

Listen to the Children

Voices of Children Living in
Poverty
In the City of Edmonton

A Report by the

QUALITY OF LIFE COMMISSION

December 2000

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Introduction

For children to become learners and doers, to become creative and constructive members of society, they must live lives that give these qualities a chance to grow.

Adapted from Lucy Sprague Mitchell, *Our Children and Our Schools*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1950.

Alberta in the 2000s

Canada's pledge to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000 has not been realized. Despite a multitude of proposals, recommendations and good intentions on the part of many, there remains overwhelming evidence that many children are disadvantaged because they live in homes in which poverty is their ever-present reality.

This continues to occur in a time when both federal and provincial governments have budget surpluses. Many of us are no longer feeling the pain of massive cuts to health, education and social services, which were made in the name of the debt and deficit. Some of the fear has been replaced with a sense of hope, for both the present and the future.

While many of us are enjoying the fruits of the renewed economy, there are many in Edmonton left living in poverty. For these citizens there is still the constant worry about survival and the struggle to attain a quality of life, which includes safety, adequate food and housing, and opportunities to develop their skills, enjoy recreation and find fulfillment.

"I want to be like the Mayor...I'd make less taxes...it costs too darn much...and I'd make everything fair...like if there's people on the streets, I'd put them in homes...and make sure everybody had food."

Quality of Life Commission

In 1995 a group of concerned citizens met to talk about the impact of Alberta provincial government social policy reforms and cutbacks. They found that those who were hit hardest by the cuts in social programs had no voice in our society.

These concerned citizens established the Quality of Life Commission to listen to these voices in the Edmonton region. They decided to hear directly from those living in poverty. They held small, informal group discussions and a public meeting, during which they identified government decisions that had adversely impacted these citizens' lives. What people told them was recorded in the Commission's 1996 report *Listen to Me*. This report documented the experiences of individuals and families living in poverty. The report contained 40 recommendations to improve the quality of their lives.

The Quality of Life Commission has continued as a vehicle to ensure that peoples' experiences are heard and recorded, to remind decision makers how social policy affects the quality of life of the people they represent.

Listening to the Children

Children represent the most vulnerable group in our society, especially those living in poverty. They are eager to grow and experience life, but are dependent upon their families and their community. As we enter the new millennium, it is important to focus on the future and to understand the factors that influence the lives of children.

To understand the dichotomy between those with plenty and those with little, we must listen to the voices of children living in poverty. How does their world affect them? What are their fears? What are their hopes and dreams? The promise and potential of children is unlimited, if as a society we can strengthen our approach to their care. The Quality of Life Commission has therefore decided to go to the children, to hear from them first hand, to allow them to share their personal stories. This report provides an insight into the issues that concern these children the most.

Executive Summary

The Research

After consulting with professionals who work with children, the Commission hired Jane Hewes, PhD, and Chair of Early Childhood Development at Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton and a recognized leader in children's studies, to conduct the research. The research focused on a single age group, ten-year olds. At this age, children are beginning to be able to articulate their thoughts. They are becoming aware of social justice issues, and their own place in their community and with their families, but they are not yet dealing with the turmoil of adolescence.

To select children to participate in the research study, neighbourhoods with a poverty rate higher than 30%¹ were identified in various geographic areas of the City of Edmonton, as well as a community liaison person familiar with the children living in their neighbourhood. The community liaison person identified the children and acquired the necessary consent forms from the parents. As a result, 32 ten-year olds were identified to participate in seven, small-group interviews.

The researcher prepared an interview protocol to ensure similar questions were asked during each interview session. All group sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed. In addition, a member of the Commission, who attended each session, took notes.

Research Findings

In almost every interview, the children conveyed a strong sense of the importance of family and community. This contrasted with the complex and difficult family circumstances that many of the children described, many of them living apart from their parents, with one parent or in blended families, or moving back and forth between two households. Living situations frequently did not involve their siblings, and there were a lot of extended family members involved, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, stepparents and stepbrothers and sisters.

¹ Based on the 1996 census and the level for low-income identified by Statistics Canada.

The Influence of Neighbourhood

The most compelling finding was the impact of poverty and low-income neighbourhoods on children's feelings of safety and security in their homes and neighbourhoods. Children in all of the interviews routinely described experiences with guns and knives, domestic violence, police, theft, fire, drugs and alcohol use.

"If I could change my neighbourhood, I would just move away...cause it's not safe here...."

Along with their feelings of lack of safety, came many descriptions of being afraid and worried. There was a high level of fearfulness about strange adults, and a lack of trust in things that should be trustworthy, such as block parents. There were concerns expressed that block parents might be "faking it", and there were several descriptions of block parents taking signs out of their windows, when they found the child in need was native.

It is clear that these children are not living in "civic" neighbourhoods. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) defines a "civic" neighbourhood according to the following characteristics:

- i) It is safe to walk alone in this neighbourhood after dark.
- ii) It is safe for children to play outside during the day.
- iii) If there is a problem, the neighbours get together to deal with it.
- iv) There are adults in the neighbourhood that children can look up to.
- v) People are willing to help their neighbours.
- vi) You can count on adults in this neighbourhood to watch that children are safe and don't get in trouble.
- vii) When I'm away from home, I know that my neighbours will keep their eyes open for possible trouble.

Recreation/Entertainment

The second striking finding is around children's limited participation in organized recreation and cultural activities. The research in this area has clearly demonstrated that exposure to multiple risks are mediated by access to organized recreation programs, and that participation in recreation and cultural programming is a protective factor in the prevention of crime and social maladjustment. A 1998 study by the NLSCY entitled *Sports, the Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation*² has established a link between "un-civic" neighbourhoods and the lack of participation by children and youth in organized recreational activities. What this research study indicates is that while multiple risk factors are very present, the protective factor of recreational and cultural programs is almost non-existent for these children.

In this sample of children, participation in organized recreational activities was minimal. None of these children described experiences playing on organized sports teams. None of them described having taken music or drama or dance lessons in extracurricular settings. By contrast, lots of them spoke of their enjoyment in playing soccer on the school playground at recess, of going swimming, and of their desire to play musical instruments.

Limitations of the Research

Poverty proved to be a difficult subject for the children to talk about. Poverty is a sensitive subject, and the researcher had only one session with each group of children, which limited the opportunity to develop the level of trust and rapport required for genuine dialogue about such a sensitive subject matter.

There is very little information in this data about children's experience with the impact of poverty on their health, educational opportunities, clothing and hunger. Results of this study must be interpreted with caution in these areas. There is no indication in this data that the children did not experience impact in these areas. Rather this study leaves these impacts as unanswered questions. For example,

² National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth: *Sports, the Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation*, Offord, D.R., Lipman, E. L. and Duku, E.K, 1998

rather than suggesting that adequate nutrition and hunger are not an issue for these children, this research suggests that hunger may be a very personal issue for the children, one which they feel may reflect badly on their families, and which they are unwilling to discuss in this type of casual interview format.

Conclusions

The world these children told us about was sometimes different from our expectations. They did not dwell on the issues of lack of money or food, which many adults would assume to be paramount in their lives. First and foremost, they expressed concerns about their safety, about the safety of their friends and family, and about the impact of criminal activity on their daily lives. They worried whether they were safe at home sleeping in their beds at night.

These children were also aware of racial discrimination against themselves, or against children they knew through school or the playground. They were aware of negative attitudes towards children that dressed poorly, or who were unable to fully participate in school activities because their parents couldn't afford it.

Their stories were moving, often scary, sometimes sad, and occasionally hopeful. They showed us resilience and an ability to cope with very difficult circumstances. What they told us was real to them, and they identified, in their own words, issues we believe are important to pursue.

"I would change my brother from stealing candy from the stores...sometimes he takes those containers... he might get caught by the police, cause sometimes there's polices walking around...I feel really sad that my mom can't buy it cause she doesn't got enough money...sometimes she has to use her cards...and I don't want my brother to go to jail."

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The ability of these children to develop to their full potential will depend on our ability as a community to nurture them. We have a grave and urgent to ensure that all children growing up in the City of Edmonton feel safe, and have the opportunity to participate in recreation and cultural activities, regardless of their family income or situation.

The recommendations that follow will increase the likelihood that these children will become learners and doers, creative and constructive members of our society; willing and able to return to their community the support they received growing up.

Recommendations

The Quality of Life Commission recommends:

1. That the **City of Edmonton** recognize the issue of safety and fear expressed by the children who participated in this study by:
 - a. Developing a task force to promote the development of “civic” neighbourhoods as defined in the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). Members of the task force should include social workers, member of the police force, teachers, community workers, faith leaders and residents of communities with a high level of poverty.
 - b. Allocating sufficient operating funds so the task force can work effectively and efficiently in all affected neighbourhoods.
2. That the **Alberta Children’s Services Department** and **Ma’mowe Capital Region Authority** recognize the importance of skill development in sports and the arts for children from low-income families, as a protective factor in the prevention of crime and maladjustment, by:
 - a. Adopting the concept of “targeted” programs as outlined in the research study by NLSCY entitled *Sports, The Arts and Community Programs*.³
 - b. Working in co-operation with the City of Edmonton and other agencies to support fee-reduction programs, and ensuring that free sports equipment, musical instruments, supplies and transportation are available to children from low-income families.
3. That the **Edmonton Police Commission** develop a work plan, which will enable City Police to be more effective in dealing with the fears and concerns of children and adults living in low-income neighbourhoods in Edmonton.

³ National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth: *Sports, the Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation*, Offord, D.R., Lipman, E. L. and Duku, E.K, 1998

4. That **Alberta Human Resources and Employment** assist families to participate in healthy social and recreational activities by restoring the recreation allowances to S.F.I. recipients.
5. That the **Block Parent Association** develop more effective screening for potential block parents to test for racist views and general helping skills.
6. That **Edmonton Public Schools** and the **Edmonton Catholic School Board** implement accredited programs for children from low-income families to develop skills in the arts and sports, which would lead to certification. Examples of these programs include swimming badges, music and dancing grades and art portfolios. These would allow children from low-income families to pursue advanced experiences in sports and the arts. It is also recommended that specialized schools such as **Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts** set a goal to have 10% of their students come from low-income families.
7. That the **Alberta Government** act on the recommendations of the *Alberta Growth Summit* and the *1999 Children's Forum* to expand School Lunch Programs, so they are accessible to all low-income children.
8. That **faith communities** make the issue of child poverty a priority, and speak out on behalf of children's issues to ensure the implementation of the recommendations of this report.

Listen to the Children

RESEARCH REPORT

Prepared by:

JANE HEWES, PhD

August 8, 2000

Background and Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to begin to understand children's experience of poverty, and the impact it has on their lives, from their perspective and in their own words.

It builds on the findings of *Listen to Me* (1996), a report outlining the results of the Quality of Life Commission public hearings and small discussion groups with Edmontonians on the impact of social policy reform and government restructuring on quality of life in Edmonton. *Listen to Me* found that children in poor families are amongst those most affected by cutbacks in health and social services.

This report details the results of seven small group interviews with 32 children from low-income neighbourhoods in Edmonton.

Methodology

Research conducted with children presents particular methodological and ethical challenges, particularly in relationship to a topic as sensitive as the impact of poverty on their lives. The research methodology was developed in consultation with the Research Sub-committee of the Quality of Life Commission. The process involved input from a group of community experts and two focus groups - one with low-income parents and one with professionals working with children in low-income communities. The focus groups were designed to identify appropriate recruitment strategies and interview questions. Quality of Life Commission members conducted the focus groups.

The recruitment strategy involved identifying low-income neighbourhoods and then finding a community contact in a school or community based program who could identify and approach families willing to participate in the research. Neighbourhoods were selected based on high poverty rates. An attempt was made to include both rural and urban groups and to investigate this phenomenon in a variety of Edmonton neighbourhoods.

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On the advice of experts, the age cohort selected for this study was children 10 – 11 years old, based on their developmental capacity to understand the concept of poverty, to speak about their own experience as well as the experience of children younger and other than themselves. We also hoped that the keen awareness of social justice and fairness emerging at this age would contribute positively to the research.

Consent forms were developed for both parents and children (see Appendix 1), emphasizing the anonymity and confidentiality of the results and the voluntary aspect of participation in the research. Community contacts were asked to identify and approach low-income families with 10-year-old children who might be willing to participate in this research. In discussions with the community contacts, many revealed that they had chosen children based on their ability to articulate their thoughts in a group as additional criteria. After the pilot test, the research subcommittee agreed that the focus should be on children in lone parent families. In reality, this was much more difficult to control, given the time frames of the research. The resultant interviewees came from a diversity of backgrounds – some lone parent families, some two parent working poor families, some immigrant and aboriginal families.

The researcher conducted all interviews, with a Commission member as observer and recorder, and the community contact person in attendance. Parents were not in attendance at the interview. All children received a gift to acknowledge their participation and their families received a \$20 honorarium to acknowledge expenses associated with children's participation.

The interview questions were developed and pilot tested along with the consent forms. The questions were open-ended and organized in the following categories: food, clothing, place of residence (housing and neighbourhood), health, education, and recreation/entertainment. Results from the pilot test led to a more direct style of questioning in some of the key areas. All but one of the interviews were 1.5 – 2 hours in length, which in retrospect was somewhat overlong to maintain focus. All interviews were taped as well as recorded through notes taken in the interview.

The same interview process was followed in each interview. In response to the children's hesitancy in answering questions about running out of food, a new piece was added to the introduction after interview #3, indicating to children that running out of food didn't mean their family or parents were bad. This did make a difference in the willingness of children to talk about these experiences. The interview process and questions are attached in Appendix 2.

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Every attempt was made to ask questions in each of the categories in each interview. In order to maintain a relaxed, informal conversational tone, questions were not necessarily asked in the same order, or in the same wording. In two instances, time constraints and the intensity and depth of response in one category prevented questions in all categories. In one instance the children's voices were very hard to hear on the recording. There was some evolution in the nature of the questioning as we discovered through trial and error which questions were most effective in eliciting responses from children. During the pilot test, for example, we discovered that children had much to say when asked what was "scary" to them in their neighbourhoods.

A written transcription was created for each interview. Interview results were transcribed verbatim wherever possible and for all relevant contributions. Other aspects of the interviews were summarized. There are some sections of some interviews where children were discussing other topics of interest. In cases where the discussion was clearly irrelevant, they are not included in the transcription at all (e.g., one group had a long discussion about the people they had recently seen on Oprah). In cases where there is an indirect connection, they were summarized briefly in the transcription. For example, in answer to the question about whether or not children who are poor get teased, one group of children launched into an extended discussion about children teasing one another for reasons not related to poverty. This discussion is summarized in one sentence in the record of the interview.

What follows is a very preliminary analysis of the research. Some very strong themes emerged, as did some critical questions for further research. Findings were grouped according to the initial categories and interpreted based on the depth, intensity and frequency of comments in each area. In the analysis that follows attempts have been made to provide contextualizing information to assist in further interpretation.

Verbatim comments from the interviews have been number coded to facilitate interpretation within the neighbourhood context. Prompts and questions from the interviewer are indicated with italics in the quotes from children. Pauses in speech are indicated by three dots. Missing or skipped speech is indicated by four dots. Place names and personal names are included in the original transcripts, but changed in the report. Minor grammatical corrections have been made in the transfer of data from the transcriptions to the final report to facilitate reader comprehension.

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Limitations

The findings of the research are limited by a number of factors. The interviewer met each group of children on the day of the interview - thereby affording limited opportunity to develop the level of trust and rapport required for genuine dialogue about a sensitive subject matter. While some of this was mediated by the presence of the community contact well known to the children, it must be taken into account in interpreting the findings of this piece research. It is abundantly clear that children have much more to say than is revealed here.

It wasn't always possible to get solid demographic information about the families, without being invasive. This was not part of the consent process for parent involvement. Wherever possible it has been noted which children are from single parent families, which are aboriginal or recent immigrant children, which children revealed that there was unemployment in the family or that their family was on social assistance.

The selection process also presents some limitations worthy of taking into account when reading the results. Several of the community contacts recruiting children revealed that they had naturally selected children they knew would talk. Some of the children who were most quiet turned out to be those most seriously affected. This was revealed by community contact people in two instances, one where a child lived in a home with no bed, and one where a child came with inadequate winter clothing. The children did not reveal these things, even when asked directly.

Children's awareness of the low-income status of their families varied. In some cases they were well aware of the issue of poverty, of families not having enough money and of being chosen to participate because they lived in a low-income neighbourhood. In other cases they had been told that the process was more about what they wished and hoped for in their lives.

One of the surprising findings was that there was little demonstrated awareness of the injustice and inequity of poverty as it applied to their own family situations. In many cases it seemed as though children didn't consider themselves to be "poor." In one case, one girl revealed that she didn't know why had been asked to participate, as her parents always told her she was "spoiled." It was ethically

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uncomfortable to ask questions that might have the effect of raising the awareness of individual children about the economic status of their families.

Because the selection process favoured neighbourhoods with a high percentage of families living below the poverty line, there may be fewer differences amongst children and families in the interview communities (which might in turn be expected to have an effect on their awareness of their own poverty) than in communities where there is a more marked contrast in income levels, or where low-income families are a small minority. There was only one setting where there appeared to be a contrasting income group that was a part of children's everyday experience. This was in one of the school settings where a program of choice attracts students from upper middle-income communities outside the local neighbourhood.

It was not always possible to maintain a consistent focus in the discussion. Children want to talk about their own things. In addition, children use many ways to communicate besides verbal language. Often body posture and tone and the way the subject was changed when children were uncomfortable seemed to have meaning. The nuance of their speech is lost in written transcription. This was not a focus of the documentation and is thereby difficult to interpret reliably.

The interviews were conducted in different settings, which must also be considered in interpreting the findings. For example, it became very difficult to ask questions about the treatment of children from low-income families in school, when the community contact person present was the principal of the school.

There is very little information in this data about children's experience of the impact of poverty on their health, educational opportunities, clothing and hunger. Results of this study must be interpreted with caution in these areas. There is no indication in this data that children experience no impact in these areas. Rather, the current study leaves these as unanswered questions. The subject of hunger and access to food, for example, was very sensitive and may require an entirely different methodology to understand. Given that the focus of the current research was broad and far reaching, and the selection of participants was deliberately uncomplicated and not focussed on a particular impact, it is very possible that participating children and families are not all equally representative of those most affected by particular issues.

Summary and Discussion of Results

The Children

Thirty-two children (including the pilot test group) from seven Edmonton neighbourhoods were interviewed.

With one or two exceptions, these children presented initially as eager, curious, open, and in most cases still fairly happy and carefree with a firm sense of hope and possibility for the future. They were often affectionate with us by the end of the interview, giving us hugs as we left. This was in marked contrast with what they revealed during the interview about the circumstances of their everyday lives. One is left marvelling at the sheer resiliency and strength of these young people.

In almost every interview, children conveyed a strong sense of the importance of family and community and the things that money can't buy. This again contrasted with the complex and difficult family circumstances children described. Some of them are not living with their parents. Many of them are living with one parent or in blended families, or are moving back and forth between two households. There seemed to be lots of extended family involvement. Living situations frequently didn't involve all of the siblings. Grandmas, aunts and uncles or stepbrothers and sisters are included often in their stories.

Here is a sampling of their own descriptions of their families:

"I don't get much time to spend with my mom or my dad, because I don't even know my dad, all I know is my step dad, because when I was born, my dad abandoned my mom. I only get to spend summers with my mom, and that's all I get to spend with her and like sometimes she comes down here on holidays to see me, but I only get to see her on holidays and summer....it makes me sad when my mom goes." (3)

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“My dad ...I don't live with him no more....he went through this one stage...it happened last year he sold our...he went to a pawn shop....or an exchange or something like that...he would take stuff from our house and exchange it for money and stuff....there's a police station near Safeway...so my mom went over there, she got this big policeman guy, she had the picture and everything written down inside her wallet...when she went to (name of pawn shop), they said well we can't give you back the stuff, she said well if you don't give it back there'll be trouble...there's been stuff stolen from my family...well nothing really bad happened...to most of it...but there's this old fiddle that we had...well violin, fiddle, something like that...from Scotland, it's about \$8,000 worth....and it was my great grandpas...so, that's all I'm gonna say ...“(6)

Another child talked about living with mom, her sister sometimes baby-sits to give her mom a break. She talked about her sister locking all the doors and the windows when she's alone with them. She didn't say how old her sister was. She sometimes waits up for mom to make sure she is all right, or writes her notes with kisses on them. Dad lives in (name of northern Alberta town). She doesn't see him much. Sometimes all of the kids go to see him, sometimes he tries to borrow a car so he can come and see them. He sometimes sends things for Christmas with grandpa or with a friend. (3)

“My mom and dad live together, but they don't come home until 10 or 11. Sometimes they, like on Tuesday, they close at three and they come home early and we go shopping and stuff, or spend time together. On other days they're really late and on Saturday and Sunday it's busy so they're like 12 o'clock or something and sometimes I stay up late to wait for them, but other times I fall asleep cause they don't come home. *Who looks after you when your parents are working late at the restaurant?* My grandma, (-----) and my big brother, but he's in the hospital. (3) (Child whose family owns the restaurant)

“Lots of people make fun of me because I'm adopted and it's kind of hard for me because I don't get really to see my real mom...I know who she is and everything, she's like my aunt now. I'm still in the same family but she's in (name of another Canadian province), and I don't really get to see her. The last time I seen her I was like eight and now I'm ten.” (3)

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“One of the houses I live in is with my mom and (man’s name) and the other house I live in is with my dad, and my house with my mom has almost all my clothes, my toys, my TV, my CD player and at my dad’s it has some of my clothes, some of my toys and that’s all...*how often do you stay with dad?*... I can go and visit whenever I want...(he lives) upstairs in my building” (6)

These young people display a remarkable generosity and richness of human spirit in spite of the adversity of their life circumstances. Children talked about helping others out when they didn’t have enough:

“There’s this girl named (-----)... she can’t go on all the field trips that we go on...like when we go on ski trips, she can’t go on those, cause her family doesn’t have enough...and like she doesn’t have very good things, like she doesn’t have very good clothes...so what me and my friends do, we gather up clothes that we don’t need no more and we give them to her...we’re like her friend and everything, cause she has no other friends...she’s like in our club now, so she actually has some friends to play with, instead of just sitting by herself.” (6)

Poverty proved to be a difficult subject for children to talk about. Acknowledging this made it much easier for them to speak. The state of their awareness of the issue remains ambiguous in the findings of this research. In some ways they seem keenly aware of the stigma associated with poverty, especially in the area of food. In other ways it seems that the only way to get them to comment on their own experience would be to give them more of a sense of what other children have that they don’t have. The children interviewed in this sample all live in neighbourhoods where there is a high incidence of family poverty. There isn’t yet much of a sense of the injustice or inequity of their own poverty, though they are well able to speak about it in relation to others they have known or heard about.

These children were easily able to articulate the difference between needs and wants. They didn’t spend much time talking about material possessions. Several mentioned health care in addition to healthy food, clothing, shelter, love and caring, families, friends, air to breathe with. We had long opening discussions about the differences; what costs money, what doesn’t cost money, etc.

The question about times when their families haven’t had enough money to buy what they need turned out to be quite a complicated question. Children seemed to find this a difficult question to answer and/or they responded in a very literal way.

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For example, when asked if they ever run out of food in the refrigerator, the reply might be “yes” and the response to the next question “what do you do then” might just as likely be “go and buy some more” as “go to the food bank.” Questions need to be worded clearly and concretely.

These children were wonderful storytellers. Some of what we talked about was off topic. Their thinking is kind of eclectic – the conversation sometimes wandered, with connections being made according to children’s own experiences rather than my questions. The conversation was rarely linear. This being said, children took this exercise very seriously and sometimes the richest comments seemed to come out of nowhere.

The Influence of Neighbourhood

The most compelling finding from this piece of research is the impact of poverty and low-income neighbourhoods on children’s feelings of safety and security in their homes and neighbourhoods. This is evidenced both in the numbers of experiences that the children voluntarily contributed related to this theme and to the intensity of those experiences. The strongest evidence in this research is the level and frequency of violence in the neighbourhoods in which these children live. Children didn’t seem to be aware that there was something different about this, although it is clearly something they don’t like and would like to change.

Experiences with guns and knives, domestic violence, police, theft, fire, drug and alcohol use were described routinely by children in all of the interviews. Safety is a big issue for these children. Many of them describe not feeling safe in their neighbourhoods and in some cases, in their homes and bedrooms. In one child’s words:

“If I could change my neighbourhood, I would just move away...cause it’s not safe here.... (6)

Upon reading and hearing their experiences, it seems clear that many of them are not safe in the neighbourhoods where they live. In one interview, every single child had had at least one experience of being followed by someone, on foot or in a vehicle. Two of these children described experiences of being picked up by

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strangers. The results of this research suggest that there is exposure to multiple risk for children in all of these communities.

Here are some of their experiences:

“A guy almost took you away in a car” This story was hard to tell. One girl had this experience and another child brought it up. “Some guy took almost (girl’s name) in his car, and (girl’s name) helped her get out and took down the licence plate and he had to go to jail” Asked about when this had happened, child didn’t want to talk about this. (3)

“There’s like people – people go around and do stuff to kids.” This child went on to talk about a man in the neighbourhood who pulls down his pants. People call the cops and when they come he leaves, when they leave he comes back. (3)

Another child described a similar incident with another man pulling down his pants. The children went to tell adults. This happened several times over several days. The police came to talk to the children about him. (3)

Another child talked about hearing stories about this man pulling down his pants in front of children. “He shows younger girls his.... (inaudible), and the police are trying to get after him.” (3)

“I feel safe, but not outside, like one night me and my friend, I was walking her halfway home, and all of a sudden this big gang started sounding me and my friend and we had to run all the way to my friend’s house and my uncle had to come and get me.” (3)

Another child describes someone trying to pick up a friend in a car. “There’s a truck and it’s like all white, with a blue stripe and my friend, they were like trying to pick her up.” (3)

“Once when I was four, I had just moved into the condominiums here and this guy - I was like coming home from kindergarten - I was walking home by myself because I just lived across the street and this guy started following me home and I had to run all the way home and then the cops came and I had to describe him to them.” (3)

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“I wanna add something that willa basement, a better basement that holds all the stuff and everything, so it would be a three story building...and I also want to take away the front area, the door, cause it’s all glass and stuff...I wanna take away that and put some of those steel and metal bars there cause we’ve had quite a few breakins in my building...it was very scary for me....cause they broke in and got into the laundry room and stuff...and my house is really close to the back entrance where they broke in...my room is closest to the door of the house and I didn’t have the bat in my room then, it was in my mom’s room,....now the bat’s in my room, so if somebody breaks in...I can just...now it’s in my room.”...*Was your mom home when that happened?...*”we were all in bed.” (6)

Along with the feelings of lack of safety come many descriptions of being afraid and worried. There is a high level of fearfulness about strange adults, and a lack of trust in things that should be trustworthy, e.g., block parents. While many of the children interviewed clearly have solid and trusting relationships with some adults – a parent, a school teacher, a daycare worker, a community program leader – they cannot trust the adults in their communities to look out for them.

“There’s quite a few block parents in the complex I live in except I don’t know the people so I don’t know if I’m safe going there, when people get big signs and they put them up, but they’re really bad people, because it happened to my friend before and she had to run out really quickly because the people tried to harass her.” Further comments about not being sure of block parents, how block parents might be “faking it” – they’re strangers, “adults can hurt you.” (3)

One child described a friend who was getting chased by a man and when she went to a block parent’s house, they took the sign out of the window, because she was native. (3)

Another child describes walking home with a friend when a guy started following them in his car. She describes running and hiding to try to “lose him.” They approached a block parent who also took down the sign in the window because they were native. They eventually had to run all the way home. (3)

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Several children talked about being afraid of the people who go to the bar beside the mall. They talked about being at the mall, walking out of the mall and having drunk people “say bad stuff to you.” (3)

“I don’t like going in my back alley, because there’s people that pick out of garbage and there’s other people which I don’t quite like – they dress badly – mini skirts and strapless shirts and lots and lots of makeup.” (5)

Another child continues to describe clothing that is “disgusting”, especially on “Hooker Ave.” The children talked some more about Hooker Ave. and a man in a corner house who has a camera in his window. The kids in the neighbourhood are scared of him. (5)

“I also don’t like going in the sauna in my apartment, cause my dad found a guy in there one time.” (5)

People looking through the garbage are looking for cans. Child talked about them staring at her “...he looked really weird, he wasn’t too pleasant.” (5)

“There’s these freaky people across the street – we have a whole bunch of apartments across the street – like some of those people are barely worth anything, like there’s been a lot of screaming and yelling...mainly at night...and one thing too is there’s always cops going by our street.” (5)

“Sometimes I’m scared to go outside, because our next door neighbours, we live between two of the same family, sometimes ambulances go to the grandma’s house and we don’t know what’s happening, and sometimes ambulances go to the other house – we never know what’s happening, and sometimes police even come, and we don’t know what’s happening.” (5)

“One thing I don’t like is one of my neighbours, he’s almost constantly drunk, and he’s always yelling and we finally got this private fence and we don’t need to watch it but we still hear it and he had this girlfriend and they had a baby together and she came to our place one night because the guy was sleeping and they lived with his mom and so she snuck out while his mom was on the phone downstairs and it was really freaky, cause she brought her baby along and she didn’t bring anything else. It was really freaky, because he used to be a good friend of my mom’s until that incident happened...so like now she just wants to be away from him....it made me feel nervous and scared of him.” (5)

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“Behind my apartment there’s big kids around there who swear and smoke and fight – every time at night they yell, like screaming and yelling and the yelling is right beside our window...we call the police....but they ran off and they keep coming back.” The child’s apartment is near a hotel where lots of people come and go. (5)

It would be useful to compare these findings with the literature on the effects of exposure to violence and crime on children and youth, as well as the short and long-term effects of childhood stress. It’s important to contextualize these experiences with literature on the risk factors associated with delinquency, particularly given the number of instances where these children describe theft, vandalism and harassment carried out by children (perhaps even quite young children) and youth in their communities:

Several children describe being bullied on the playground by older children.

What do you do when that happens? You have to be careful, because “if you talk back to them, they might start rumours.” (3)

Children talked about gangs, and how difficult it is for some kids to get out of gangs. Talked about police coming into the school to talk about gangs. (3)

One child described a break in when she was four – a kid who poured perfume into the fish tank. She can remember her brother beating him up. (6)

Another child described having a bike stolen by kids in the neighbourhood. Her mother was able to get it back by walking around the neighbourhood and finding the kids who were using it. (6)

“When I really little, I was practising to ride a two wheeler, but I didn’t really ride a two wheeler...I was starting to ride training wheels, whatever it’s called...I put it in front of my door and somebody just came and took it and put it in the alley and we didn’t find it for two weeks...and my friend she found it...it was by a little park where we go to play...I thought I was gonna lose it.” (6)

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“My Mom, she told my grandma that by her house there’s like kids sniffing gas and that and she had to have a whole bunch of people walking around until about 7 o’clock in the morning, because kids like sneak out of their houses at night, so like you have” (3)

“I would change my brother from stealing candy from the stores...sometimes he takes those containers....*how do you feel about that*....sad, cause he might get caught by the police, cause sometimes there’s polices walking around...I feel really sad that my mom can’t buy it cause she doesn’t got enough money...sometimes she has to use her cards...and I don’t want my brother to go to jail.” (6)

“There’s lots of teenagers around and they like pick on younger kids.” (3)

“Behind my apartment there’s big kids around there who swear and smoke and fight – every time at night they yell, like screaming and yelling and the yelling is right beside our window...we call the police....but they ran off and they keep coming back.” His apartment is near a hotel where lots of people come and go. (5)

Many of these children live in apartments, duplexes or row housing. A few children live in houses with backyards. Many of them describe frequent moves. When asked if he had lived in his house for a long time, one child replied “yes, two years.” Many children spoke about wanting bigger rooms and yards. Some spoke about the state of disrepair of their homes, how they were “run down.”

One child described why his family had to move. There was a hole in the floor where the washing machine was and the stairs were falling apart. The landlord wouldn’t fix it. When they moved there was no money for food. Parents didn’t have jobs. This was “scary, I didn’t have no friends.” (1)

If you were going to change your neighbourhood what would you do? “I’d get rid of the apartments across the street....they look all ugly and stuff...once I walked in there because I had a friend who lived there and she doesn’t anymore...and the place inside was just all leaky and stuff and it smelled really bad....she (friend) said it was really freaky and she just asked her dad to move cause her dad was the manager and so they just moved a month ago.” (5)

One of the stronger themes emerging from these children’s experiences is about the noise in their neighbourhoods, not being able to sleep at night because they

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can hear fighting in the streets, or in the apartment next to them, lots of sirens and fire trucks and alarms.

“I like my house, but like next door, they play really loud music. Once my Mom had to go over and ask them to turn it down, but they just turned the music up louder.” They didn’t listen to the landlord. (3)

“When I lived in the apartments, and at night I tried to get to sleep and I couldn’t” Describes talking and screaming outside – kids from the school (3)

Another child talked about living in an apartment and noise coming from upstairs. People didn’t respond to the landlord’s request to be quieter. (3)

The apartment that I’m living in, it was really scary when there was a fire. *When did that happen?* “Two months ago. It was really scary because everyone had to go outside and this guy came out of his balcony door and the fire was coming right out of the balcony door and he got almost all of his body burnt.” (1)

“One night we went to McDonald’s and when we were coming back we saw this police, they were arresting this man and I think I heard him say that he came from my apartment...and also almost every night, there’s always fire trucks going by my house.” (1)

“This was three months ago, one night, probably 10:00 p.m. we looked outside, we could see all these red lights going on, and then we saw ten ambulances and two fire trucks and police cars blocking our back alley, we’re like ‘oh no somebody’s loose’ and.....then I got really scared, cause like almost every three months something happens on our block....they were trying to find the guy, I think he escaped from jail and came on our block....cause it said on the news.” (1)

It is clear that these children are not living in “civic” neighbourhoods. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth defines a “civic” neighbourhood according to the following characteristics:

- i) It is safe to walk alone in this neighbourhood after dark
- ii) It is safe for children to play outside during the day

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- iii) It there is a problem around here, the neighbours get together to deal with it;
- iv) There are adults in the neighbourhood that children can look up to;
- v) People around here are willing to help their neighbours;
- vi) You can count on adults in this neighbourhood to watch out that children are safe and don't get in trouble; and
- vii) When I'm away from home, I know that my neighbours will keep their eyes open for possible trouble.

Recent NLSCY research is exploring the influence of community on children's development. *Sports, the Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation* (Offord, D.R., Lipman, E. L. and Duku, E.K, 1998) has established a link between uncivic neighbourhoods and lack of participation by children and youth in organized recreational activities. This link is reflected in the current data as well (see next section).

Recreation-Entertainment

The second striking theme in this data is around children's limited participation in organized recreation and cultural activities. It has been demonstrated that exposure to multiple risk is mediated by access to organized recreation programs, i.e., that participation in recreation and cultural programming is a protective factor in the prevention of crime and social maladjustment. What is clearly indicated in this research is that while the risk factor is very present, the protective factor is almost nonexistent.

In this sample of children, participation in organized recreational activities is minimal. None of these children described having had experiences of playing on organized community sport teams. None of them described having taken music or drama or dance lessons in extracurricular settings. A few described learning how to play the recorder in school music programs. One or two described having

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taken Tae Kwon Do, or once playing baseball or going to Girl Guides. Even swimming lessons were rare, with some children describing participation in a school based swim lesson program.

Community programs provide some experiences with camp, crafts, games etc., but there was little evidence in this sample of participation in skill based programming in sports or the arts. By contrast, many of them spoke of their enjoyment in playing soccer on the school playground at recess, of going swimming, and of their desire to play musical instruments.

Given the new findings in the literature, this is an area worthy of much more systematic exploration with children from low-income families. Questions in this sample were open-ended, e.g., *What do you do in your spare time?* Trigger questions routinely involved inquiries about swimming or music lessons or sports teams, though not all groups were asked all of these questions directly. In spite of the lack of systematic rigour in questioning in this area, the theme of lack of participation remains clear and strong in this research.

Some (probably most) children reported having bicycles although some do not. Many of the children with bicycles have had them stolen. Several children talked about roller blading, TV, Nintendo 64 and a few mentioned computers. Nearly every group, often as a result of free or reduced rate tickets being available through school, mentioned West Edmonton Mall Waterpark as a destination for family fun. Family vacations were visits to grandmas or other relatives, all within Alberta. Very few children talked about attending summer camps. Foody Goody's (all you can eat buffet for a fixed price) was the most often mentioned spot for family dinners out. Birthdays were described as family events, not occasions for children's parties. None of these children talked about children's birthday parties. They most often talked about having friends for a sleepover, or to go swimming or a family picnic to the park to celebrate.

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Food

The question of the depth and extent of childhood hunger and the impact of food insecurity on children is one that framed the initial investigation, but was not revealed in the results in the way we expected. Rather than suggesting that adequate nutrition and hunger is not an issue for these children, this research suggests hunger may be a very personal issue for children, one which reflects badly on their families and which they are unwilling to discuss in this casual interview format. A different methodology may be required to get at children's experience.

The body of literature on childhood hunger is also revealing. First, it confirms the comments made by parents in the initial report *Listen to Me*; parents will deprive themselves long before they will allow children to go hungry. Second, evidence in both Canada and the U.S. suggests the actual incidence of deprivation due to hunger and/or sustained food insecurity amongst children is relatively small (see McIntyre, Connor & Warren, 1998). Getting at children's experience of hunger might involve a much more careful recruitment and selection process.

There is some indication in this research that confirms the sporadic nature of childhood hunger in Canada, i.e. there are not many children who suffer consistently from hunger. There is also some evidence in the following comments that hunger and lack of food may be tied to transitions in family life, themselves sometimes connected to lack of financial resources, e.g., moving, unemployment, etc.

The experience of hunger and missed meals was very difficult to access. Children occasionally would talk about others' experiences of this, but it was much more difficult for them to talk about their own experiences. In several instances children were quick (it seemed almost too quick) to comment that they'd never been hungry or it had never happened to them in response to this question. There was a sense in which they avoided the discussion altogether.

This subject became easier for them to talk about when I introduced the session by telling them that the Quality of Life Commission members had discovered that people who didn't have enough money were not bad or lazy – they were good people and good parents. It may be that children are intuitively aware that feeding is a primary need which parents fulfill. They seemed very protective of their families. It also helped to tell them in the introduction to the interview

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session that some of the questions I was going to ask would be hard to talk about.

What is not clear from these results is whether or not these children have experienced hunger, or whether or not they have an awareness of the food insecurity experienced by their families. The results are also complicated because of the research methodology. Community contact people who chose the children and families were often aware of their circumstances because of their participation in a community food security program, e.g., collective kitchen or school lunch program. There is good evidence then to substantiate the assumption that their families do experience difficulty in maintaining access to nutritious and adequate food sources. It is also logical to assume that participation in a community feeding program mediates children's experience of hunger.

As a result, findings in this area raise more questions than answers. Are children aware enough of what constitutes a nutritious balanced diet to comment on the availability of food in their families? Is a sandwich in your lunch two pieces of bread?

Many of them mentioned "healthy" food, suggesting that they are aware of what is good for them, but whether they consistently apply this to what they are eating is another question. It was not possible to get much information/insight about the quality and variety of food these children are receiving.

Many parents have trouble getting children to eat nutritious food, or to eat at all when they are busy and involved. It may be that children in general are more attuned to things other than food. Findings from this initial research suggest that the lack of a feeling of safety and security in their homes and neighbourhoods have a greater impact on the day to day lives of these children than any food insecurity their families may experience.

What follows is a selection of children's experiences of running out of food, told mostly in their own words. As is evident from their descriptions, not having enough food is "embarrassing." It reflects badly on their parents and family. Children talked about it being "bad" and "scary" when there isn't any food, and feeling 'hungrier' when there isn't any food.

"There was one kid, his family didn't have lots of money so they couldn't afford things and it was pretty hard for him because everyone would make fun of him...they called him names because...like it's not his fault...it was really hard for him, it isn't his fault, it isn't anybody's fault." (3)

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“Sometimes we don’t have enough food in our house, so we have to have like sandwiches or something for supper and maybe nothing for breakfast sometimes....it’s not bad, but when I’m hungry....sometimes my dad can take us to the store, but not all the time, cause he doesn’t have lots of food (sic), but if he hasn’t, I just like grab a slice of bread and go outside.” (4)

“We didn’t have enough for lunches, cause we only had supper stuff...like steak and hamburgers.... we didn’t have anything for lunch, so our dad gave us bread and meat for our lunch.” His dad doesn’t live with him. (4)

“Sometimes we run out of food....usually we just eat rice and stuff like that, we just mix it up.” (4)

“Her mom always forgets to do her lunch, her mom doesn’t have money to do it” (2)

There are kids who don’t have lunches at school – the teachers give them food, sometimes they go out for lunch with the principal. (2)

It’s “boring” for kids when they don’t have lunch – it’s “embarrassing”. *Why?* “Cause other people have lunches and they think that their mom’s more special because their mom makes their lunches” (2)

People make fun of you if you don’t have lunch. Children talked about giving each other their lunches. They said it didn’t happen a lot. (2)

Children didn’t/couldn’t/wouldn’t explain why it’s embarrassing for people when they don’t have money. (2)

Does it ever happen that there isn’t any food in the house and there’s no money? “Yes” One child talked about not wanting to go to breakfast club, going to his friend’s house instead to get food. (2)

“It happened to me once when I was younger and my mom was still in university and she had to go across the town to go to the food bank and I said to my mom – ‘Mom are we poor why do we have to go to this awful place’...and also just a few days ago, my friend had to go there because her dad wasn’t making enough money to get a lot of food. Why was it an awful place? Not a whole bunch of people were there like in normal food marts...I don’t really remember it much now but it had all this food on for free and it’s like ‘Mom are we poor?’....and my mom was just saying ‘No

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we're not." *And what about your friend, what was it like for her?* "Well she just said it was really awful...she just said I can't believe we'd ever get that tight...she was embarrassed because her friend saw her walking into the food bank and she told everybody at school, and she just said 'I really was embarrassed.' *Why do you think that was embarrassing for her?* "She said it was embarrassing because everybody thought she was poor after her friend spread the news and it was just a rumour that she was poor and stuff." (5)

If they run out of food and money they "go to the manager's house" or "starve" (2)

"Ya, my grandma goes to the food bank." Child would not talk about what this was like for her or her family. Said it was good they could get food. She has not been to the food bank. Her grandma goes when they run out of food. (1)

"In our house right now, when we first moved in, our fridge was completely empty, we had no money, so we're like how are we supposed to get food, and then _____'s mom, after a couple of weeks, she said that this Christmas thing that's how they get all their food, so then they helped us." *So what did you do in the meantime, before _____'s mom helped you?* "We just got, my parents had a little bit, so we just got healthy food." *So were you hungry?* "No, cause before we left our old house, I ate like a pig." (1)

"_____, at his old house, at first his dad had a job but then I don't know why but he didn't have a job so then he didn't have no food every day after school, so me and him traded, I traded toys for food." (1)

"I have lots of food in my fridge, but my cousins,my grandma had to feed them all the time because the mom wasn't around and...every night they slept there, because there was no one to watch them....it was sorta scary for them." (3)

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Clothing

This topic didn't lead into much discussion. The children didn't seem concerned about having name brand clothing. They talked about buying new clothes, mostly at Zellers or WalMart, and getting second hand clothing. In one interview, the community contact revealed that she had gotten socks for one of the children in the winter. There was some talk of children who wear the same clothing every day getting teased.

"Other people think that they're poor" They have "ripped clothes;" they wear the same clothes every day. (2) *What do you do when you're getting teased because you're poor?* I face up to them. You guys are poor too. I'm in the bottom of poor; you're in the middle. (2)

Why do you think it's embarrassing to be poor? "Cause like you see everybody else wearing all these really fancy clothes and this really expensive backpack or something, like you want to be like them and have the stuff that they have but your family doesn't have enough to get a lot." (5)

This was not something that was obvious in the interview sessions. There was only one group in which children's clothing looked worn out or too small.

Education

Children didn't reveal a sense of not being able to participate in school related activities. This may have been limited due to many of the interview settings being in schools, with teachers or principals present to the discussion.

There was some discussion of problems between children related to poverty and family income. This was most evident in those schools with a mixed income population (2, 5)

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School is place that children talk about as providing some exposure to “extra-curricular” activities – learning to swim, playing the recorder. Children expressed primarily positive feelings about their schools and education in general during these interviews.

Health

Children gave very little sense of being aware of problems with affordable medication, or of illness or ill health affecting them or their families, other than very typical occurrences. One child had an experience of being left alone when ill.

Children’s Ideas for Making it Better

Here is a sampling of children’s ideas and suggestions for making their communities better places for children and families:

“I wish every second block there was a police so there were more people to protect us” (1)

“I would have a lot more block parents – like who could walk around and check for people outside and that.” (3)

“I wish I could get more quality time with my family but I can’t because my parents are on late shifts and we don’t have enough money to like get a new car.” (1)

“If I had money, I would probably save my avenue’s community hall, because the owner doesn’t want it...that’s where most of the community parties are.” (1)

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“You know what kids need. Sometimes kids are in the streets, I think people should walk by and hand them like them forty bucks or something.” (2)

“No drinking, smokes or drugs.” (5)

“I want to be like the Mayor”.... *what would you do if you were the Mayor?*
“I’d make less taxes...it costs too darn much...and I’d make everything fair...like if there’s people on the streets, I’d put them in homes....and make sure everybody had food.” (5)

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Recommendations for Further Analysis and Research

- The most obvious analytical framework is that developed in the theories of resiliency, on protective factors and risk factors in home, family and community. In particular, the emerging theoretical notion of what is a civic community is an important framework to consider in relationship to this data. This work is accessible through publications of the Sparrow Lake Alliance, available at <http://www.sparrowlake.org> and the work of the National Crime Prevention Council (1997).
- There are obvious connections between this research and the documented literature on the preventive social benefits of access to recreational opportunities for children at risk. There is recent Canadian research in this area, as well as a solid foundation in the history of recreation. These children's access to organized recreational and cultural opportunities is clearly compromised. Coupled with the evidence of increased level of exposure to violence and crime, one wonders about the long-term impacts. It would be useful to explore the literature on the impact of exposure to violence on children. A bibliography of major references can be found in *Children's Choice, Children's Voice* (Hewes, 1999). There is also recent Canadian research demonstrating that facilitated access to recreational opportunities has a positive impact on getting families off social assistance (Browne, 1998).
- The body of emerging Canadian data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) provides some generalized and quantitative data confirming the qualitative reports of these children, particularly in the areas of the influence of community, participation in organized recreation and cultural activities, and food insecurity. This is accessible at <http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca> Data in this sample would be further substantiated by comparing children's experiences with statistical information on the incidence of domestic violence and crime in these neighbourhoods, food bank usage, poverty rates, percentage of lone parent families, income levels, green spaces/parkland, etc.

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Some of this data may be useful in establishing a logical connection between rates of poverty and uncivic neighbourhoods. If it can be demonstrated that low-income families often have no choice but to live in uncivic neighbourhoods, it becomes possible to frame the impact of poverty on children in terms of the multiple risk that they themselves identify in their communities. There are obvious connections to several articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The strength of this data would be enhanced by the addition of some basic demographic information about the families of the children interviewed, e.g., family structure, employment, food bank use, use of community recreational facilities, etc. It would also strengthen this data to have some kind of comparative interview process with children in middle-income communities.

- Comparative research on communities where there are numerous community based programs to address poverty versus those where there are very few or no resources would be very interesting given the findings of this initial research.
- Follow-up research could include targeting specific issue areas, e.g., food insecurity or recreation and recruiting from a more targeted and criteria specific community e.g., lone parent families on social assistance headed by women. The literature suggests that these are the children who are most affected.
- A focussed literature review in the key areas of investigation would be very useful in substantiating the results of this research.
- Miscellaneous opportunities for further research and questioning emerging from the data include:
 - ◇ Experience of family unemployment
 - ◇ Experience of homelessness
 - ◇ Experience of hunger – selection of children needs to be much more careful, using predictors in research

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- ◇ What they worry about?
- ◇ Impact of poverty on quality of family relationships - What do you do with your mom or dad, what kind of time do you get to spend with mom or dad?

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Appendix 1: Consent Form A

CONSENT FORM A

LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN

I, _____, have been made aware of and
(print name)

understand the following regarding the *Listen to the Children* project:

- The project is about finding out from children what living in poverty means to them.
- The purpose of the project is to obtain information to educate the public about children living in poverty and to lobby government for policies that reduce child poverty.
- My child will be asked questions about food, clothing, what it is like where they live, health problems, things they would like to do at school and what they do for fun.
- My child will also be asked what they see for the future, what they would like to change now and how they would change it.
- The project is being done by the Quality of Life Commission with support from the Edmonton Social Planning Council.
- My child will participate in a group interview with other children.
- I will not be present while the group is run.
- The group discussion will be taped. The tapes will only be used to record information for the project and will not be used anywhere else.
- My child can withdraw from the discussion at any time.
- Any information discussed in the group will be kept confidential.
- My child's and our family's identity will be kept confidential. Only the Quality of Life Commission and those employed by the Edmonton Social Planning Council will know who participated in the group.
- I have discussed with my child his/her participation and he/she is participating voluntarily.
- Our family will receive \$20.00 to cover any costs associated with my child's participation.
- My child will receive a thank-you gift for his/her participation, regardless if he/she decides to withdraw at any point after the group has begun.
- There will be a total of seven groups of children that will all be conducted the same way.
- A copy of the final report will be sent to my child and me when it is complete.

By signing this I agree to _____ participating in this research
project. (child's name)

Signature of parent/legal guardian

Date

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Consent Form B

CONSENT FORM B

LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN

I, _____, understand the following about
(print name)

the *Listen to the Children* project:

- The project is about trying to make people understand what it is like for kids when they do not have very much money.
- In the group we will talk about what it is like for our families and for us kids not to have much money for things we need and things we want.
- I can ask questions in the group if I want to.
- What the group says will be recorded on tape so the people doing the project can remember what we said.
- The group will not have more than four other kids in it.
- If I start the group and do not want to finish it, I can quit if I want.
- There will be six other groups like the one I will be in.
- My ideas will be in a report with the other kids' ideas, but my name will not be in the report.
- What I say might go into the report.
- I will get a copy of the report.
- I am going to be in this group because I want to and not because anyone is making me do it.

By signing this I agree to participate in the group.

Signature

Date

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Appendix 2 Interview Protocol

Introduction

Why are we here? Do you know why you were invited today? Ask children to respond.

Introduce Quality of Life Commission member as listener and note taker – someone who wants to know what it is like for children when their families don't have enough money for what they need.

Ask children to tell us what it is that families and children need – food, clothing, shelter, love, caring, friends, playtime, and school. Tell children they can talk about their own experience or what they know about what it's like for other children who cannot get what they need because there isn't enough money.

Have the children generate norms for participation – listen to each other, ask questions of each other, ask me questions, tell me you don't want to answer the question.

Talk about the importance of confidentiality/anonymity. Talk about the consent form. Why do you think we asked you and your parents to sign this?

Tell children what we will do with what they tell us.

- ◇ We will put it in a report. It won't say who you are, but it might say exactly what you said. You will get a copy.
- ◇ The people who are writing the report want to try to make things better for families who don't have enough money to buy what they need. That's a big job. They want you to know that what you are doing today is really important and will help them in understanding what needs to change to make things better for children and families who don't always have enough money for what they need.

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- ◇ (Added after group #3, in response to difficulty getting children to respond to questions about running out of food.) It's important for you to know that members of the group have talked to lots of adults about poverty and found out that people aren't poor because they don't work hard – they're good people and good parents. (Added after group #3) Some of the questions I'm going to ask you are hard to answer; it's about things that are hard to talk about, even for adults. You may not feel comfortable. It's OK to feel that way. It's OK not to answer.

Questions

Housing/Neighbourhood

1. Tell me about where you live.

- What's your house like? Do you have your own room?
- Have you lived in the same house for a long time?
- Do you invite friends over to play at your house?
- What do you do to help out at home?
- What would you change about your house, if you had the money?

2. What's your neighbourhood like?

- Do you play outdoors with your friends a lot?
- Is there a park nearby where you go to play? What's it like?
- What would you like to see change in your community? What would you do to make it a better place for children?

Recreation

3. Tell me about what you and your family do for fun.

- What do you like to do with your friends?
- Do you play any team sports?
- What else would you do, if you had more money?
- Do you have any of your own money to spend?
- What does your family do together for fun? Tell me about what you do on summer vacation.

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Education

4. Tell me about school. What's it like for you?

- Do you or does anyone you know ever get teased because you or your family don't have lots of money?
- What happens when you need extra money for field trips, school supplies and special activities?
- What happens when you need new clothes or shoes for school? Where do you get your clothes? What do you do when there isn't enough money?
- Do you do any after school activities? What do you want to be when you grow up? What are your hopes for your future?

Health

5. Tell me about what happens when you or someone in your family gets sick.

- Do you get sick a lot?
- Does anybody in your family take medicine every day?
- Where do you go when you're sick? Who looks after you?
- Who looks after you when your parents get sick?

Food

6. Tell me about food. Does your family ever run out of food? Does this happen to other children you know?

- What do you do, where do you go when your family runs out of food?
- Are you ever hungry? Tell me what that's like. What happens in your family when you're hungry? What happens at school?

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Appendix 3

Literature Review

United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child

Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations – November 20, 1989

The following articles have particular relevance to “Listen to the Children”:

1. Preamble: Paragraph 7 refers to the necessity of the child being brought up in “the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.” The reference to peace has special application to the community atmosphere.
2. Article 3.1 gives the underlying basis. “In all actions concerning children- the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.
3. Article 3:2 calls “to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being.” This applies to protection in the community also.
4. Article 27 recognizes the “right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.” Refer to our document in regard to food.
5. Article 27.2 talks about providing “the conditions of living necessary for the child’s development.” This applies to food, housing and community conditions.
6. Article 27.3 states the “need to provide material assistance and support programs particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.”
7. Article 19.1 calls for the need to “protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence” which would include the threat of violence in their neighbourhood.

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8. Article 24 identifies the right to “enjoyment of the highest standard of health”.
9. Article 29.1a says that education shall be directed to : “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.” This supports our brief on recreation/entertainment.
10. Article 31.1 recognizes the “right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities...and to participate in cultural life and the Arts.
11. Article 31.2 states that “State Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, recreational and leisure activity. “

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Annotated Bibliography on Children's Issues

(Appendix Three con't)

Offord, David, R., Lipman, Ellen L., and Duke, Eric K. *Sports, the Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation*. Human Resources Development Canada. Ottawa, 1998.

This research examined two groups of children; six to eight and nine to eleven years old, and looked at four categories of income levels to determine if there was evidence that participation in sports, the arts and community programs is associated with improved psychosocial adjustment in children, and what are the rates of participation. The findings of the research state that when children participate in sports and the arts, they quickly gain skills and enrich the quality of their lives. Joining a club or team provides an opportunity for children to learn how to interact with their peers and adults. Involvement in these activities protects children from having emotional and social problems. The findings demonstrate however, that large groups of children, mostly those who need them most, are least likely to get them. For arts and community programs, over 2/3 of the children six to eight years of age were reported to have rarely participated in programs in the last year. For children nine to eleven years, over 60% rarely participated in programs over the past year. They found that gender, income and community facilities were three strong determinants of non-participation in activities. The authors conclude that targeted programs are required to reach subgroups such as poor children.

Pollack, Nancy, Vedan, Richard, and Tester, Frank. *Critical Choices, Turbulent Times*. U.B.C. School of Social Work: Workbook on Social Problems, 1998.

This article looks at the child poverty snowball. It indicates that a result of child poverty is "unrealized human potential and hopelessness, spiritual and social poverty-a cost that cannot be measured in numbers or dollars."

Hurtig, Mel. *Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999.

This book examines the extent and implications of poverty in Canada. It shows the trends and compares poverty in Canada with other countries. It makes the points that poor children live in poor families, that Canada's rate of child poverty is one of the highest in the developed world, and shows that the number of people who relied on the food bank in Edmonton had more than doubled since 1993, and about half of those are under 18 years of age. One conclusion is that

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“hunger is a health issue.” This book gives a partial list of what it means to be poor and includes “poor children have little or no opportunity to participate in organized extracurricular activities such as sports and field trips. They cannot afford Boy Scouts or Girl Guides, music or art or dance lessons.”

Ma Mowe-Service Plan. Edmonton, 1998.

This service was developed by the Capital Region to identify the elements of a re-design plan for services to children in Region 10. Ten goals are identified as well as strategies. Strategy #2 states: “Ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in economic, educational, social, recreational, cultural and volunteer activities in their community.”

Schorr, Lisbeth, and Schorr, Daniel. *Within our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of the Disadvantaged*. Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, 1989.

This book examines some of the causes and strategies to help disadvantaged children and their families. It includes an emphasis on seeing the child in the context of the family’s surrounding.

McIntyre, Lynn, Connor, Sarah, and Warren, James. *A Glimpse of Child Hunger in Canada*. Human Resources Development Canada. Ottawa, 1998.

This research looked at hunger in families in Canada. It is known that hunger can have frequent and long-term effects on the health and development of children. One of the main causes of food insecurity in Canada is poverty. Individuals most at risk for poverty are welfare recipients, single mothers, the elderly and the unemployed. Lone parent families headed by women have the highest incidence of poverty for all poverty types. It is interesting that 25% of respondents to the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth did not respond to the question on hunger. Children experiencing hunger were more likely to be living in lone parent households. Aboriginal people were four times more likely to report having experienced hunger. The “working poor” represented one-third of the people who had experienced hunger. There is a strong correlation between food insecurity and health. Child hunger appears to be the most severe, and the least common form of food insecurity. Parents, mostly mothers, are seven times more likely to go hungry when there is no food in the house or money to buy food than are their children. Hungry families cope by visiting food banks and/or seeking help from families and friends.

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Sprott, Jane B., and Doob, Anthony N. *Who are the Most Violent Ten and Eleven Year Olds? An Introduction to Future Delinquency.* Human Resources Development Canada. Ottawa, 1998.

This research looked at factors in a child's life that may lead to delinquency. Some of these factors within the family are harsh discipline, physical abuse, neglect and low levels of parental involvement. In the school, some factors are academic failure, association with delinquent peers and low commitment to school. Neighbourhood factors are poverty, community disorganization, and a high level of neighbourhood adults involved in crime and the easy availability of drugs. Aggressive, violent children are the result of this type of environment, and they are unhappy children whose lives have gone wrong in many respects. The best strategy would be to intervene in the homes, schools and communities where these children live, in order to reduce the chance of them becoming violent in the future.

Ross, David P., and Roberts, Paul. *Income and Child Well-being: A New Perspective on the Poverty Debate.* Canadian Council on Social Development. Ottawa, 1999.

This research indicates that Canadian Society needs a new and realistic approach that will allow us to determine an appropriate poverty line. Producing healthy children should be the main objective of anti-poverty efforts. In 80% of the different variables examined in this study, the risks of negative child outcomes and the likelihood of poor living conditions were noticeably higher for children living in families with annual incomes below \$30,000. The authors looked at child development in six different areas: family, community, behaviour, health, learning outcomes and cultural and recreational participation. The authors felt that families should have an income that allows all children to develop to their potential and become successful adults. They suggest a level of income above which children will not experience "poverty of opportunity". They say an appropriate poverty line should be set within the range of \$30,000 to \$40,000 for a family of four. Children's development is complex and many factors influence the process. Environment can enhance or detract from children's ability to optimize their potential.

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Community – The quality of life in neighbourhoods and the safety of the physical environment are critical to healthy child development. Within the community, children can interact with their peers and with adults who can help them develop trust, autonomy and initiative. Neighbourhoods that offer a child safety, social support and access to good facilities can contribute greatly to a child's achievement in school. Research has found that children who live in neighbourhoods that are unsafe or that lack services, face greater risks of developing problem behaviours such as hyperactivity, aggression or withdrawal, regardless of the quality of their family life. If parents consider it unsafe for their children to play on the street or in local parks, the children's abilities to form friendships and to develop good social skills are limited.

Cultural and Recreational Participation – Participating in sports, joining clubs or groups, and taking music, dance or art lessons are examples of ways in which young people can participate in their community, learn new skills and socialize beyond their family boundaries. Children's involvement in cultural and recreational activities can protect them from emotional and social problems. Children who participate in the arts are one-third less likely to have one or more social or emotional problems compared with children who do not participate in such activities. The extent to which children participate in community activities depends both on their family's resources and on the availability of good parks, playgrounds, swimming pools and community centres. Where these facilities are available in a community, the participation rate of children in related activities is higher than it is in communities where cultural and recreational amenities are lacking. The level of income that families need in order to maximize a child's chance of full development goes beyond the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Hence, the market basket approach may not be any better than a poverty line approach, which only provides for the basic necessities.

According to the Canadian Council on Social Development, the market basket measure or the MBM is "an attempt to calculate the income needed by a given household to meet its needs, defined not just in subsistence terms, but also in terms of what is needed to approach 'creditable' community norms. While controversial in that the MBM involves subjective judgements on what to include in the basket, and would lower the low-income rate compared to the traditional pre tax Low Income Cut Off (LICO) measure, many anti-poverty groups have followed the same approach of attempting to calculate basic budgets. In summary, the different lines provided in Canada reflect different approaches and provide different rates, but all define low income as more than inability to meet very basic needs, and all tend to show the same broad trends over time."⁴

⁴ Jackson, Andrew, *Low Income Trends in the 1990s*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, January 2001, Page 1.

Appendix 4

Community Profile Highlights

Note: All information is extracted from City of Edmonton civic census data 1999 and Statistics Canada census 1996.

Abbotsfield (3)

Abbotsfield is a community in north-east Edmonton comprised almost entirely of multi-family dwellings such as row houses (60.27%) and apartments of less than 5 storeys (33.56%). The population is young, with over 39% of the population under 20 years of age. The neighbourhood has a comparatively small senior population (under 6%).

The neighbourhood has a high percentage of low-income status, evidenced by 39.85 % with incomes under \$20,000 as reported in the 1999 Edmonton Civic Census.

Alberta Avenue (1)

Alberta Avenue is a relatively stable neighbourhood located in the Central District of the City of Edmonton. Over one half (55%) of the residents have lived in the community for over five years, and 42.44% for over five years and most live in single family accommodation (78.1%).

According to Statistics Canada 1996 Federal Census, 40.8% of the population has incomes of under \$20,000 and a further 18.95 with incomes between \$20,000 and \$29,999.

Britannia Youngstown (5)

Britannia Youngstown is a community located in West Edmonton comprised primarily of single-family dwellings (92.5%). Thirty-six percent of individuals in the community have incomes below \$20,000 with an additional eighteen percent between \$20,000 and \$29,999.

The community's age distribution includes a higher proportion of older persons than some of the other communities in the study. While 27% are under age twenty, 14.9% are over age sixty.

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Evansdale (2)

Evansdale is located in the Northeast district of Edmonton and is fairly evenly split between single-family dwellings (52.1% - 95% of which are owner occupied) and row housing and low rise apartments (47.3%)

Young people are a significant portion of the total population (27% under age twenty) and there are a relatively high number of low-income individuals (23.6% incomes under \$20,000). A significant number of residents report their occupation as homemaker (34.76%).

Inglewood (6)

Inglewood is located in the northwest district of Edmonton. The majority of residents live in low rise multiple family dwellings (57.64%) and one-quarter live in single-family homes (25.26%). The community is a mix of relatively stable residency (42.8% with residency of three years or more and more recent residents (26.6% one to two years residency). The majority of more recent residents have moved from somewhere else in Edmonton to the Inglewood community (83.1%)

Income levels are low, but higher than some of the other communities in the study (26.33% incomes below \$20,000.)

McDougall (Pilot)

McDougall is in the central district of Edmonton and consists of mostly walk-up multiple family dwellings (84.99%) It is a relatively transient community with only 32.33% of the population with three or more years residency.

The community is a low-income neighbourhood, with 39.79% of incomes below \$20,000 and a further 13.21% between \$20,000 and \$29,999.

Richfield (4)

Richfield is part of the southeast district of Edmonton and consists of mostly single-family dwellings (97.2%). It is a relatively stable community, with 56% of individuals having lived in the community for three or more years.

Income level reflects a full 30% with incomes below \$20,000 and a further 15.5% with incomes between \$20,000 and \$29,000. The community has a higher proportion of young people than the city as a whole (36% under age twenty compared with 27% for the entire city).

Appendix 5

Members of the Quality of Life Commission

Dr. Doris Badir is the retired Dean and a professor in the Faculty of Home Economics, University of Alberta. She is the winner of many awards, including an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Alberta and the YWCA Tribute to Women award. She chaired the committee in the Capital Region for the redesign of children's services, and is now a member of the Ma'mowe Regional Authority for Services to Children.

The Rev. Faith Brace is a Lutheran pastor employed by the Inner City Pastoral Ministry. Her involvement in the inner city of Edmonton is focused on projects concerned with addictions, prostitution and homelessness.

The Rev. Suzanne Cowles is a Lutheran pastor, and was formerly employed by the Inner City Pastoral Ministry. She is one of the Lutheran representatives on the Edmonton and District Council of Churches and is presently involved with a project known as City on the Hill.

Midge Cuthill has lived in poverty for most of her life, and was the founder of Poverty in Action, a grass roots organization seeking to empower people living in poverty. She is a board member of the National Anti-Poverty Organization and was an organizer of the Western Canadian Poor People's Conference.

Sandi Darrell is an adult educator/trainer and facilitator. She has spent ten years in the education sector and twelve years in the health sector, in health promotion and community development. Her career includes teaching overseas, community mobilization in the aboriginal and inner city communities. She has volunteered with several organizations that are committed to the issues of human rights and social justice.

Betty Farrell volunteers in the community as a member of the board of the Edmonton Inner City Housing Society, at the Anawin Place Inner City Food Depot and on the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace of the Edmonton Archdiocesan Council.

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Kay Feehan is a professional social worker. She spent twenty years as Chair of the Social Work program at Grant MacEwan Community College where she developed programs for delivery on site to aboriginal and rural groups. She has volunteered in a variety of community activities including a Youth Justice committee, Steering Committee for the Commission for Services to Children, Safer Cities Advisory Committee and ABC Headstart.

The Rt. Rev. Ken Genge is the retired Anglican bishop of Edmonton. He spent many years in parish ministry, and was the director of Sorrento Centre, an Anglican centre for lay Christian Education in British Columbia. While bishop, he regularly volunteered at the Edmonton Food Bank.

Kathryn Harton is a diaconal minister serving at St. Paul's United Church in Edmonton. She is interested in education and social issues. She is presently co-chair of the Quality of Life Commission.

The Rev. Brian J. Kiely is the minister of the Unitarian church in Edmonton. He is also active with Faith in Action. Brian was formerly a journalist.

Virinda Lambda is a businessperson who is active in issues of human rights. He was chair of the Alberta Interfaith Council on Human Rights, is involved in the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action Society, the Executive Council of the Dignity Foundation and the Edmonton Chapter of Amnesty International. He is also involved in the Sikh Society of Alberta and has lectured on social issues, human tolerance and principles of the Sikh religion.

Frank Manzara is a volunteer involved with the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund as a trustee, the Friends of Medicare, the Faith in Action group of the Quality of Life Commission, Edmonton Coalition on Homelessness, and is a former member of the Edmonton Archdiocese Social Justice and Interfaith and Ecumenical Commissions.

The Rev. Dr. Don Mayne is a retired United Church minister, and former federal government employee working for the New Horizons program. He is President of the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action and Chair of the North American Faith Network. He volunteers with groups who are active in issues relating to aging and seniors, poverty, housing, elder abuse and racial discrimination.

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The Rev. Marilyn McClung is an Anglican Priest, and the Ecumenical Coordinator for the Diocese of Edmonton serving on the Edmonton and District Council of Churches. She is a past member of the board of Poverty in Action and has had many years of involvement in the area of family violence, having served on the board and advocacy committee of the Edmonton Women's Shelter, as well as volunteering at WIN House.

Patricia McGoey is a professional social worker with a background in counseling and social work education. She has a strong commitment to social justice issues and has been chairperson of the Social Justice Commission of the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton. She is a founding member and past chairperson of the Quality of Life Commission.

The Rev. Dr. Bruce Miller is a United Church minister serving at Robertson-Wesley United Church, as well as a lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Alberta. He has been a member of the United Church Interfaith Committee, Church and Society Committee, and the National Social Issues and Justice Committee. In the community, he has been chair of the Edmonton Learner Centre and coordinator for Edmonton Project Ploughshares. He is a fellow of the Jesus Seminar, an international group of scholars doing research into the historical Jesus. He has served on the board of Poverty in Action and is co-chair of the Quality of Life Commission.

Jan Reimer is an honorary member of the Quality of Life Commission and a former two term Mayor of the City of Edmonton. In addition to three terms as a City Councilor, she has been involved in a wide range of community and social groups including the Alberta Council on Aging and the Urban Reform Group of Edmonton.

Senator Douglas Roche, O.C. is a former member of parliament and is now a senator. He is an author and a diplomat. He was a founding editor of the Western Catholic Reporter, and was Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament. He is a visiting professor in the Political Science Department, University of Alberta. He is the author of twelve books on the United Nations, peace and global security, and international development. In 1992, Mr. Roche was admitted as an officer of the Order of Canada.

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Deana Shorten was formerly the coordinator of Poverty in Action. She has lived in varying degrees of poverty for many years and is passionate in her fight to end poverty.

Louise Zoerb has spent many years living in poverty, and has been involved in a number of organizations that assist people living in poverty, including Poverty in Action and Dickensfield Amity House.