was decided to interview three of the researchers to hear their thoughts on the project. The goal was to understand whether they felt they benefited from participating

as a community researcher and what their thoughts were on the project in general.

The stories that they told mirrored many of the messages that came through from the broader research project. Their stories are presented in this four-page document, while the full report, *Is Participation Having an Impact? Measuring Progress in Winnipeg's Inner City* through the voices of Community Based Program Participants, is available from the CCPA.

I am speaking up for people who don't have a voice or they're afraid to speak up. I am giving you permission to put my real name on the final report.

These women are involved as participants and/or supporters of the Mamawipayiwkamik "Gathering Place" which is co-hosted by the Aboriginal Visioning Program and the Native Women's Transition Centre Mentorship Program. Some of the women participated as community researchers for this project. (From top left: Alvina Smith, Lynda Decoste, and Debra Diubaldo, Cindy Head, Nancy Thomas, Darlene Klyne, Gloria Duck, Carey Sinclair, Monica Dominique, Jackie Kennedy, and Deborah Quoquat,

NANCY

Nancy is a 39-year-old Aboriginal woman. Nancy told us that she quit drinking on September 4th, 1996, when she was told that if she did not do so, she would die. Adopted by a non-Aboriginal American family during the 1960s large-scale adoption of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal families (often referred to as the Sixties Scoop), Nancy was sent back when she was 16-years-old and was placed in the Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre. Nancy had four children, all of whom were raised by foster parents. Her daughter

committed suicide one year ago and since then Nancy has focused on her own healing.

During an interview that took place at the Aboriginal Visioning Centre on Selkirk Ave., Nancy was asked whether she felt that her participation as a community researcher benefited her at all. Nancy lowered her eyes and reflected for several minutes before responding. She then looked into the interviewers' eyes and said: "Participating in this project gave me my voice back." When asked to elaborate she went on to say that she was initially very anxious about participating and almost dropped out. But she was encouraged by her mentor at Native Women's Transition Centre and CCPA researchers and so she continued.

Nancy told us that she had very low self-esteem and did not have the confidence that she could do this work or any work. Although Nancy had been engaged in volunteer activities in her community, she had never been 'employed' for wages. Nancy bravely continued through the project in spite of her initial hesitation. She told us that she became stronger and more confident with each interview. We witnessed her improvement through each interview we listened to.

Nancy expressed being thankful for the support and encouragement she received and she said that she now feels that she has the confidence to try other things. Nancy has since begun work—paid work—as a support worker at the Native Women's Transition Centre.

CAREY

Carey became involved in the project through the Native Women's Transition



Centre, where she is a participant in the Centre's mentoring program. Carey conducted interviews at Wolseley Family Place, where she has also participated in programs.

After the birth of her son, Carey worked on a casual basis at Wolseley Family Place for four years. She credits Wolseley family place for providing her with some early training. She moved on from there to pursue her education and work in other communities.

Carey has participated in other community-based research projects and she told us that she feels she learns a lot from doing so. "I really enjoy doing these kind of research projects because it gives me a chance to hear other peoples' stories and also their opinions because I guess a lot of people don't get that opportunity very often...to voice their opinions or be able to have it actually used for something."

When asked if there was something in particular that stood out for her, she said that it was the emphasis on the need for greater supports for youth. Carey also noted that there was a desire for more "Aboriginal places they could go for cultural stuff." A further issue she observed was the fearfulness of repercussions from Employment and Income Assistance. Even after reading through the consent form and learning that interviews would be confidential, one of the women she interviewed was hesitant to share too much information "...because she was on social assistance, she was afraid to...I don't think I got as much as I could have out of her because she was hesitant to share."

An interview with a refugee woman also stood out for her. "...Her story was...scary I guess...Yeah, where she came from and what she had to go through...that was the first time [I had talked to a refugee]...you hear about it on the news but when you're actually talking to a person telling their story, it's different."

In terms of hopes for the project and her participation, Carey would like to be able to use the experience as a reference for future employment, and she hopes that the information will be used. "...The information is important and instead of looking at numbers all the time...I think people's stories have a bigger impact on... it should have a bigger impact on...how polices and stuff are made."

LORRAINE

Lorraine is a long time inner-city resident and has volunteered at Rossbrook House for several years. She told us that she was honoured when Sister Maria asked her to participate as a community researcher for the project. Lorraine told us that she had already believed that Rossbrook House was providing a valuable service but hearing what the kids had to say about Rossbrook was sometimes quite surprising. Lorraine felt that she developed some important skills. It was sometimes challenging to get the children to open up and elaborate on their answers, but when they did, they had some very important things to say. Lorraine told us that she appreciated getting to know the children she interviewed better. She now has a better understanding of the extensive challenges that they have.

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The full *State of the Inner City 2007* report is available from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba.



A lot of them don't have any place to go. I talked to one that was staying at his grandpa's but there is no room for him so he hangs out at Rossbrook basically 24/7 when he can...and a lot of them because of the home life, they...I remember going to work and having kids sitting at the door because they've been outside since early morning, parents are doing drugs, they haven't ate since the day before. All they want... 'can I have a piece of bread?'... and it's sad.

Lorraine plans to continue to participate as a volunteer at Rossbrook House and elsewhere in her community. Lorraine is interested in continuing to be involved in this and future community-based research projects.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A critical lesson for governments and funding agencies is that 'success' has many meanings. Those of us who had the opportunity to participate in this project learned much about the very subjective nature of measuring outcomes. The size, scope and design of this project presented many challenges. While the hiring and training of community researchers added an additional layer of complexity, it was a critical component of our project if we were to remain true to our capacity-building objectives. The benefits far outweighed the costs.

In respect for the many program participants and community researchers that contributed their time and shared their stories with us, we conclude with a quote

from one of our community researchers, which we believe captures the essence of what this project has been all about.

When asked is she wanted to provide a pseudonym to ensure her anonymity in the final report, Nancy, a community researcher and program participant, responded as follows. Nancy's words very powerfully articulate why our PAR model is critical to conducting research in the inner city.

I really don't mind if you put my real name on the final report. Our people have been silent for way too long... without a name or a face, which is known as an identity.

I'm starting to know my culture and my identity, so without a name or a face, I am not complete or whole. I feel our government and/or other agencies could and will know the real facts. I feel too, we as a people need to speak up, and let our voices be heard. I am speaking up for people who don't have a voice or they're afraid to speak up. I am giving you permission to put my real name on the final report. I want to thank you for giving me the chance to speak up, I have learned so much about human beings, including myself.