



Determinants of Social Capital and Differential Success: Building a Better Life

2015 –
2018

A Community Research Project
with NorQuest College
and the Edmonton Public Library

Funded by CCSIF-SSHRC



Was I ever happy to hear that NorQuest College was digging into the impact of social connection, with its Better Life Project. Emerging research reveals we have a quiet epidemic of loneliness in modern cities, to go along with epidemics of depression, debilitating anxiety and addictions.

Councillor Scott
McKeen, City of
Edmonton

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Treaty 6 Acknowledgement: We would like to acknowledge that we are situated on the traditional lands, referred to as Treaty 6 Territory and that the City of Edmonton and all the people here are beneficiaries of this peace and friendship treaty. Treaty 6 encompasses the traditional territories of numerous western Canadian First Nations as well as the Métis people who have called this area home for time immemorial. We are dedicated to ensuring that the spirit of Treaty 6 is honoured and respected.

Introduction

Building a Better Life was a community project. Grounded in their experience in the community, NorQuest staff, social worker and instructor, Bob Marvin, and community researcher and private sponsor of refugees, Marlene Mulder, established a partnership with the Edmonton Public Library to carry out this work.

Unless otherwise noted, all italicized texts in this booklet are direct quotes from research participants. We highly value their wisdom and insight and want them to see their words in print.

The project had two goals:

1. To build relationships and create research partnerships in the community
2. To learn about the bridging and bonding relationships needed to build a better life

The researchers made more than 80 community visits, learning from service providers and asking them to work with us to develop research that was useful and meaningful to support their work. Forty-four unique agencies or programs were involved in the project from beginning to end, from creating the study to deciding how to report and share the findings.

The project was guided by the following teachings and individuals:

- 🌿 The Seven Sacred Teachings: love, respect, wisdom, courage, honesty, humility, truth
- 🌿 Project Elder Elsie Paul
- 🌿 Project Wisdom Holder San San Sy

All data collection took place in the community at the collaborator locations, where participants felt comfortable and supported. The project included:

- 🌿 606 face-to-face interviews
- 🌿 50 focus group discussions
- 🌿 3 life map case studies



The Research Plan

Goals

- ☛ To learn what people need to build a better life
- ☛ To work with community agencies and government to strengthen relationships



Rules of Engagement

- ☛ Nurture working relationships
- ☛ Honour and respect
- ☛ Include community
- ☛ Build Social Capital
- ☛ Be sensitive to needs
- ☛ Build a research team

Working with community service agencies

- ☛ Relying on agencies' community-level expertise to develop a research plan
- ☛ Relying on agencies to host data collection events
- ☛ Sharing data with agencies to gain their feedback and insight
- ☛ Adjusting methodology based on feedback from agencies



Learning from the community

- Coming to people at the agencies they go to
- Spending time together through face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and food
- Honouring customs, practices, and needs

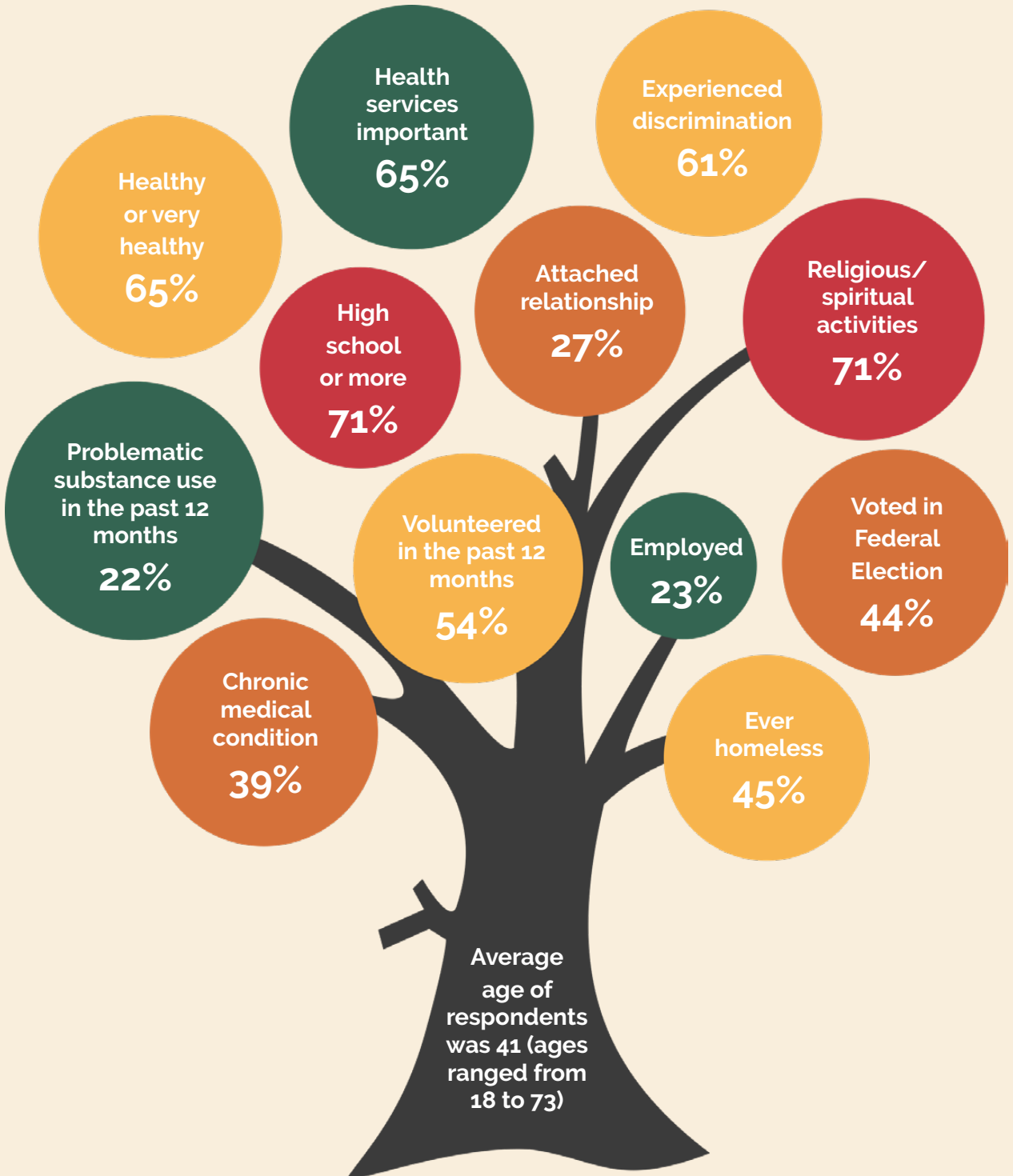


Outcomes

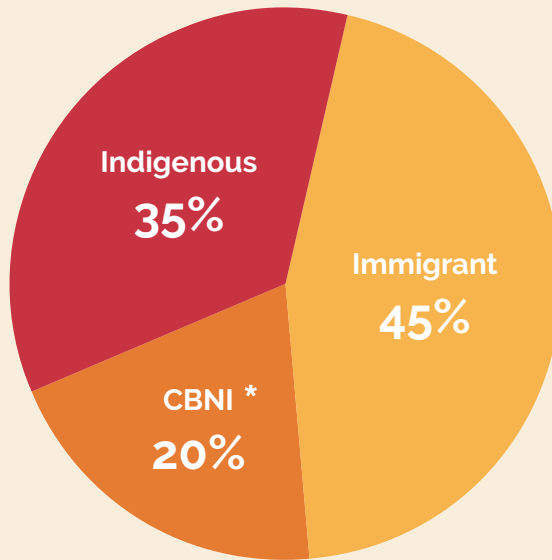
- Sharing findings and methods with the community collaborators, partners, and other researchers
- Sharing findings in easy-to-use formats (i.e., booklet, posters, life maps)
- Recognizing the value of relationships to build Social Capital
- Learning about further research needs

This [research project] I felt made our organization a partner from the beginning. We were able to contribute to the design and implementation of the project. Also, the data collection itself was an empowering and humanizing experience. The researchers were part of the community literally and made the experience very comfortable. – Jeremiah Bašurić, The Mustard Seed

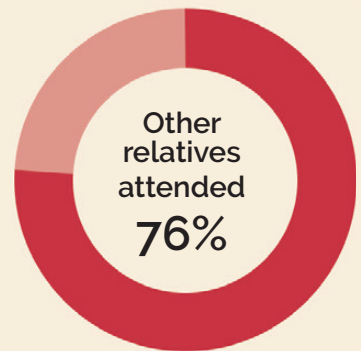
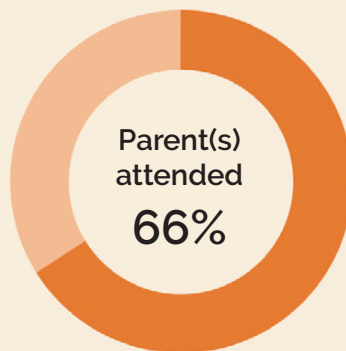
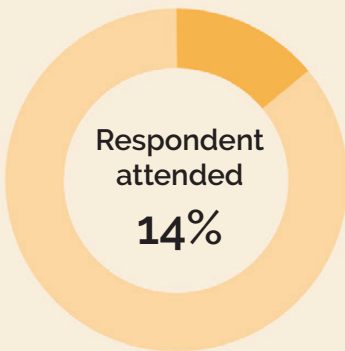
Research Participants



Respondent Profile



Indigenous Respondents & Residential Schools



I just wanted to go back on the things to have a good life and stuff like that. I could have said understanding and relationship. Relationships are a pretty big part. Everyone needs someone and understanding—there's a lot of understanding that people need to learn.

* CBNI: Canadian-born non-Indigenous

Bonding & Bridging Relationships = Social Capital

Bonding Relationships

Everyday relationships with people like me
(family, friends, neighbours)

Bridging Relationships

Relationships with people different than me with different networks
(teachers, community groups, across social and ethnic groups)

Social Capital Themes

Community engagement

Feelings of connection to others

Feelings about self

Lack of loneliness

Trust for others

Trust for service providers

I make Canadian friends. I go out in the parks. Invite people to our home. I invited the director and the teacher from the centre. When I came here, I didn't have anyone here. So you have to go out. You have to be social to learn the language.

Social Capital

The higher the score, the more Social Capital one has (measure ranges from 1 to 4).



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These factors increase Social Capital

- ✿ Having a close, dependable relationship
- ✿ Good mental and physical health
- ✿ Education that builds skills and confidence
- ✿ Employment that brings financial security
- ✿ Participation in spiritual activities
- ✿ Volunteerism

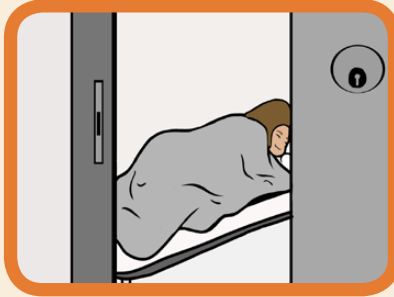
These factors decrease Social Capital

- ✿ Problematic substance use
- ✿ Having ever been homeless
- ✿ Experiencing discrimination frequently

We all come from different backgrounds. You have to take that into consideration. And then you make your friends on what you do or how you look at yourself and then you associate with those people, or those kind of people you want to be with or hang out with.

Barriers

Poor Health & Chronic Medical Conditions



Poor Health

Chronic medical conditions

50%

46%

19%

59%

64%

13%

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It's a very lonely disease ... neighbours won't let me use their phone because they're afraid of germs. It's a really painful place to be.

We don't have any kind of mental health problems because we don't have time for that! Even if we have it, it's suppressed inside! So we don't have time to take self-care.

I had my children taken from me [because of] PTSD. I had a workplace injury ... my life changed in the matter of a day. When I reached out for help it wasn't there because as a woman, a mother, you're not allowed to make mistakes.

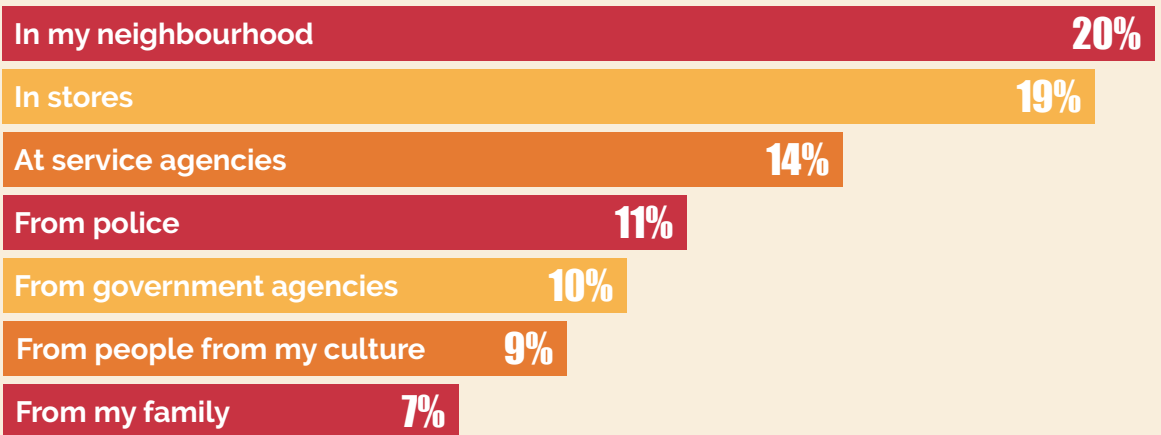
Discrimination

Experience discrimination

Experience discrimination frequently



Sites of Discrimination



Do you know what it's like to be marginalized and to have people from other countries come in and be racist against you, and you are a First [Nations] person and this is your country?

I've always felt like I was either too black for the white people or too white for the black people.

They [Canadians] are more accepting of me, who looks different, sounds different, from a different country, than [they are of] an Indigenous person.

It [discrimination] is everywhere, Native on Native, being called an "apple" for hanging out with white people.

Poverty



3 in 4 research participants live under the low income cut-off (LICO)

Even money has a way of affecting your personality, your outgoing spirit ... money has a huge part in how you feel about yourself. It does even affect how much you can volunteer or give.

Back home, we had families to feed, people we were supporting with the income we had. But when you come here, you realize that the income is not there, you cannot support those people.

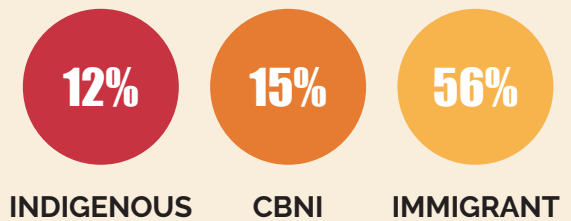
Education, Experience & Credentials

I need a job to support my family. I will need further education to improve but cannot afford it.

The immigration process gives the impression that education and experience count, but they really do not when you get here.

I would like to ask for more attention to be paid to the transfer of skills, talents, and qualifications that immigrants have already established back home.

Completed post-secondary programs



Homelessness & Housing

There's no real support for people who are employed that are homeless.

I'm in a two-bedroom, however, I can't afford it. My rent is \$1000. I pay it though, it's hard. My daughters want to come back this summer ... because we can't all share the one room.



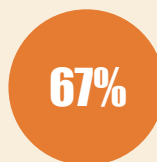


Problematic Substance Use

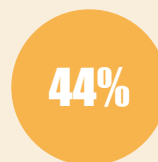
(in past 12 months)



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Sometimes I have a hard time belonging to myself because I get thrown off by addictions.

If you're down and out, stressed out, you turn to substance abuse.

Language Barriers

General

Without the proper language, it is very hard for us.

For anybody to really have a fulfilled life, we need the basic necessities of life, like housing, food, shelter.

When you speak [English] properly, you don't get lost. You don't need to get lost on the bus, you just go on your own.

People who have been incarcerated need more support. They get sent out, then they re-offend. They have no support to get their lives started.

The first barrier is language. It is the main barrier in our new life because if we don't have language ... we can't be full participants in this society.

Weekends are tough! Services are closed and there is nowhere to go.

Trust

Loneliness

I don't even trust the professional people in my own community.

It can get quite lonely ... It's so easy to just stay in the house, then you'd never go anywhere.

A lot of us have been taken advantage of in different ways so it's really hard to trust. It's not easy to find people you can talk openly with about the things we've had to deal with without being judged.

You are far from your family, you are far from your friends, and you are far from your own land.

Transcending the Barriers

Skills and Characteristics I Use to Build a Better Life	External Supports I Use to Build a Better Life	What I Give Back to the Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🍃 Caring nature 🍃 Communication skills 🍃 Confidence 🍃 Courage 🍃 Honesty 🍃 Humility 🍃 Integrity 🍃 Leadership 🍃 Networking 🍃 Non-judgmental 🍃 Perspective 🍃 Positive attitude 🍃 Resiliency 🍃 Respect 🍃 Self-awareness 🍃 Self-care 🍃 Stress management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🍃 Community 🍃 Counselling and therapy 🍃 Cultural connections 🍃 Education 🍃 Elders and traditional practice 🍃 Employment 🍃 Faith communities 🍃 Family 🍃 Friends 🍃 Health care 🍃 Justice system 🍃 Mentors and teachers 🍃 Programs and services 🍃 Shelter and food 🍃 Skill-building opportunities 🍃 Staff at agency(ies) 🍃 Transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🍃 Acceptance 🍃 Advocacy 🍃 Calmness 🍃 Caring 🍃 Communication 🍃 Connecting people 🍃 Consistency 🍃 Courage 🍃 Honesty 🍃 Hopefulness 🍃 Leadership 🍃 Patience 🍃 Positive role model 🍃 Understanding 🍃 Volunteering

I have many good qualities
(most of time or always)

I am free to decide how to live
my life (most of time or always)

81%

80%

90%

88%

81%

91%

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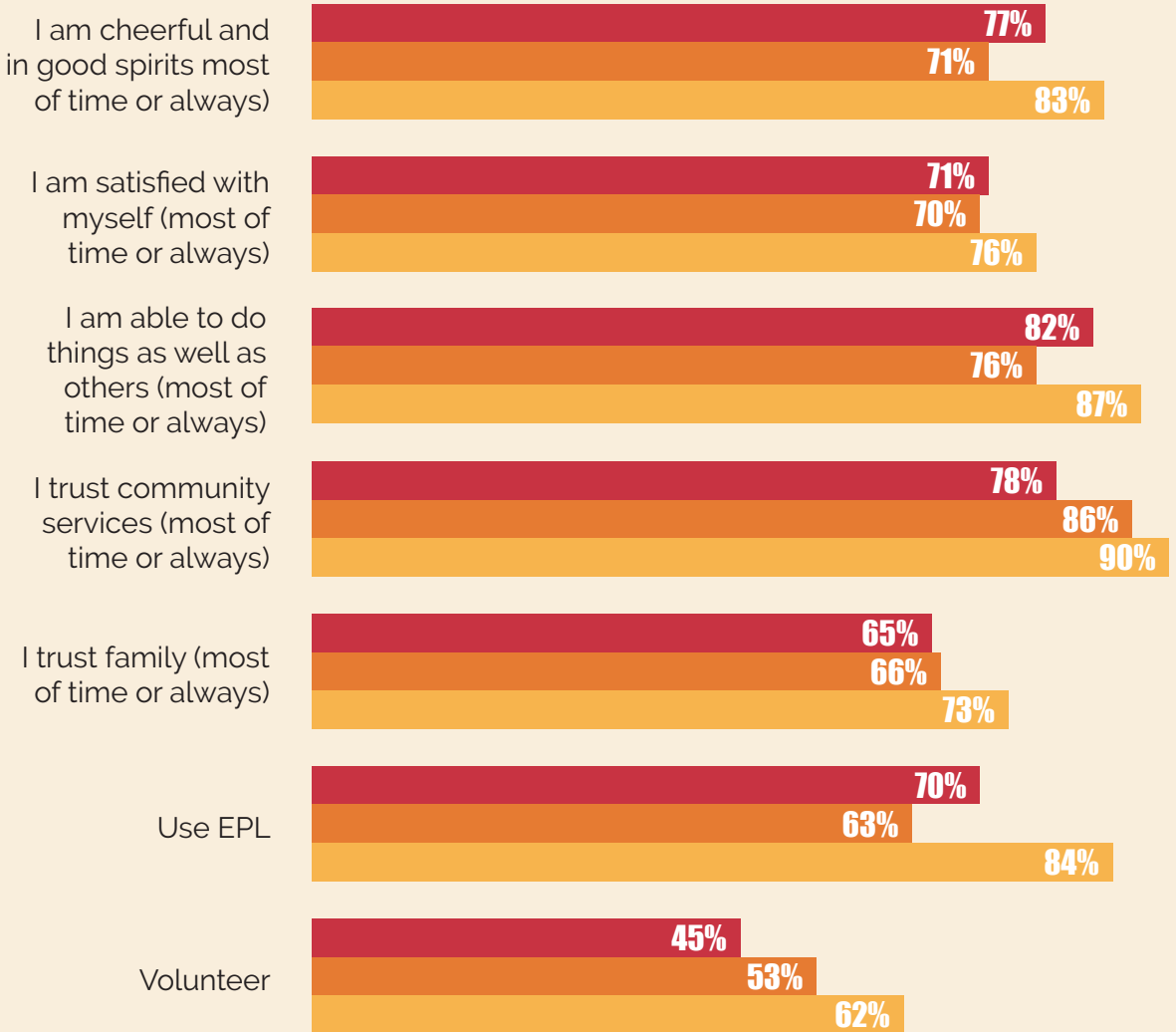
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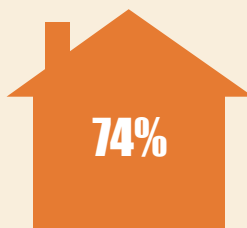
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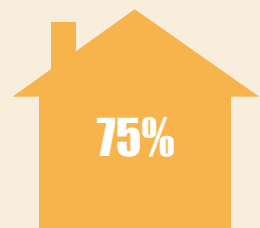
Currently Housed



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We're actually being vulnerable [in this program] the past couple weeks because we've been telling our life stories. There is a lot of trust here so it takes a lot to say what we need to say and share it with everyone.



In prison I transformed myself and took responsibility for my actions. I joined the Native Brotherhood and became a leader. I met with an Elder regularly, smudged, and attended the sweat lodge.

Journalling or talking to family is really important, reconnecting the relationships that we've broken through addiction and realizing that these people suffered with you and tried to stand by you.

If you speak with someone that's not your culture, your self-esteem grows a little bit. You're like, "Wow. I talked with someone that doesn't speak my language."

We just organize a small prayer on the weekend and then we do a potluck and sharing and helping each other to keep that culture, that religion thing going on, and this is how we connect.

I'm not afraid to admit that I go out and have free meals, I meet complete strangers, I'm lonely, I just get in a bus and strike up a conversation with anybody. Just to talk to someone sometimes. It's a happy conversation.



It's the harm-reduction method instead of abstinence. It works to help people that realize they need change but don't necessarily know how to go about it. Here you go at your pace. If you try and you fail, you're still welcome here. Wherever you are, they encourage and support.

And it's not easy to find people you can talk openly with about the things we've had to deal with without being judged or discriminated or stereotyped. It makes a difference because you realize you're not the only one who has been through [difficulty].



What We Learned

People are resilient – Most of the participants in this study are resilient and resourceful, important qualities when living a marginalized life. When asked about themselves, participants strongly believed in the statements “I am free to decide how to live my life” and “I am able to do things as well as other people.” They want to give back to their community and generously share and care for others, even when they have limited resources.

There are many challenges – Most of the respondents live in poverty. This often leads to uncertain access to basics such as food, shelter, clothing, and health care. Substance use may help manage or cope with difficulty and the stress of living with so many challenges. At the same time, substance use often leads to a more difficult life.

Immigrant participants often face unique challenges, especially those who are new to Canada. They struggle to settle in their new country, make new friends, have their credentials and experience recognized and valued, attain Canadian job experience, and learn how to network. For those who are far away from family and friends, the early stages of settlement can be isolating and lonely. If they don't have an established cultural community to help them, they often build bridging relationships with newcomers from other cultures. Services often become available when they are no longer required. An example is subsidized housing, which is needed most in the second year in Canada, but often does not become available until the fourth or fifth year.

Participants are educated – Most of the participants in this research (7 in 10) had completed high school, and many (1 in 3) had completed a college or university program. These levels of education challenge the stereotype that marginalized people are uneducated. Unfortunately, for many of our participants education may not provide the opportunities that others enjoy in the labour market.

Relationships are key – Many participants talked about wanting face-to-face rather than over-the-phone services and referrals. While drop-in services are essential, focused programs are most helpful in building relationship and community, fostering acceptance, understanding, and value. Limited budgets may lead to services being offered through call centres and phone referrals. This means people who use these services have less face-to-face contact and fewer opportunities to build relationships, leading to greater isolation and loneliness. Some participants said that loneliness and isolation are worst on weekends, when agencies that serve as their primary source for human contact and community are often closed.

Good health is important – Good health is important when building Social Capital. If a person feels healthy, they are more likely to build relationships and access services and opportunities in the community. When a person moves from homelessness to being housed and supported, they are also likely to spend more time and energy on their health.

Discrimination is common – Four in five (4 in 5) Indigenous participants reported that they experienced discrimination, followed closely by Canadian-born non-Indigenous individuals. Discrimination lessens one's confidence and self-esteem, especially when it is experienced everywhere. It also has long-term negative effects on trust and feelings about self. Discrimination also excludes people from community and increases loneliness. Immigrants were less likely to say they had been discriminated against, but their widespread experiences of it came out in the stories they shared in the focus group discussions.

Being homeless at any time makes a difference – We learned that homelessness at any point in one's life, has a negative impact on trust and well-being. Canadian-born non-Indigenous participants were most likely to have been homeless and to have had problematic substance use in the past 12 months (1 in 3 participants). These proportions were followed closely by Indigenous respondents. The double-jeopardy of homelessness and problematic substance-use reduce one's Social Capital.

Immigrant respondents were far less likely to report ever being homeless in Canada, but it is important to remember that this is partly because they have not lived their whole lives here. They also reported offering places in their homes to fellow immigrants in need, which likely also reduced the rate of homelessness in this group.

Trust – Trust is typically considered to be good, but we learned that when a person is marginalized, and especially if they are homeless, trust may not be a good survival strategy. The homeless are vulnerable to violence and abuse and must be careful about who to trust. For Indigenous participants, the residential school experience affects many generations and is a legacy that destroys trust. Lack of trust makes it difficult to access and engage in community.

Work-arounds – When participants face difficulty navigating a process or finding help, they often find their own ways (work-arounds) to meet their needs.

A group of Indigenous participants shared their experiences with using an alternative way of finding someone they were looking for.

The “Moccasin Telegraph” does its duty, so you don’t need to go to the cops. You don’t need to go to the social agencies. If you are a Native, you just go to Churchill Square, you ask the people that are First Nations, and they will hook you up. – Indigenous participant

While settling in Canada, a group of immigrant women who met at a local agency, formed a support group using a social messaging app. Through this app they share job ads, check-in with each other, and offer emotional and social support. If someone gets an interview they share clothing, child care, and transportation. Close friendships have developed through this network and for this diverse group of women, success for one is success for all.

Transitions are difficult – Completing a program and moving on to independence is often considered a key measure of success. This may also be a time of considerable vulnerability. A person may not have the skills, resources, or confidence to meet new challenges once they lose the structure and support of the program they left. Despite best efforts, one can lose some of the successes they have gained.

A group of mothers graduating from a rehabilitation program expressed their hope of being reunited with their children. One of their greatest barriers was around housing. Getting adequate housing is a requirement to get their children back, and having their children with them is a requirement to get housing. This situation creates a difficult cycle that impedes one's journey to a better life.

For participants who had been homeless, adjusting to being housed is often difficult because of restrictions on guests and visitors. Being housed separates one from the community they had while homeless and is often a lonely and isolating experience.

Resources & Ideas

Resources for the Community

It is the desire of the principal investigators that this project remain the property of the community that built it. To that end, the final report, this booklet, the case study life maps, the methodology map, and the data presentations will be available for download from the webpage norquest.ca/better-life as they become available.

Ideas for Further Work and Big Questions

- ☛ Why do people discriminate? How do we build community that values everyone?
- ☛ Bringing Indigenous individuals and immigrants together to build community.
- ☛ Understanding the relationship between chronic medical conditions and homelessness.
- ☛ Exploring the jeopardies that exist at transition points such as completing rehabilitation programs or becoming housed.
- ☛ The influence of Indigenous spiritual and religious practices on one's well-being.
- ☛ How to support the portion of the population that face multiple-barriers and live in isolation

Community Collaborators

This project would not have been possible without the community. As researchers, our role was to facilitate and carry out the research, but it was the members of the community who brought their knowledge, experience, and expertise together to design, implement, and offer their insights to understanding the data.

Community organizations opened their homes and hearts to this project, and in doing so gave voice to people they serve, who participated in interviews and focus groups. Our community collaborators and participants are the most important people in this project.

The Role of Community

- ✦ The community collaborators hosted the principal investigators to discuss a possible research project, offering their insight and support for the project.
- ✦ The small working group of 12 agencies
 - ✦ Met to design research
 - ✦ Vetted and approved the research plan
 - ✦ Hosted data collection and invited participants to their sites
 - ✦ Reviewed findings after each round of data collection, offering insight and advice
 - ✦ Hosted presentations of results for their organizations, participants, and/or community

Why did this approach to research matter?

- ✦ Collaborators welcomed the opportunity to develop a meaningful project that was collectively created.
- ✦ Collaborators were engaged and validated for their knowledge.
- ✦ Research participants felt comfortable participating at agencies they were familiar with, and where they felt safe.
- ✦ Researchers did not have to take on the role of “expert” as the project was created by the community and our job was to walk beside our community experts.

Going forward, our collaborators are encouraged to have a role in using the data to inform their practice and to be part of further community-based research.

We found this research project to be quite instructive as it helped our clients illuminate how a sense or lack of belonging impacts their personal and familiar life in a new country. – Oliver Kamau, Edmonton Immigrant Services Association

Community Collaborators

Bold indicates data collection hosts with the number of events in brackets.

1. **Action for Healthy Communities (1)**
2. **Africa Centre (1)**
3. Alberta Community & Social Services
4. Alberta Culture & Tourism
5. Alberta Health Services
6. **Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society – Parent Link Centre (2)**
7. **Bissel Centre (2)**
8. **Boyle Street Community Services (1)**
9. **Bredin Centre for Learning in Alberta (1)**
10. Canadian Mental Health
11. **Catholic Social Services (1)**
12. City of Edmonton – Community Inclusion
13. City of Edmonton – Family Supports
14. **City of Edmonton, Citizen Services, Millwoods Site (1)**
15. Creating Hope Society
16. **Distinctive Employment Counselling Services of Alberta (DECSA) (1)**
17. E4C
18. Edmonton Community Foundation
19. **Edmonton Food Bank (1)**
20. **Edmonton Immigrant Services Association (1)**
21. **Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (3)**
22. **Edmonton Native Healing Center (2)**
23. **Edmonton Public Library (3)**
24. Federation of Community Leagues
25. **George Spady Society (2)**
26. **HIV Edmonton (2)**
27. Homeward Trust
28. M.A.P.S. Alberta Capital Region
29. Marian Centre
30. **Métis Child and Family Services Society (1)**
31. Multicultural Health Brokers
32. Native Counselling Services
33. **New in Town Aboriginal Welcome Service (1)**
34. **Niginan Housing Ventures (Ambrose Place) (1)**
35. **NorQuest College (Day Home Provider program) (3)**
36. **NorQuest College (LINC program) (1)**
37. **NorQuest College (Social Work program) (1)**
38. **NorQuest College (Wetaskiwin Campus) (2)**
39. Rupertsland Institute
40. **The Candora Society – Edmonton (1)**
41. **The House Next Door (1)**
42. **The Mustard Seed (2)**
43. Wichitowin
44. YMCA



Thank you to those who participated in the Better Life project. We are honoured to have been able to spend time with you and hear your stories about the challenges you face, the supports that help you, and your contributions in your community. Without your honesty and humility this project would not be possible.

It takes a community to build a great research project. We would like to say thank you to the following individuals and organizations:

- ✦ The community collaborating agencies for welcoming us into your space and working with us to build and carry out this research.
- ✦ The small working group of collaborators who developed the research plan: Carola Cunningham, Cheryl Whiskeyjack, Christina Nsaliwa, Elsie Paul, Harold Roscher, Heidi Veluw, Jane Slessor, Jeremiah Bašurić, Oliver Kamau, Patti Brady, Peggy Spies, Richard McHutchion, Roberto Petersen, San San Sy, Tesfaye Ayalew, Zanette Frost, Zedingle Ghebremusse
- ✦ Facilitators: Pieter deVos and Kim Ghostkeeper
- ✦ Project Elder Elsie Paul and Project Wisdom Holder San San Sy for your wisdom and guidance
- ✦ Our project partner, the Edmonton Public Library: Allison DaSilva, Ian Robertson, Jared Tachuk, Kyle Marshall, Léanne Labossière, Lucinda Johnstone, Marian Enow, Michael Sambir, Michelina Pagliuso, Soleil Surette
- ✦ Our research team for sharing your skills and experience, and always pitching in wherever needed: Ako Ngu, Carol Rain, Colin Mulholland, Darrell Lacorde, Donald Kinistino, Kelly Gosal, Leah Dejenu, Lori Giampa, Nawar Hamadeh, Nouredin Zaamout, Prava Vishwakarma, Zeina Sleiman-Long
- ✦ Case study participants A, B, and C for your honesty and courage and sharing your stories—this was a large time commitment and you were so dedicated telling and owning your stories (names removed to protect privacy)
- ✦ City of Edmonton, Citizen Services staff for your support throughout the entire life of this project: Chelsey Anseeuw, Jenny Kain, Zanette Frost
- ✦ City of Edmonton Councillor Scott McKeen for bringing greetings at the project showcase and final celebration
- ✦ M.A.P.S. Alberta Capital Region staff for walking with us through this process and for making a contract into a partnership of support: Deborah Morrison, Kilee Winterford-Nadeau, Lindee Golden, Louise Ye
- ✦ NorQuest College staff (current and former) for their formal and informal support, from technical support to words of encouragement—your support made this project a success: Adam Chrobak, Alexandru Caldararu, Alpina Pradhan, Amy Abe, Angie Tarasoff, Brian Bowen, Cindy Boucher, Corey Stroeder, Damian Finlay, David Flomo, Darrell Giraldeau, Dawn Witherspoon, Debra Bachman, Diane Shaw, Dicken Pena, Donna Bell, Dorothy Jacques, Eddie Moon, Erika Goble, Eugene Ip, Ginette Noel, Gwen Morraz, Heather Kitteringham, Helen Ma, Ivan Bos, Jeff Jenkins, Jim McGregor, Jodi Abbott, Jay Suathim, Jonathan Robb, Judy Cobb, Julie Yen, Kelly Hein, Liz Fulton-Lyne, Lori Smits, Kevin Barranoik, Krysta Wetterberg, Krystall McCann, Maple Liu, Marvin Kwan, Maria Montenegro, Maryjane Simeon, Melissa Santoro, Monica Janvier, Nancy Thornton, Nicholle Carriere, Norma Schneider, Richard Wright, Sandy Kram, Todd Schnirer, Tsitsi Chizengeni, Wanda Bursey
- ✦ Ivan Fuentes for supplying amazing food during data collection that did more to tell people they were valued than words ever could
- ✦ Joe Mulder, Margie Marvin, and Bruno Cornejo for cooking, driving, carrying, organizing, and all those things that great spouses do to offer support
- ✦ The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for providing the funding to make this project possible

Signed: Marlene Mulder, Robert Marvin, and Colette Cornejo

Thank you



Photo from the November 2017 public showcase event (from left to right: Scott McKeen, Jodi Abbott, Robert Marvin, Marlene Mulder, Michael Sambir, Soleil Surette)

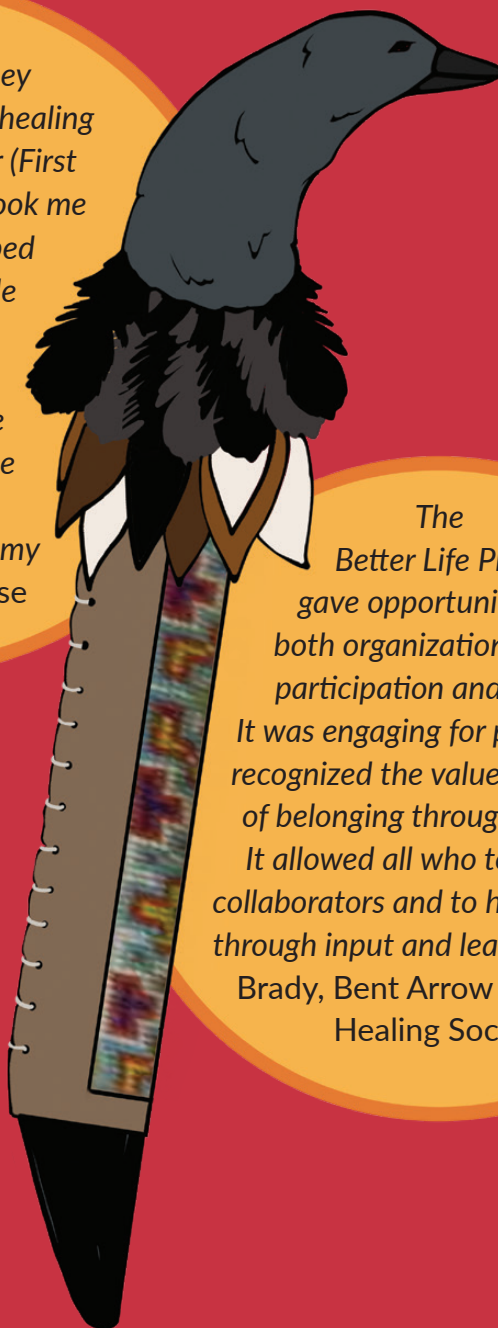


ALBERTA CAPITAL REGION

Printing of this booklet was made possible thanks to the support of the City of Edmonton – Citizen Services

Booklet artwork and design

I started my journey of recovery in a native healing circle. The grandmother (First Rays of The Sun Woman) took me under her wing. We developed a divine connection. She made me feel safe to speak about my wounded inner core child issues... For four years I have run an empowerment circle and it's been the most uplifting experience of my life. - Strong Horse



The Better Life Project gave opportunities for both organization and client participation and experience. It was engaging for participants and recognized the value and importance of belonging through participation. It allowed all who took part to be collaborators and to have ownership through input and learning. - Patti Brady, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society

Image of a talking stick that was gifted to the Better Life project by Strong Horse.



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