The State of Niagara: Demographics, Incomes, Poverty, Hardship and other Social Outcomes.
An update of *Building a New Legacy.*

Report submitted for Phase 1A of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation

[redacted] Brock University   October 9, 2020

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This report updates key indicators set out in *Building a New Legacy: Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Residents by Improving the Quality of Neighborhood Life* by Sarah Pennisi (Niagara Region, October 2011). Most of the indicators are derived from data collected in the 2016 census, so most indicators are updated only to 2015 or 2016. The previous full census was done in 2006 so the change since 2005 or 2006 is reported where possible. The indicators cover the Niagara Regional Municipality (Niagara RM, census division 3526) unless otherwise indicated. Note that this is different from the smaller St. Catharines - Niagara Census Metropolitan Area (CMA 539) which excludes Grimsby, Smithville, and West Lincoln.

1. Demographics

1.a. Population

In 2016 the Niagara region's population was 447,888, representing 3.33 percent of Ontario's population. Table 1.1 shows that Niagara's population has grown since 2006 but at a much slower rate than Ontario. Niagara's population increased by 4.79 percent between 2006 and 2016, while Ontario's increased more than twice as fast, rising by 10.59 percent. Consequently, Niagara's share of Ontario's population fell from 3.51 percent in 2006 to 3.33 percent in 2016.

Table 1.1

	Population		Niagara's Share of Ontario's population
	Niagara	Ontario	
2016	447,888	13,448,494	3.33%
2006	427,421	12,160,282	3.51%
percentage change	4.79	10.59	

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2016, Profile 2007 for 2006.

Population counts the number of individuals in the society. Many reported measures of poverty, disadvantage, hardship, or well-being, however, do not apply to individuals. Instead, they describe the circumstances of census families, economic families, or households. Thus, it is important to describe how individuals in the population are arranged into the different sorts of families and households defined by Statistics Canada and other agencies. It is even more important to describe how the composition of those census and economic families and households have changed over time.

For example, if we are going to compare median incomes or inequality across households over time, we need to know whether and how the composition of the households has changed over that period. The same holds for statistics (characteristics) of census families and economic families. If the composition of the families or households have changed -- for example, the proportion of lone parent families or one person households has increased -- then the measures of income levels or inequality across households or families mean different things at different times.

<u>1.b. Census Families</u>

Table 1.2 shows the number of census families, lone parent census families, and female headed lone parent census families in Niagara and Ontario, 2006 and 2016, and the percentage growth rates between those dates. A Statistics Canada census family consists of:

- a couple,
    - married or common law,
    - same sex or not,
    - with or without children of any age as long as they do not have their own partner or children.

  or
- a lone parent of any marital status with at least one child of any age (who does not have their own partner or children), or
- grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) with no parents present

all living within the same dwelling. See Statistics Canada (2015a).

Table 1.2

	Number of census families in private households		Number of lone parent census families		Number of female headed lone parent census families	
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario
2016	129,470	3,782,540	22,930	644,975	18,265	518,480
2006	123,365	3,422,315	20,200	540,715	16,205	441,105
percentage change	4.95	10.53	13.51	19.28	12.71	17.54

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2016, Profile 2007 for 2006

Table 1.3

	Percentage of census families that are				Niagara minus Ontario: percentage of	
	lone parent		female headed lone parent		Lone parent census families	female lone parent families
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario		
2016	17.71	17.05	14.11	13.71	0.66	0.40
2006	16.37	15.80	13.14	12.89	0.57	0.25

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2016, Profile 2007 for 2006

Table 1.2 shows that the number of census families in Niagara and Ontario grew at roughly the same rates as the population growth in each jurisdiction. Table 1.2 also shows that the number of lone parent and female lone parent census families in both Ontario and Niagara grew much faster than the total number of families. In Niagara the growth rates were more than two and a half times as large. As a result, as shown in Table 1.3, lone parent and female lone parent families account for larger proportions of all census families in 2016, compared to 2006, in both jurisdictions. In 2016, 17.71 percent of all Niagara census families were lone parent families while 14.11 percent were female headed lone parent families. Niagara has higher percentages of both lone parent and female lone parent families than Ontario in both years. The differences

between Niagara and Ontario are small (i.e. less than one percentage point) but they grew and are larger in 2016.

Another notable change in the composition of census families is that the total number of lone parent families grew faster than the number of female lone parent families in both Niagara and Ontario. Male and female are the only categories of lone parent families reported, so the numbers and shares of lone parent families headed by males had to have increased from 2006 to 2016, in both jurisdictions, given the male/female binary gender classification system reported by Statistics Canada in the census data (Profile 2017 and Profile 2007).

1.c. Households

Many of Statistics Canada's income and low income measures refer to households. A Statistics Canada household refers to one person or a group of persons who live in the same dwelling. Thus a census family or an economic family (not defined yet) would also constitute a household. But households also include the following combinations of people, all living within the same dwelling:
- a solitary person (i.e. persons living alone),
- two or more unrelated families
- two or more unrelated individuals (e.g. roommates)
- a family and a boarder

See Statistics Canada (2012).

Table 1.4 shows the total number of households and one person households in Niagara and Ontario, 2006 and 2016. The total number of households has grown much faster than the overall population in both Niagara and Ontario. This means that average household size decreased in both jurisdictions from 2006 to 2016 and any comparisons of household income (or other household characteristics), over time, should adjust for the smaller household size. Part of the decrease in household size is shown by the even faster growth of one person households. One person households grew by 16.15 percent in Niagara, from 2006 to 2016, almost twice the growth rate of the total number of households and more than three times the growth rate of the total population.

Table 1.4

	Total households		One person households		Percentage of one person households		Niagara minus Ontario % of one person households
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	
2016	183,830	5,169,175	51,215	1,341,305	27.86	25.95	1.91
2006	169,510	4,555,025	44,095	1,104,865	26.01	24.26	1.76
percentage change	8.45	13.48	16.15	21.40			

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2016, Profile 2007 for 2006

Table 1.4 also shows that, in 2016, one person households account for more than one quarter of all households in Niagara and Ontario. Niagara has higher proportions of one person households (than Ontario) in both 2016 and 2006, but the difference is a bit bigger in 2016. The share of one person households in Niagara is almost two percentage points higher than in Ontario in 2016.

1.d. Immigrants

The percentage of immigrants and recent immigrants are important characteristics of the demographics of Niagara and Ontario. Immigrants are defined to be people who traveled to Canada from a foreign country and who are not temporary residents or visitors to Canada. Immigrants include landed immigrants, permanent residents, and those who have obtained Canadian citizenship by naturalization (Statistics Canada 2016a, 2016b).

Table 1.5 reports the percentage of immigrants in the populations of Niagara and Ontario, 2016 and 2006. It is clear that Niagara has a significantly smaller proportion of immigrants than Ontario with only 16.63 percent of the population, as compared to more than 29 percent of the population for Ontario as a whole. Further, the proportion has decreased in Niagara from 2006 to 2016 while it increased slightly for Ontario as a whole. Recent immigrants (i.e. those who arrived in the five years before the census) make up much smaller shares of the populations in both Niagara and Ontario, but they show similar patterns. In 2016, the percentage of recent immigrants in the Niagara population (at 1.17 percent) is only a third (roughly) as large as the 3.57 percentage for Ontario. Surprisingly, the proportions of recent immigrants declined in both Ontario and Niagara from 2006 to 2016.

Table 1.5

	Percentage of immigrants in the population			
	All immigrants		Immigrants arrived in the five years before census	
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario
2016	16.63	29.09	1.17	3.57
2006	17.98	28.25	1.87	4.83
change 2006 to 2016	-1.35	0.84	-0.70	-1.26

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2016, Profile 2007 for 2006

2. Median Incomes

2.a. Economic and Census Families

Table 2.1 shows median total and after tax income for Niagara and Ontario calculated from the 2006 and 2016 censuses. Censuses report incomes for the previous calendar year; i.e. for 2005 and 2015, respectively. The 2005 values provide the median income of census families (defined above). The 2015 values refer to economic families. A Statistics Canada economic family consists of a grouping of two or more persons (any age or sex) who are related to one another

and who live in the same dwelling. Thus, all census families are also economic families, but economic families also include:

- two or more census families living in the same dwelling (e.g. three generations cohabitating)
- co-resident siblings with no parent or grandparent
- nieces, nephews, aunts or uncles living with what would otherwise be a census family.

(Statistics Canada, 2015b)

So the percentage change from 2005 to 2015 shown in the last rows of Table 2.1 and 2.2 are making an apples to oranges comparison. But they are both still fruits. Given the differences in definitions, one expects economic families to be slightly larger than census families and the data bear this out. In the 2016 census, in Niagara, the average economic family size was 2.9 persons while the average census family was 2.8 persons. In the 2006 census, however, the average census family size in Niagara was also 2.9 persons. Thus, there is no difference in the average family sizes that correspond to the Niagara median income numbers shown in Table 2.1 between 2005 and 2015. The composition of those 2.9 persons will differ across census and economic families, however, so the 2005 to 2015 comparison is still flawed. But the differences are likely small.

Total income includes income from all sources, including government transfers. So the after tax values show median income after all government taxes and transfers. The 2015 (2005 $) row reports 2015 income in 2005 constant dollars. It deflates the 2015 nominal dollar values (shown in the 2015 row) by the change in the Ontario all-items Consumer Price Index (CPI) from 2005 to 2015.

Table 2.1

	All economic families (2015 data) and all census families (2005 data)							
	Median total income		Median after tax income		Percentage income paid in tax		Niagara minus Ontario after tax income	
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	dollars	% of Niagara
2015	81,433	91,089	72,105	79,531	11.45	12.69	-7,426	-10.30
2015 (2005 $)	68,314	76,415	60,489	66,719	11.45	12.69	-6,230	-10.30
2005	64,965	69,156	56,014	59,377	13.78	14.14	-3,363	-6.00
percentage change (2005 $)	5.16	10.50	7.99	12.36	-16.86	-10.27		

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2015, Profile 2007 for 2005

All of the rows of Table 2.1 show that median incomes in the Niagara region are a lot lower than in Ontario as a whole. The 2015 difference between Niagara and Ontario is especially striking. In 2015, median total nominal family income in Niagara was almost $10,000 ($9,656 or 11.86%) less than Ontario's. The higher proportions of lone parent and female lone parent families in Niagara surely contributes to the difference, but the extent of the contribution is not investigated further here. The bottom row of Table 2.1 also shows that median family income in Niagara

grew a lot slower than in Ontario (less than half as fast for total incomes) so Niagara fell further behind Ontario from 2005 to 2015. Recall that 2015 is economic families while 2005 is census families, so the percentage changes reported in Table 2.1 should be considered imprecise and read with some caution.

The percentage of income taxes paid columns (in Table 2.1) confirm some conventional wisdom about the Canadian tax system. First, income taxes are progressive. The percentage of income paid in Ontario as a whole is higher than the percentage in Niagara since Ontario incomes are higher. Thus the income tax system performs some modest redistribution of after tax or disposable incomes towards lower income families. After including the minor redistribution from income taxes, the Niagara median (disposable) family income is still well below the Ontario median, but the difference is smaller. In 2015, after all taxes and transfers, Niagara's median family income is $7,426 or 10.3% below the Ontario median and this difference is much larger than the $3,363 or 6.0% reported for 2005.

Second, income tax rates decreased from 2005 to 2015. The percentage of median incomes paid in income tax was lower in 2015 (in both jurisdictions) even though the incomes are higher in real and nominal dollars. The decrease in tax rates was larger in Niagara than in Ontario.

2.b. Lone Parent Economic and Census Families

Table 2.2 shows median incomes for lone parent economic families (2015) and lone parent census families (2005), both before taxes and after all taxes and transfers. The points made above about income taxes (with references to Table 2.1) continue to hold in Table 2.2, although the actual tax rates are not shown to save space. As with the all families comparisons reported in Table 2.1, lone parent families in Niagara have substantially lower median incomes and slower growth from 2005 to 2015 than in Ontario as a whole. In 2015, after all taxes and transfers the median (disposable) income in Niagara was $49,760, up 13.6 percent from 2005. The 2015 median income was $3,633 or 7.78 percent below the Ontario median, compared to the $1,261 or 3.66 percent income gap in 2005.

Table 2.2

	Lone parent economic families (2015 data) and lone parent census families (2005 data)							
	Median income		Median after tax income		fraction of all families' after tax income		Niagara minus Ontario after tax income	
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	dollars	% of Niagara
2015	49,760	54,363	46,684	50,317	64.74%	63.27%	-3,633	-7.78
2015 (2005 $)	41,744	45,605	39,163	42,211	64.74%	63.27%	-3,048	-7.78
2005	36,745	38,448	34,416	35,677	61.44%	60.09%	-1,261	-3.66
percentage change (2005 $)	13.60	18.62	13.79	18.31				

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2015, Profile 2007 for 2005

Lone parent median incomes are a relatively stable fraction of all families' median incomes. In both 2005 and 2015, in both Niagara and Ontario, the median incomes of lone parent families are between 60 to 65 percent of the median across all families. Lone parent families do worse

relative to all families (i.e. have a lower percentage of the all families' median income) in 2005. This occurs because, surprisingly, lone parent families' median incomes grew much faster than all the families' median. This occurred in both Niagara and Ontario.

Median incomes for female lone parent families are available for 2005 but not 2015 so they are not reported. Suffice it to say that female lone parent median incomes are expected to be less than $2,000 below the medians reported in Table 2.2. The female lone parent median income is close to the lone parent median income because females head the vast majority of lone parent families.

2.c. Households

The income data in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 cover census or economic families, so they ignore one person households. Recall that one person households count for more than a quarter of all households and have become more common since 2006. Table 2.3 reports median incomes for all households and one person households. It also reports median after tax (disposable) income for one person households. A comparison of Tables 2.1 and 2.3 shows than the median income of all households is far below the median incomes of census or economics families, This, in turn, suggests that economic or census families are not very helpful units of observations for examining the legacies of poverty. An important reason why household incomes are so much lower than family incomes is that there are so many one person households (more than one quarter) and the median incomes of one person households are really, really low – less than one half the median income across all households and roughly 40% of the median income of economic families. Surprisingly, the median incomes of one person households are also well below those of lone parent families (and female lone parent families in 2005, where we have data). In 2015, the median total income of all households and one person households in Niagara, in 2015, were $65,086 and $32,201 respectively.

Table 2.3

	All Households		One Person Households					
	Median income		Median income		Median after tax income		Niagara minus Ontario after tax income	
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	dollars	% of Niagara
2015	65,086	74,287	32,201	36,900	29,581	33,219	-3,638	-12.30
2015 (2005 $)	54,601	62,320	27,014	30,956	24,816	27,868	-3,052	-12.30
2005	54,497	60,455	26,588	30,025	23,994	26,473	-2,479	-10.33
percentage change (2005 $)	0.19	3.08	1.60	3.10	3.42	5.27		

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2015, Profile 2007 for 2005

The median incomes of all households and one person households grew much more slowly from 2005 to 2015 than families' median incomes, and the growth rates in Niagara were well below those for Ontario. The lower (almost non-existent, in fact) increase in median household income in Niagara is partly attributable to the fact that average household size in Niagara fell from 2.5 to 2.4 persons from 2006 to 2016. In contrast, average household size for Ontario remained the

same at 2.6 in both 2006 and 2016. If one adjusts median income for household size using the common square root rule then the household size adjusted median incomes increase by 2.26% from 2005 to 2015 in Niagara. This is much closer to, but still below, the Ontario increase and it is a very meager increase for a decade long time span.

Median incomes of households and one person households in Niagara are well below the Ontario medians. In 2015, the Niagara after tax median income of one person households was $3,638 or 12.3 percent below the Ontario median, and more than $500 further behind the 2005 gap of 10.3 percent.

3. Low Income Measures

Using low income measures to talk about poverty, measure poverty, or evaluate policies targeted at poverty is premised on a large and fundamental assumption.   Deaton (2016) describes this assumption as follows:

> "measurement, even without understanding of mechanisms, can be of great importance in and of itself — policy change is frequently based on it — and is necessary if not sufficient for any reasoned assessment of policies, including the many that are advocated for the reduction of national or global poverty.
> (Deaton 2016, p. 1221)

Put another way, we can talk about poverty in a meaningful way, analyse it, provide measures of it, and evaluate policies targeting it without defining what poverty is or understanding fully the mechanisms which underlie it. The low income measures published by Statistics Canada provide the sorts of measurement referred to by Deaton. Currently, Statistics Canada publishes three basic measures that identify low income:
- the low income cut off (LICO),
- the low income measure (LIM), and
- the market basket measure (MBM).

Different versions of these basic indicators (e.g. before tax, after tax, rural versus urban, etc.) are also published by Statistics Canada. In every case persons in households or family units who fall below the low income measure are considered "low income"; a proxy for poverty.

3.a. Low Income Cut-off (LICO) (see Statistics Canada 2015c)

This measure is based on the premise that a household suffering low income is "in straitened circumstances" if it must spend an inordinately large percentage of its income on three categories of essentials: food, shelter, and clothing; thereby leaving very little income left for the purchase/consumption of other essentials and non-essentials. Inordinately large is arbitrarily defined as 20 percentage points higher than the average across all households.

The 1992 Family Expenditure Survey found that, on average, households spent 43% of their after-tax income (and 35% of their total "before-tax" income) on these three necessities. Thus, a

household is considered low income if its income is so low that it spends 63% or more of its after-tax income (or 55% or more of its before tax income) on food, shelter, and clothing. Regression analysis is used to estimate the average level of income at which a household tends to spend 63% (55%) or more of its income on the three essentials.

As noted above, there is an after tax LICO and a before tax LICO. There are also different LICOs (i.e. different required percentages spent on the three necessities and, therefore, different income cut offs) calculated for seven different family sizes (from unattached individuals to families of seven or more persons) and for five community sizes (from rural areas to urban areas with a population of more than 500,000). These different versions are meant to capture the different spending patterns (and required incomes) of different household sizes and households that face different costs of living as a result of living in different sized communities.

An obvious problem with the LICO is that the benchmark expenditure percentage is based on spending patterns in 1992. Current expenditure shares on the different categories of goods are different from those in 1992. An important reason for the change in expenditure patterns is that incomes were lower, on average, in 1992 compared to what they are today. This means that the average household spent higher proportions of their incomes on the three necessities than the average household today. Thus the benchmark percentages are set too high, relative to current spending patterns, the cut-off income level is too low, and too few families are identified as low income. If the LICO was calculated using today's spending patterns the cut-off percentages of income spent on food clothing and shelter would be lower, which means that the cut-off level of income would be higher, and more families would be classified as low income. Corak (2016) and Osberg (2018) both show the effect of rising incomes on LICO. They show that LICO measures of Canadian low income fell sharply and steadily after the mid 1990s due to the rising incomes after the early 1990s recession, although the decline was not monotonic and proportion of households classified as low income increased briefly after the 2008/2009 great recession. One can argue, of course, that measures of the prevalence of low income should decrease when incomes are rising. But that does not take away from the fact that more families would be identified as low income if the LICO criteria were applied using current spending percentages.

Another obvious problem with the LICO is that only three essential spending categories are considered. Ignoring other important spending categories (which can also be considered necessities) such as transportation, child care, healthcare (e.g. prescriptions, dental care, and glasses) and communications (cellphones) yields a skewed and suspect measure of low income. This is especially problematic because households in 1992 spent much smaller shares (or even zero shares) of their expenditures on categories of goods that comprise big shares of current households expenditures. Common examples of these would include cell phones and service, streaming services, child care, and many prescription medications. Spending more (than was spent in 1992) on these categories of goods causes households to spend smaller shares of their incomes on food, clothing, and shelter than they would have in 1992. As with higher incomes, this causes the cut-off percentages of income spent on food, clothing, and shelter to be set too high, the resulting cut-off income level to be set too low, and too few household to be identified as low income, compared to what would occur if current spending patterns were used to determine the cut-offs.

3.b. Low Income Measure (LIM) (see Statistics Canada 2015d)

The LIM is an extraordinarily simple minded and arbitrary measure of low income. Any household with income less than one half of the median household income is considered low income according to this measure. The choice of half of the mid-point of the income distribution is completely arbitrary and has nothing to recommend it other than the fact that half is a round number. In practice, other measures such as 60 percent or 40 percent of the median are sometimes used. Three versions of the LIM are calculated; one for each of market (i.e. earned) income, before-tax total income, and after-tax income. The LIM also adjusts for the size of the household by dividing household income by the square root of the number of people in the household.

 One advantage of the simplicity of the LIM is that it is easy to calculate. Unlike the LICO, which requires surveys of incomes and expenditures, the LIM only requires data on incomes. As a result, many countries also publish their LIMs and international comparisons are possible.

The main problem with the LIM is that it provides information about the distribution of income (i.e. what income level is half of the median and how many persons or households are below it) but it tells us nothing about the absolute levels of hardship, deprivation, or straitened circumstances of those with incomes below half the median. We know nothing about how well off or poor off a household with the median income is, so knowing that a household receives less than half of that median income is equally uninformative about how well off or poor off the household is.

The median income increases and decreases over time and that makes the LIM even more problematic. Consider a recession, for example, where all incomes in the lower 51% of the income distribution fall by the same percentage. It is clear there will be more poverty as a result. But the median income decreases along with all of the other incomes in the lower half of the distribution, so the LIM would show no change in the incidence of low income.

Corak (2016) and Osberg (2018) show that the Canadian percentage identified as low income by the LIM is much more stable, (i.e. it changes very little) from year to year than the percentage falling below the LICO. Osberg (2018) shows that the LIM percentage is also more stable than that yielded by the market basket measure. Both Corak(2016) and Osberg (2018) show that the percentage of Canadians below the LIM has trended up gently since the mid-1990s. This contrasts with the decreasing percentage of Canadians falling below the LICO income cut-off since the mid 1990s.

3.c. Market Basket Measure (MBM) (see Statistics Canada 2015e)

The Market Basket Measure (MBM) sets out the cost of a specific basket of goods and services that are meant to represent a modest, basic standard of living as developed by Economic and Social Development Canada (ESDC). The base case reference basket specifies quantities and qualities of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter, and other expenses for a family of two adults and two children. The basket and its cost are calculated separately for 50 different geographic areas including different municipality sizes in each province and specific municipal

areas. Thus, the MBM provides low income thresholds at a much finer geographic level than the other measures. The base cases are then adjusted for family sizes using an equivalence factor equal to the square root of economic family size.

The estimated costs of the base case and family size adjusted baskets are then compared to a very robust version of the disposable income of economic families and persons not in an economic family. The cost of the basket should be compared to the amount of income that the household actually has available to spend on the items in the basket. This is proxied by the measure of disposable income, which is defined to be the amount of income left after paying:

- Income taxes
- the personal portion of payroll taxes, such as employment insurance premiums and Canada Pension Plan or Quebec Pension Plan contributions,
- other mandatory payroll deductions, such as contributions to employer-sponsored pension plans, supplementary health plans, and union dues,
- child support and alimony payments made to another family,
- out-of-pocket spending on child care, and
- non-insured but medically prescribed health-related expenses such as dental and vision care, prescription drugs, and aids for persons with disabilities.

If a household owns a dwelling without a mortgage, an estimate of the extra expenditures for shelter that they would have to make if they had a mortgage or rented their shelter is added to their disposable income. This amount represents the typical savings accruing to the dwelling owner compared to having to pay rent or make mortgage payments.

The cost of the MBM is updated annually for changes in the prices of the items in the basket. The contents of the basket are also revised periodically to reflect changing expenditure patterns. This ensures that the basket continues to reflect the same basic standard of living over time, that the differences across different geographical regions are kept up to date, and that the disposable income available to families to purchase the basket is appropriately defined and measured over time. Recall that disposable income is net of expenditures on some goods and services such as child care and health related expenditures, so an accurate estimate of disposable income requires an accurate picture of expenditure shares. The 2002 basket was revised in 2008/2011. Another review was started in 2018 to be completed in 2020.

The MBM became Canada's official poverty line in 2018. Unfortunately the public use census data released by Statistics Canada for the Niagara region (Profile 2017) does not include the percentages of economic families and persons not in economic families that fall below the MBM threshold.

The MBM is, for this author, the best measure of low income by far. It is much more comprehensive and far less arbitrary than the LICO or LIM, and its underlying assumptions/parameters are updated at reasonable intervals.

The descriptions of the low income measures above are taken from Corak (2016), Osberg (2018), Statistics Canada (2016), and the Statistics Canada census definitions posted on the Statistics Canada web site.

3.d. Low Income in Niagara and Ontario

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show the percentages of persons in private households who fell below the LICO and LIM after-tax (AT) measures of low income, for Niagara and Ontario. The 2005 data in Table 3.1 is taken from the 2006 census profiles (Profile 2007). The 2010 data in Table 3.2 is taken from the results of the National Household Survey (NHS) conducted in 2011 (Profile 2013). The NHS data are not as reliable because they were collected from a voluntary survey rather than a census.

Table 3.1 shows that the falling incidence of low income for Canada (noted above), as determined by the LICO, also occurs in Niagara and Ontario. The percentage of low income in both Niagara and Ontario fell by a little more than one percentage point, from 2005 to 2015, for all persons and all youth. In 2015, 7.37 percent of all persons were below the LICO-AT cut-off in Niagara, while 9.85 percent were below it in Ontario. Higher percentages of youth (ages 0 to 17) are classified as low income in both Ontario and Niagara. In 2015, 9.14 percent of Niagara youth and 12.31 percent of Ontario youth were below the LICO cut-off. Table 3.1 also shows that poverty (as measured by LICO) is much less prevalent in Niagara than in Ontario for all age groups. The most striking feature of Table 3.1 is the very low incidence of low income among seniors (aged 65 and older), compared to all of the other age groups in both Ontario and Niagara.

Table 3.1

| | Percentage of all persons in private households below the LICO after-tax (AT) cutoff | | | | | | | |
| | All Persons | | Young Children (0 to 5 Years) | | All Youth (0 to 17 years) | | Seniors (65 & older) | |
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario
2015	7.37	9.85	8.34	11.46	9.14	12.31	2.13	5.05
2005	8.4	11.1			10.5	13.7		
change	-1.03	-1.25			-1.36	-1.39		

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2015, Profile 2007 for 2005

Table 3.2

| | Percentage of all persons in private households below the LIM after-tax (AT) cutoff | | | | | | | |
| | All Persons | | Young Children (0 to 5 Years) | | All Youth (0 to 17 years) | | Seniors (65 & older) | |
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario
2015	14.47	14.4	19.14	18.44	21.05	19.78	10.82	12.03
2010	12.9	13.9	19.1	18.4	16.9	17.3	6.5	8.3
change	1.57	0.5	0.04	0.04	4.15	2.48	4.32	3.73

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2015, Profile 2013 for 2010

Table 3.2 shows that the after tax LIM identifies much higher rates of low income than the LICO, in both Niagara and Ontario, and for every age category. This is consistent with the results reported for Canada in Corak (2016) and Osberg (2018). Table 3.2 also shows that the incidence of low income increased in Niagara and Ontario from 2010 to 2015, overall and in every age category. This is also consistent with Corak (2016) and Osberg (2018) who show that

the LIM for Canada trends upwards (gently). So the low income measures (LICO and LIM) behave as one would expect, based upon how they are defined and constructed, in both Ontario and Niagara. The increase in low income shown by the LIM and the decrease shown by the LICO are mostly due to the differences in what the LIM and LICO measure and how they are calculated, and not due to the different endpoints used in Tables 3.1 and 3.2. This leaves us, unfortunately, uncertain about whether low income increased or decreased in Niagara. This author leans more towards absolute rather than relative measures of poverty. This suggests that the LICO measure is the more compelling and that low income declined in Niagara from 2005 to 2015.

In 2015, according to the LIM, seniors are again found to have much lower rates of low income than the other age categories in both Ontario and Niagara, although the differences are not as large as they are with LICO. Further, the low income rate for seniors in Niagara is lower than the Ontario rate, which is also consistent with the results of the LICO measures in Table 3.1 although again the difference is smaller. For young children, all youth, and all persons, however, the 2015 incidence of low income (according to the LIM-AT) is higher in Niagara than in Ontario. This occurs in spite of the fact that median incomes are lower in Niagara than in Ontario as a whole. A lower median means that half of the median is also lower. But, despite the lower half-median, Niagara has a larger percentage of people in households below that (lower) half-median. This means that the Niagara distribution of incomes has more people in the very bottom tail of the income distribution, compared to Ontario as a whole. It also means that the 14.47 percent identified as low income in Niagara almost surely have lower incomes (i.e. are worse off) than the 14.40 percent of low income persons across Ontario as a whole.

The 2010 LIM data differ from the 2015 results in that they show lower rates of low income in Niagara (compared to Ontario) for all persons and youth (0-17). Young children are reported to have higher rates of low income in 2010, same as in 2015, and the differences are almost identical. These differences should be read cautiously, however, since they result from the less reliable NHS.

The percentages of people classified as low income in the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of St. Catharines - Niagara (CMA 539) in 2015, according to the Market Basket Measure (MBM), are reported in Tables 3.3 and 3.4. It is important to emphasize that the St. Catharines - Niagara CMA is smaller than the Niagara region since it excludes Grimsby, Smithville, and West Lincoln. So data reported in Table 3.3 are not directly comparable to those in Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

Table 3.3 shows that 12.7 percent of the Niagara CMA population have disposable incomes that fall below the cost of the MBM basket of goods. This is 1.2 percentage points below the Ontario rate of 13.9 percent. Young children and all youth have much higher rates of low income at 19.3 percent (almost one in five!) and 16.3 percent, respectively, in the Niagara CMA. The incidence of low income for young children in the Niagara CMA is 0.6 percentage points higher than the Ontario rate, but the Niagara CMA rate for all youth is 0.9 percentage points below the Ontario rate. So there is little consistency across the low income measures for all persons, young children, and all youth regarding whether Niagara has higher or lower rates of low income than Ontario. All three low income measures consistently show, however, that youth and young children have substantially higher incidence of low income than the overall population.

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Table 3.3

| | Percentage of all persons in private households classified as low income according to the Market Basket Measure (MBM) | | | | | | | |
| | All Persons | | Young Children (0 to 5 Years) | | All Youth (0 to 17 years) | | Seniors (65 & older) | |
	CMA Niagara	Ontario	CMA Niagara	Ontario	CMA Niagara	Ontario	CMA Niagara	Ontario
2015	12.7	13.9	19.3	18.7	16.3	17.2	5.6	8.1

Sources: Statistics Canada (2016e)

All three low income measures also provide a consistent message about seniors. People aged 65 or older are much less likely to be low income than the other age groups, and the low income rate in the Niagara CMA is well below the Ontario rate. Only 5.6 percent of seniors (around one in twenty) are classified as low income according to the MBM, 2.5 percentage points below the Ontario rate.

Table 3.4

| | 2015 percentage of low income persons according to the Market Basket Measure (MBM) | | |
Economic family characteristics of persons	Niagara CMA	Ontario	Niagara-CMA Minus Ontario
Total - Persons by selected economic family characteristics	12.7	13.9	-1.2
Persons in economic families [5]	9.3	11	-1.7
In couple economic families	6.1	8.3	-2.2
In a couple economic family with children	6.3	9	-2.7
With children aged 0 to 17 years	7.8	10.7	-2.9
With children aged 0 to 5 years	10.4	13.2	-2.8
In a couple economic family with other relatives only	6.5	5.1	1.4
In lone-parent economic families	25.8	27	-1.2
In a male lone-parent economic family	18.9	19.4	-0.5
With children aged 0 to 17 years	30.2	29	1.2
With children aged 0 to 5 years	42.1	42.2	-0.1
In a female lone-parent economic family	27.3	28.7	-1.4
With children aged 0 to 17 years	41	42.7	-1.7
With children aged 0 to 5 years	62.3	60.4	1.9
In other economic families	21.4	21.7	-0.3
Persons not in economic families	30.8	31.9	-1.1
Persons not in economic families aged 65+ years	14	18.8	-4.8

Sources: Statistics Canada (2016d)

Table 3.4 presents the percentage of low income persons in the Niagara CMA and Ontario (using the MBM), disaggregated by their type of economic family. The last column is the Niagara CMA rate minus the Ontario rate so a negative number means that the Niagara CMA has a lower rate of low income. The last column is mostly negative, so Niagara has lower incidence of low income according to the MBM measure for most economic family configurations.

Measured across all persons, 12.7 percent of Niagara CMA residents and 13.9 percent of Ontario residents are low income. These are the same rates as reported in Table 3.3. Persons in couple economic families are much less likely to be low income, although the rates are higher if the couple have children and they are even higher still if they have young children (aged 0 to 5). Lone parent families are much, more likely to be low income. More than one in four (25.8 percent) lone parent families in the Niagara CMA are low income and the Ontario rate is 1.2 percentage points higher. The incidence of low income for male lone parents is lower at 18.9 percent, but most of the lone parent families are female lone parent. In the Niagara CMA, 27.3 percent of female lone parent families are low income. The low income rates rise dramatically if there are children (0-17) in the household. 41 percent of female lone parent families with children 0-17 are low income in 2015 and the percentage increases to 62.3 percent (almost two out of every three!) if there are young children (0 to 5) in the family. The 62.3 percent rate is for the Niagara CMA. The Ontario rate 1.9 percentage points lower at the still mind-bogglingly high rate of 60.4 percent.

The incidence of low income for persons not in economic families (essentially single person households) is more than twice as large than it is for the general population in both the Niagara CMA and Ontario. Recall that the MBM adjusts for family size so the higher rate is not because there are fewer people (i.e. only one person) included in the unit. In the Niagara CMA 30.8 percent of persons not in economic families are low income in 2015, 1.1 percentage points below the Ontario rate. Seniors who are not in economic families are much less likely to be low income than the 'not in an economic family' group as a whole. Only 14 percent of seniors not in an economic family are low income in the Niagara CMA, and this is almost five percentage points below the 18.8 percent for Ontario as a whole. These singleton seniors, however, are still more than twice as likely to be low income than seniors in general. Recall that the incidence of low income for seniors is 5.6 and 8.1 percent for the Niagara CMA and Ontario respectively (see Table 3.3).

4. Other measures of hardship

4.a. Household After Tax Income Under $20,000

The percentage of households with after tax income below $20,000 in 2015 in the Niagara region equals 9.63%. Source is the Niagara Story Map (NSM) reporting custom statistics from the 2016 census 25% long form sample.

4.b. Working Poor

The current Statistics Canada definition of the working poor are individuals:
- between 18 and 64 years of age,
- who are not students
- who are living independently (i.e. they are not living in an institution and they can be part of an economic or census family or household)
- who earned at least $3,000 in the last year (the threshold for earning the Working Income Tax Benefit), and
- whose family or household after tax income is below the after tax Low Income Measure (LIM-AT).

In 2016, 8.13 percent of individuals in Niagara, 18 to 64, who were living independently and were not students (i.e. they satisfied the first three bullet points above), were classified as working poor (i.e. they also satisfied the last two bullet points above. Source is the Niagara Story Map (NSM) reporting a custom tabulation of the 2016 Statistics Canada T1 Family File.

Pennisi (2011) reports on a different definition of working poor; one employed in the 2010 Federation of Canadian Municipalities report (FCM 2010). According to that definition the working poor are defined as families who receive less than half of their income from government transfer and whose after tax income is below the after tax Low Income Measure (LIM-AT). Pennisi 2011 reports that 6.5 percent of Niagara families were working poor (according this definition) in 2005.

4.c. Tenants Paying 30% or More of their Income on Rent

In the Niagara region, 48.11 percent of tenant-occupied households spent 30 percent or more of their total household income on rent in 2016. This is an increase from the 45.5 percent in 2006 reported in Pennisi (2011).   Source is the Niagara Story Map (NSM) reporting custom statistics calculated from the 2016 Statistics Canada National Household Survey

4.d. Unemployment Rate

The unemployed are civilian, non-institutional people, aged 15 and older, who are not employed but are actively searching for paid employment. The unemployment rate is the number of unemployed divided by the sum of the number of employed and unemployed. In 2016, in the Niagara region, the unemployment rate was 7.38 percent.   The rate was lower at 6.1 percent in 2006 (Pennesi 2011). Source is the Niagara Story Map (NSM) reporting custom statistics from the 2016 census 25% long form sample.

4.e. Percentage in Core Housing Need

A household is considered in core housing need if its dwelling is considered unsuitable, inadequate, or unaffordable; and the household's income levels are such that they can not afford alternative suitable and adequate housing in their community. See the Statistics Canada Census definitions in Statistics Canada (2017b).

Table 4.1 shows the percentage of households in core housing need in Ontario and the Niagara region, 2006 and 2016. In 2016, 13.3 percent of Niagara households were classified as in core housing need, up from 11.8 percent in 2006. Table 4.1 also shows that Niagara has a lower incidence of core housing need than Ontario as a whole in both 2006 and 2016. The difference is smaller in 2016, at two percentage points, compared to the 2.7 percentage points in 2006. The smaller difference in 2016 occurs because core housing need in Niagara increased by 1.5 percentage points from 2006 to 2016 while it only increased by 0.8 percentage points (slightly more than half as much) in Ontario as a whole.

Table 4.1

	Percentage of households in core housing need	
	Niagara	Ontario
2016	13.3	15.3
2006	11.8	14.5
Change from 2006 to 2016	+ 1.5	+ 0.8

Sources: Statistics Canada 2017b

4f.. Child Early Development Instrument (EDI)

The EDI reports the percentage of children who are identified as not developmentally ready to start grade one of elementary school in two or more childhood early development domains. The five domains of early child development considered are:
   1. Physical health and well-being
   2. Social knowledge and competencies
   3. Emotional health and maturity
   4. Language and cognitive development
   5. General knowledge and communication skills
A child is identified as not ready to start grade one if they score in the bottom 10 percent of the comparison population for their jurisdiction. The evaluation is conducted in the second-half of senior kindergarten by their kindergarten teachers. The Niagara region EDI score is 30.3 percent of children are not developmentally ready to start grade one according to this criterion. Source is the Niagara Story Map (NSM) reporting custom statistics calculated by the Niagara Region

5. Education

The percentage of the population, aged 25-64, with that highest level of formal education, 2006 and 2016, for Niagara and Ontario, is reported in Table 5.1. At the lowest level there is very little difference between the Niagara region and Ontario as a whole. In 2016, slightly over ten

percent percentage of the adult population had not completed high school in both Ontario and the region. Further, the incidence of no high school completion declined by three to four percentage points between 2006 and 2016 in both jurisdictions. At the other end of the formal education spectrum, there is a staggeringly large difference between Ontario and Niagara. In 2016, in Ontario, almost 32 percent of the adult population had completed an academic credential at the bachelor's level or higher. In Niagara the rate is more than 10 percentage points lower at almost 21 percent, and the gap between Ontario and Niagara grew larger between 2006 to 2016. The incidence of achieving a bachelor's or higher grew by almost 4 percentage points in Niagara over than ten year period, while it grew by almost 6 percent for Ontario as a whole.

Table 5.1

	Percentage of population 25 to 64, with that highest level of Education Achievement							
	Below High School Diploma		High School Diploma		Apprenticeship, certificate, or diploma below Bachelors		Bachelors or above	
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario
2016	10.20	10.42	29.83	24.47	39.23	33.20	20.74	31.92
2006	13.96	13.55	29.93	25.02	39.35	35.44	16.76	25.99
change 2006 to 2016	-3.77	-3.13	-0.10	-0.55	-0.11	-2.24	3.98	5.93

Sources: Profile 2017 for 2016, Profile 2007 for 2006

The differences in the proportions of the population completing higher education are reflected in the other education categories. Roughly 5 percent more of the Niagara adult population did not complete any education beyond high school compared to Ontario. In 2016 almost 30 percent of Niagara's population had only a high school diploma versus roughly 24.5 percent for Ontario, and the differences between Ontario and Niagara were similar in 2006. The percentage with only high school education fell slightly in both jurisdictions but the decline was slightly larger for Ontario (at 0.55 percentage points) compared to Niagara where percentage decreased by only 0.1 percentage points.

The remaining intermediate education category, apprenticeships, certificates, or diplomas post-secondary, but below the bachelor's level (just certificates hereafter) show the same basic pattern as high school diplomas. In 2016 more than 39 percent of the Niagara population had certificates as their highest formal education level, more than 6 percentage points higher than Ontario's 33 percent rate. Between 2006 and 2016, the percentage of the Niagara population with education certificates barely changed while it fell more than 2 percentage points for Ontario as a whole.

6. Voter turnout

A particularly debilitating effect of poverty is the marginalization and powerlessness that accompanies it, making it difficult to engage in civil society. In effect, poverty deprives

individuals of their rights as citizens. Voting in elections is an important aspect of civic engagement and exercise of citizen rights. Table 6.1 shows voter turnout rates in Niagara ridings, Niagara as a whole, Ontario, and Canada in the 2015, 2011, and 2008 federal elections.

Niagara's voter turnout rate is similar to the Ontario and Canadian rates in all three of the elections. The biggest difference occurs in 2015 where the rate in Niagara is 1.4 percentage points less than the Canadian rate and 0.9 percentage points less than the Ontario rate. Niagara voter turnout is also below the Ontario and Canadian rates in 2011. It is higher in 2008, but the 2011 and 2008 differences are quite small. It is notable that eligible voter participation rates increased by roughly two to three percentage points from 2008 to 2011, and then increased by a much larger margin (six to seven percentage points) from 2011 to 2015. Altogether, the Canadian and Ontario turnout rates increased by more than nine percentage points from 2008 to 2015 while the increase in Niagara was lower at 7.3 percentage points. Pennisi (2001) shows that voter turnout rates from 1997 to 2006 were in the mid to low 60% range, so 2008 has the lowest participation rate since 1997 and 2015 has the highest in all three jurisdictions (Niagara, Ontario, and Canada).

Table 6.1

Electoral District	2015			2011	2008
	Votes Obtained	Number of Electors on List	Voter Turnout	Voter Turnout	Voter Turnout
Niagara Centre	55,005	83,799	65.6%		
Niagara Falls	65,064	103,291	63.0%		
Niagara West	50,899	69,414	73.3%		
St. Catharines	57,834	85,377	67.7%		
Total Niagara	228,802	341,881	66.9%	60.9%	59.6%
Ontario	6,572,378	9,517691	67.8%	61.5%	58.6%
Canada	17,711,983	25,939742	68.3%	61.1%	58.8%

Source: Elections Canada. 42nd General Election: Official Voting Results

7. Social Assistance

Two of the major programs for social assistance in Ontario are Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) (https://maytree.com/social-assistance-summaries/ontario/). Both programs provide direct income and employment assistance/support in addition to other benefits. They are intended for those who have exhausted all other means of financial support (e.g. employment insurance, worker's compensation, child benefit).

Ontario Works focuses on those in financial need. It provides income assistance for shelter and basic needs such as food and clothing. It also provides employment assistance and support to help clients prepare for, find, and maintain paid employment. The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is intended to provide the same sorts of services as Ontario Works, but it focuses on people with disabilities and their families. The goal is to help people with disabilities and their families to live as independently as possible, and to reduce or remove disability-related barriers to employment.

Table 7.1 reports data on the two programs for 2016 and some partial data for 2006. The 2016 data on numbers of cases, numbers of beneficiaries, and numbers of dependent children are the totals for March 2016. The 2006 data are the monthly average in 2006. The number of households and populations in Niagara and Ontario reported in Tables 1.1 and 1.4 above are used to calculate the rates of social assistance shown in Table 7.1. The 2016 data on the OW and ODSP programs are taken from the *Social Assistance in Ontario: Reports* web pages (Government of Ontario 2016).

Table 7.1

Ontario Works (OW)							
	Cases per 1,000 households		**Beneficiaries per 1000 people**		**% beneficiaries who are dependent children**		
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	
2016	57	49	39	33	33	35	
2006	39	44		32			
Percentage change	47.28	13.05		6.19			
Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP)							
	Cases per 1,000 households		**Beneficiaries per 1000 people**		**% beneficiaries who are dependent children**		
	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	Niagara	Ontario	
2016	83	66	47	35	14	14	
2006		49	22	25			
Percentage change		34.73	109.12	38.26			

Source: Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, (2016)

Table 7.1 shows that Niagara has much higher rates of social assistance than Ontario in 2016. The limited data for 2006 suggests that this is a reversal from the situation in 2006. In 2016 there were 57 cases of social assistance in the Ontario Works program for every 1,000 households in Niagara, compared to 49 for Ontario. Social assistance under the ODSP shows a much larger difference with 83 cases per 1,000 households in Niagara versus only 66 for Ontario as a whole. The number of beneficiaries (as opposed to cases) yields similar results. In 2016 there were 39 people receiving social assistance through the Ontario Works program for every

thousand people in Niagara, while the Ontario rate was only 33 people per thousand.   The difference in the number of beneficiaries under the ODSP was even larger with 47 per 1,000 people in Niagara and 35 in Ontario in 2016. 33 percent of Niagara's Ontario Works beneficiaries were dependent children in 2016, which is only slightly less than the 35 percent for Ontario. In 2016, 14 percent of the beneficiaries in the ODSP were dependent children in both Ontario and Niagara. Dependent children are defined as youths under 18 years of age, who reside in the same dwelling place as the social assistance recipient.

Another type of social assistance in Ontario helps people pay the costs of their child care. The Ontario child care subsidy covers all or part of the child care costs for children up to 12 years of age, who are cared for in licensed child care programs. The amount of subsidy varies according to the recipient's level of income and the reason for the child care. In 2017, a child care subsidy was provided to 7.61 out of every 100 children in Niagara aged 12 or younger. Source is the Niagara Story Map (NSM) reporting custom statistics from the Niagara region.

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The Evolution of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI)

Phase 1B- Draft Final Report

08 January 2020

Executive Summary

In 2018, an interdisciplinary group of faculty members from Brock University and staff from the Region of Niagara secured funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to conduct a program evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI). This multi-phase program evaluation is to be conducted over a three-year period. This report addresses the findings and recommendations from Phase 1 B, description of NPI's origins and evolution.

Data for this phase were collected first by interviewing ten persons identified as key in initiating or running NPI. These interviews were coded for themes. The interview data were then corroborated against committee reports (COM reports) written for the Niagara Region's Public Housing and Social Services Sub-Committee (PHSS) concerning NPI between 2006 and 2018. In some cases, additional sources were sought out in order to flesh out details. To our knowledge, NPI keeps no minutes of its own activities, and thus were not available for inclusion.

This is a historical case study, and as such, is a form of qualitative research. However, to maintain the confidentiality of interview subjects, no quotations are used. Their recollection of events was combined to create a crude timeline; these events were then corroborated by reference to COM reports and other sources. Occasionally, events not mentioned in the interviews were unearthed in the COM reports. These, too, were included in this case study.

NPI evolved in three stages. In the first phase, 2000-2008, a groundswell of concerns began about persistent and what was seen as increasing poverty in Niagara following the decline of its manufacturing sector. In response, some interviewees worked to raise awareness of not just poverty but child poverty in particular, given its power to pluck the heartstrings combined with what were alleged to be high levels of child poverty in Niagara. A key document extolling this position was the report *A Legacy of Poverty?* by Dr. Susan Arai and Rishia Burke, released in the summer of 2007 and commissioned by the Niagara Region. Before the end of 2008, Niagara Region staff, in conjunction with input from local anti-poverty groups, proposed a bold solution for reducing poverty in Niagara. It was to be funded by the re-direction of ca. $1.5 million in cost savings resulting from the uploading of costs associated with child-poverty reduction strategies to the province. Regional Councilors approved. With this decision, NPI was created and a call for proposals issued.

Organizationally, NPI was constituted as a program delivered at arm's-length from the Niagara Region. NPI consists of two bodies: the Secretariat and the Convener. While there have been slight changes over the division of tasks between these two arms, the Secretariat is responsible for administering funding for what have been variously called prosperity projects or NPI projects. This includes issuing the call for proposals, answering questions about the proposals, organizing the adjudication of proposals, disbursing these funds, providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants, monitoring the contracts, enforcing the

conditions of the contract, collecting any surplus funds and receiving a final report at project's end. In years when completed projects do not spend all their funds, these accumulated funds are used to run a call for proposals. Whereas the Secretariat's tasks encompass poverty reduction at the operational scale, the Convener's tasks encompass poverty reduction at the structural scale. This takes place through the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN, though initially known as the Niagara Prosperity Community Committee), a voluntary network of public, private and non-profit organizations concerned with poverty reduction in Niagara. NPRN's work is done by sub-committees focusing on particular aspects of poverty. What they share in common is providing a space in which poverty reduction strategies focusing on the structural causes of poverty at the local, provincial or federal scale can be developed and circulated to politicians of all political parties.

However, the hammering out of these details took time, and as such NPI is even now a work-in-process. The second phase of NPI's evolution (2009-2014) is marked not just by finding contractors to operate as Secretariat and Convener, but also explaining to a new Regional Council what NPI did and how it was accountable to taxpayers. While the now defunct Business Education Council (BEC) was selected to be the Secretariat, Opportunities Niagara was slated to be the Convener. These plans were upset when Opportunities Niagara announced its closure before the end of 2008, at which time the BEC was awarded this position, too. During this phase, this union of both positions in the same organization was a point of contention, in part because it ran counter to the original plan for NPI's bipartite structure. However, by early 2011 the Niagara Community Foundation took over the Convener contract.

Regional Council, voicing concerns about accountability, were then incorporated into the NPI process when council members were given a fixed number of positions on the proposal review committee. This practice allows Regional Councilors to see not only what proposals were being approved, but to be involved in the approval process. Additionally, given Niagara's split governance structure between the Region and its twelve municipalities, this allowed for funds to be better distributed with regard to geography (and in turn, constituents).

After weathering these tumultuous years, the third phase in NPI's evolution was marked instead by relative stability. Council no longer seemed hostile to NPI's mission, and NPI continued to make incremental changes to its operations in order to better deliver funding. This stability is the case even after the United Way of Greater Fort Erie and Niagara Falls was awarded the Secretariat position in late 2014. Here, the institutional continuity of maintaining the same staff (and their knowledge of the undocumented, month-to-month operations of NPI) was key in insuring a smooth transition.

Two recommendations seem obvious to us.

#1 NPI needs to document its workflow procedures better, and these need to be held by the Niagara Region, in the event that the Secretariat or Convener positions are awarded to other organizations. In its current form, NPI and its practices depend on the accumulated and hard-won experience of a very small number of staff in the non-profit sector. While we are not advocating that the contracts be given to different organizations, were the current staff who implement the day-to-day operations of NPI to leave their positions, we suspect NPI would collapse.

#2 While NPI generates a substantial amount of data in the form of output measures (e.g., number of users served, jobs created) it collects little data on outcome measures beyond those discussed in the Phase 2b report. Furthermore, it collects no data to measure the long-term outcome of service-users' participation in NPI programs (i.e., did participating in NPI funded programs move users out of poverty, either in the short-term or long-term?). This makes it difficult to determine if NPI is a poverty reduction program or a poverty alleviation program.

If it is determined that if the agencies receiving funding from NPI or a third-party contracted to perform program evaluation are unable to collect outcome measures to identify the long-term effect of service-user participation in NPI funded programs, then to be fully transparent to the public, NPI should be re-branded as a poverty alleviation program.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This technical report draws primarily on two sources of data. The first are ten key informant interviews conducted from July to September 2018 with individuals associated with the creation and running of Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI). The second main data source are administrative records from the Niagara Region during 2006-2018. These are minutes for full council meetings, minutes for the Public Housing and Social Services (PHSS) subcommittee, and committee reports submitted by staff to PHSS (hereafter called COM reports).

The original funding submission indicated that phase 1B would address the history of NPI, rationale for NPI and objectives of NPI. The researchers rephrased this into a single research question: what is the fit between NPI and the needs of the Niagara Region? After the funding was awarded, the project steering committee posed four questions which might be aligned with the original research question:

1. How did NPI come about?
2. What were its goals and intentions?
3. Why was it developed the way it is?
4. In the areas of strategy, politics, funding opportunities, and staff, what needed to happen in order to create NPI?

The main reason for asking these four questions is to enlighten the rest of the research team on NPI's origins and structure while they conduct their evaluation of NPI's effectiveness in reducing poverty in Niagara. If we know what NPI set out to do, we might have a better chance of understanding why NPI came to be configured in the way it is, including how it attempts to reduce poverty in Niagara. Likewise, the lay reader might be interested in the origins of NPI as well, either for posterity or program replication.

With these goals in mind, we answer our research question, and in turn the four questions posed by the steering committee. While doing so, we will occasionally draw on sources beyond those identified in the introduction.

II. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Data collection and analysis consisted of four phases. In the first phase, purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify key informants and key documents. Potential interview participants were initially identified within the project steering committee; all those identified had been influential in some way in the inception and development of NPI. Each person interviewed was then asked if there was anyone else who would be knowledgeable or influential in the development of NPI who should be contacted

for an interview. Interviewing concluded when all participants had been contacted who had been either initially or subsequently named. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by an independent transcriber.

In the second phase, the researchers contacted the Regional Council Support Assistant at the Niagara Region and requested three kinds of documents: Regional Council minutes; the Public Housing and Social Services (PHSS) Subcommittee minutes; and reports submitted by PHSS staff[1] and mentioning NPI or its precursor discussions. We received electronic copies of the relevant documents from 2006-2018.

All interviews and documents (minutes from regional and public housing and social services subcommittees) that had been identified were uploaded to NVivo 12 for analysis and were initially coded by a research assistant. The research assistant also produced a chronology of key events as described in the interviews. Both interviews and documents underwent further in-depth analysis by the three members of the research team to ascertain the reliability of the original coding and to validate and extend the interpretations. In-depth analysis resulted in refinement of the initial codes through three subsequent levels of coding and the consensus of the lead researchers as to meaning and structure of key concepts.

A third phase took place where one member of the research team (JB) reviewed and coded all the collected COM reports following the initial coding by the research assistant. During this phase, the researcher also sought out additional sources to fill in gaps regarding particular concepts (e.g., the Sustainable Livelihood Assets framework) or organizations (e.g., Opportunity Niagara).

In the final phase, the research team developed the chronology presented here. While this chronology does not draw on direct citations from the ten key interviewees, it is informed by their transcripts.

The aim of the analysis was to obtain a thick description of NPI from key documents and key informants using manifest content analysis (Elo and Kynga, 2007). The units of analysis were sentences and key phrases from the documents and interview transcripts. The description of the evolution and history of NPI incorporates these sentences and phrases as key concepts and events in the description, drawing heavily on the review of documents, with key ideas from the interviews adding context and extending interpretations.

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[1] Evidently referred to as "COM reports" by regional staff and others familiar with them.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF THE NIAGARA PROSPERITY INITIATIVE

Policy interventions (such as NPI) rarely spring from the earth fully-formed. Instead, there is often some time beforehand in which the intervention becomes seen as not just warranted, but the best possible solution given local constraints. For instance, even the dental plan being proposed by the current provincial government in 2019 is not simply pulled out of thin air, but instead reflects years of debate, research and campaigning in the oral health sector (Fideli 2019). NPI is no different. In order to capture the evolution of NPI, we break our chronology into three phases: 2000-2009, both before NPI was officially founded and before it was referred to as such; 2009-2014, when NPI becomes named such in public records and until it was no longer housed at the Business Education Council (BEC); and 2015-present, when NPI was housed at the United Way of Niagara Falls and Fort Erie (and after the consolidation of the United Way chapters, the United Way of Niagara).

Before NPI: 2000-2008

In reconstructing the chronology of NPI's evolution, one of the earliest events mentioned is the Report Card for Child Poverty. Reference to the Report Card for Child Poverty was linked to the 2000 Community and Health Services Committee COM 8-2000[2]. This Report Card made reference to a unanimous House of Commons resolution "to seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000" (no page number). More than one interviewee also mentioned this resolution's failure as perhaps an incentive to staff at the Niagara Region and community members to deal with the problem of child poverty. This CHSS committee report from 2000 indicated that Ontario had the unenviable position of outperforming Canada as a whole in terms of child poverty. According to that report, Ontario's shameful litany for the years 1989-1999 included growth in: number of poor children; children in families with less than $20,000 annual income; children in families experiencing long-term unemployment; children in working poor families; poor children in two-parent families; and poor children in lone-parent families (COM 8-2000, page 2)[3]. Likely included as a clarion call to Regional Council, we use this as the first date in our chronology.

However, because we lack minutes or COM reports for the years 2000-2005, we cannot build a more precise timeline of what happened in those years. In part, this decision

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[2] While our document search only extended as far back as 2006, this report was appended to the end of COM 27-2006.

[3] Though given that Ontario is Canada's most populous province, perhaps this is not so surprising. Likewise, a growing population and monetary inflation could likewise generate absolute increases in these figures, even if not relative increases. Here population adjusted figures might reveal a different story.

reflects our arbitrary decision to start with records from just two years before NPI began. If one wanted to better trace out the linkages between 2000 and 2006, especially to explore the hypothesis that NPI was building on a community and practices that had evolved over nearly a decade, then these records would be useful. Our decision also reflects the convention established in Pennisi (2011a), whose timeline also begins with 2006.

Thus, although NPI began distributing funds in 2008, multiple informants clearly stated that arguments for and attempts at a regionally-focused anti-poverty intervention in Niagara had already been circulating since the early 2000s. During this gestation period, interviews revealed a protracted effort to both raise awareness of and change the narrative around poverty in Niagara. Opportunities Niagara was frequently mentioned as an organization that championed this call for intervention. At the same time, this period sounded as if there was not an initially unified voice, but a chorus of roughly-aligned calls from non-profit and public sector interests.

When recalling this pre-NPI time, many interviews alluded to a lag between Niagara's changing economy and recognizing the dire impacts of these changes on Niagara's households. While the changes identified revolved primarily around the loss of manufacturing jobs, interviewees also spoke to the increasing dominance of the low-wage service sector as a source of employment in Niagara. Some interviewees spoke of the roles of support services growing during this time. While these were not seen as problems isolated to Niagara alone, most interviewees felt a particular call to solving Niagara's problems, given that most interviewees lived here.

One interviewee in particular noted that embracing this mission of reducing poverty required a mindset of moving beyond the silos and narrowly-defined competencies of any given public agency. That interviewee seemed to imply that this was becoming more difficult in an era of on the one hand increased legal repercussions via lawsuits and on the other hand increased calls for narrowly-defined understandings of accountability verging on micro-management. Despite these concerns, it would appear that high-ranking public servants in the Niagara Region were supportive, as evidenced by the case of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and various commissioners' signatures on the reports to council[4]. Furthermore, given these were civil servants serving at the behest of Regional Council, one must also recognize that there was broad political support for NPI, which in

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[4] For instance, we have the case of Mike Trojan, who was the Niagara Region CAO from 2000-2013. He had worked for 27 years at the region when he stepped down in 2013 and was associated with "several ground-breaking region-wide initiatives, establishing the Niagara Community Foundation and Leadership Niagara, which seek to strengthen community capacity and nurture local leaders, and supporting the United Way as a former campaign chair and current champion" (Niagarathisweek.com, 19 April 2013, https://www.niagarathisweek.com/news-story/3271273-trojan-calling-it-quits/ last accessed on 17 June 2019). His various 'do-gooder' activities outside his job description point to the kinds of qualities many of our interviewees espoused.

part reflected the years-long campaigns under foot to raise awareness about poverty in Niagara. The exact breadth of this support by Council is not discernable, as motions are only noted as carried or failed; the exact count or identities of the yeas and nays are never revealed in the public record.

A further thread woven subtly through these interviews was concern for the fate of persons in chronic poverty, as opposed to short-term poverty. Many times, chronic poverty seemed to also be code for intergenerational poverty, even if the rhetorical distinction wasn't always clear cut[5]. This distinction is important because while NPI came to be explicitly focused on serving the 'the poorest of the poor,' it would appear as if NPI-funded programs do not restrict themselves to just this population. Some interviewees championed a deliberate strategy avoiding means-testing for service-users, given the stigma around that practice and the vagaries of cut-off lines.

Discussions of chronic or intergenerational poverty tended to focus on the fate of children, framing them as innocents (after all, nobody chooses to be born into poverty). In part, this was a deliberate rhetorical strategy: impoverished adults, much more than children, are often seen as masters of their own destiny, and hence responsible for their own penury[6]. One interviewee noted that trying to overcome this belief was difficult, because hecklers would invariably invoke anecdotes about their poor neighbors' purchases of, for instance, cigarettes or pet food. Even when pointing out that imbibing nicotine or cuddling a companion animal might be perfectly effective coping skills, the interviewee indicated that this line of attack was less effective than pointing to the effects of poverty on (coupled with the number of children in) poverty. This recognition of negative stereotypes about persons living in poverty led to a rhetorical focus on a simple mantra that one-in-six Niagara children were in poverty. In turn, this message was shared with various community groups, school boards and Niagara movers-and-shakers.

At the same time, some interviews indicated that certain interests within Niagara saw poverty as either not a problem, or one to be swept under the rug. While interviewees never mentioned this, we wonder if this might also have reflected some sort of urban-rural stereotype that poverty was only found in Niagara's urban centers of St. Catharines, Niagara Falls or Welland. If so, this might also account for the development of the Mapping Tool along neighborhood lines, described later. In any case, our interviewees recognized the

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[5] Ren and Xu (2016) note that for the 1999-2007 time period, SLID data show that of Canada's impoverished, ca. 27% were chronically in poverty, whereas the remainder where in short-term poverty (i.e., under 4 years). Thus, while we don't have these data for Niagara, our best estimate would be that in Niagara these proportions held during the pre-NPI period.

[6] This view makes it more difficult to justify interventions to either alleviate poverty for adults, let alone reduce poverty for adults. Furthermore, this view ignores the fact that adults have children, and whether or not they have children has little to do with their ability to recognize that having children in poverty is likely to lead to another generation of the impoverished. Desperation, after all, can lead to short-sighted decisions.

importance of moving beyond anecdote and establishing a factual basis for the extent and depth of poverty in Niagara. Thus, Regional Council was presented with a recommendation to fund third-party research into the state of poverty in Niagara. Dr. Susan Arai and Rishia Burke conducted this research and titled it *A Legacy of Poverty?*, submitting to the Niagara Region in June 2007.

This report accomplished three goals. First, it identified poverty as a long-term feature of Niagara. Not all persons in poverty were short-term visitors, but instead had grown up in a state of poverty and remained in this state over their life. This meant that interventions to break the cycle of poverty needed to deal with not just children, but also their parents, communities and neighborhoods. Second, the long-term impoverished found themselves in this position largely due to structural features of the Canadian economy. Single-parent female-headed households bore the double burden of lower-wages for women and assumptions that women should provide uncompensated child-care. Aboriginal women faced the additional burden of being paid even less than aboriginal men or non-aboriginal women. Newcomers faced an additional burden of weak integration into the labour market because their professional credentials often were not recognized. Third, current interventions were not enough to lift people out of poverty in terms of transfers, wages or opportunities. Simply put, the **opportunity structure** (a term used intermittently throughout the relevant anti-poverty literature informing the creation of NPI) contributed to the chronic (i.e., the inter-generational reproduction of poor households), as well as acute (i.e., the descent of an individual or household into poverty) poverty.

The report had four main recommendations: Advocate to decrease poverty; address the broader determinants of health for adults living in poverty with appropriate and flexible supports; mitigate the negative effects of low income on children and youth through programs and services; and monitor Niagara's progress in poverty reduction (Arai and Burke 2007: 49-52). In retrospect, the first three of the four recommendations built on already existing practices and institutions. However, the fourth recommendation to monitor progress could build on no pre-existing practices or institutions. This might explain why it is still difficult to determine NPI's impact on poverty; little exists beyond Statistics Canada data released on a five-year basis and this is inappropriate data for evaluating the impact of the recommended poverty interventions. Despite NPI's failure to effectively carry out the fourth recommendation, it has made progress on the other three, though the inability to track this progress is probably still its biggest problem.

The public record indicates that shortly after receiving the report, the Commissioner of PHSS commissioned a memo on this report's findings on August 28, 2007 (PHSS 12-2007, page PHSS 112). On 15 February, the Commissioner presented a DVD titled *Poverty in Niagara – The Business Education Council of Niagara 2008* at the Business Education

Council Annual Partners Breakfast on 15 February 2019 (PHSS 2-2008, page PHSS 8-9). On February 19, 2008, the Director of Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities, along with the Director of Children's Services, made further additions to the report's findings (PHSS 2-2008, page PHSS 9), again reiterating its four recommendations. In this case, staff were instructed to investigate further the proposed strategies and provide a funding strategy for implementing them. Council records indicate the report's findings were discussed (Report CL 11-2008, page CL 118) on June 5th, 2008 by the commissioner and seven council members. Interviews suggest that a handful of Niagara Region staff worked feverishly to develop this strategy in the following weeks, though multiple interviews also corroborate that the relevant staff had been fairly immersed in the topic for some number of years already.

Interviews suggest that a central feature of what would become NPI was to involve two bundles of tasks, which later came to be called the **Secretariat** and the **Convener** (Pennisi 2011a). Optimally, these would be run by different organizations in arms-length contractual relation with the Niagara Region. One interviewee was adamant that for this arrangement to work, it would need to be run by persons not in the Niagara Region, as they alleged that the Niagara Region had a reputation for running roughshod over other service providers. One might also imagine that by contracting external organizations to run NPI, the Niagara Region likely expected the costs to be lower, interference from politicians to be minimized, and the contract could be terminated if required.

Regardless of why this two-pronged approach was selected, what was to become the Secretariat was responsible for organizing the request-for-proposal (RFP) proposals, adjudicating which applications received funding, and providing financial accountability (cf. COM 10-2010, page 3). The Convener was responsible for bringing together non-profit organizations and find collective solutions to reduce poverty in Niagara. As such, the convener seems to have emulated the work spearheaded by Opportunities Niagara. A post-mortem drawing on interviews with five persons familiar with Opportunities Niagara suggests as much (Loewen and Makhoul 2009).

On September 16, 2008, the record shows that the Niagara Regional Council members on the Public Health and Social Services committee voted to receive the report COM 53-2008, "Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Families Living in Poverty." Furthermore, they directed that:

> That staff be authorized to reinvest the cost savings in social assistance of approximately $1.5 million as a result of the implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) toward increasing prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty. The initiatives will be launched through a two year agreement with Opportunities Niagara and the Business Education Council.
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> (Original source: PHSS 11-2008, Item 175).

Noteworthy here is that Opportunities Niagara and BEC are both mentioned as responsible for launching the initiative, though not in what capacity[7]. Of further note is that on 25 September 2008, during the full meeting of Niagara Regional Council, the Acting Chair of Regional Council "declared an indirect pecuniary interest with respect to the matter related to Opportunities Niagara, as he is a member of the Opportunities Niagara Board, and he therefore requested that Councilor Smeaton take the chair during consideration of the September 16, 2008 Public Health and Social Services Committee minutes" (CL 15-2008, Item 416 / CL 184). Item 417 indicates that the minutes of PHSS 11-2008 were then approved by the council, after which the Acting Chair resumed his duties in that full council meeting.

This last point is not interesting because it suggests malfeasance; in fact, it suggests the opposite. An elected official saw the possibility of an appearance of conflict of interest, and followed formal procedures for removing himself from the discussion. This point is interesting because it appears to be the last mention of Opportunities Niagara in the public record. According to Makhoul and Leviten-Reid (2008: 167), Opportunities Niagara had formed in 2001[8]. It championed the Vibrant Communities approach to poverty reduction. In 2007, Regional Council minutes indicate Opportunities Niagara applied for a $1.3 million dollar grant to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to expand its Job Bus initiative (CL 9-2007, Item 264 / page CL 123). This project, designed to match carless workers with jobs, was mentioned by one interviewee, and also features prominently in Makhoul and Leviten-Reid (2006, 2008).

According to an article titled "Door closes on Opportunities Niagara due to funding crunch" in the 15 October 2008 *St. Catharines Standard*, Opportunities Niagara closed during the previous week, ending seven years of operation. Its Executive Director cited the funding difficulties facing all non-profits in a soft money environment. He was hopeful that their role as a broker would continue in Niagara, even if Opportunities Niagara wasn't around. The volatility of non-profits in this soft-money environment is a point we will return to later in the report. Interviews conducted by Loewen and Makhoul (2009) suggest that whereas Opportunities Niagara began as a division within Community Cares of St. Catharines and Thorold, when it became an independent entity it had to shift from just acting as a broker and convener to becoming a service-delivery agency. Their interviews suggest that this might have also cooled relations with their former collaborators because Opportunities Niagara shifted from providing complementary services to competing for

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[7] Of perhaps lesser note is that the amount allocated in 2008 was actually $900,000, with $1.5 million be allocated annually in the following years (COM 08-2009, page 1).
[8] COM 45-2010: 3 is ambiguous when it notes that "…Opportunities Niagara had been working since 2002 on building a collaborative community approach to poverty reduction…"; this might mean Opportunities Niagara existed prior to 2002, or it might mean that it began in 2002.

funding with their former partners. At the same time, this underscored the difficulties in funding network brokering. Local, provincial and federal funding bodies preferred to fund direct service provision instead of brokering networks to develop collective solutions to complex problems (Loewen and Makhoul 2009).

COM 04-2008 Appendix 2 provides an overview of projects Opportunities Niagara supported, brokered, facilitated and lead up to February 2008. These included: the Progressive Employment Relationship Campaign (PERC), which conducted research on living wage and outreach on the living wage; Long Term Shelter Committee, a transitional housing project in the City of St. Catharines funded through Community Services of the Niagara Region; and Making Ownership a Reality, "invoking the interest of two corporate partners (Meridian and Royal LePage) to offer working families caught in the 'rent cycle' a no-money down option to secure their first home" (COM 04-2008, page 20). There were also two other housing-related initiatives, as well as plans for something called Wraparound Niagara, a program to bundle community supports for children and adults "with multiple, complex needs" (COM 04-2008, page 20).

Further adding to Opportunities Niagara's cachet as an integral part of Niagara's poverty reduction community was its participation in the Tamarack Institute's Vibrant Communities initiative. Niagara's anti-poverty community was one of the first to participate in the Vibrant Communities initiative[9].

With what multiple interviewees noted was knowledge of and experience with poverty-reduction strategies, the closure of Opportunities Niagara was the first crisis facing what we now call NPI. With Opportunities Niagara out of business, this left the BEC to step in as both the NPI Secretariat and the Convener. At first blush, the BEC would seem like an odd duck for managing the inaugural NPI contract. After all, BEC was known for managing workforce training and education programs. Poverty reduction was not in the BEC's bailiwick. One interviewee, however, suggested that BEC was selected primarily because they had a proven track record of administering funding and cajoling agencies to work together to deliver services, demonstrated in getting the Early Years programs running in Niagara (COM 45-2010, page 2). As such, this might explain why NPI seems to perform better at contract allocation than program evaluation: its inaugural host only possessed the first competence.

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[9] Interviewees indicate that the Tamarack Institute was important from early on in the process. However, we find no record of its mention in the COM reports until COM 44-2011: 23, when it is described as "an Institute dedicated to the art and science of community engagement and collaborative leadership and exists to build vibrant and engaged communities in Canada)." This might reflect general recall problems common to interviews.

Given NPI's novelty, the two BEC staff responsible for running the NPI Secretariat had to improvise a new set of procedures for fulfilling their contractual obligations to the Niagara Region. Key documents and ancillary documents provide little insight into this process of ramping NPI into day-to-day operation, and thus we rely on interviews for that information. Moreover, we describe those tasks more fully later.

Phase 2 - NPI and the BEC (2009-2014)

In the months after Opportunities Niagara closed, the Niagara Region Public Housing and Social Services (PHSS) staff met with partners to hammer out a new solution. Records of the PHSS Committee indicate that while BEC was to have taken on the NPI Secretariat role (COM 08-2009 page 3), the closure of Opportunities Niagara left them with the responsibility for the NPI Convener role as well.

A PHSS report from February 2009 indicates that after the closure of Opportunities Niagara and BEC taking over both of what would eventually be called the Secretariat and Convener positions, Community Services staff organized a meeting attended by 16 Niagara-wide agencies in December 2008 (COM 08-2009). At that meeting, two decisions were made. First, an Advisory Committee would be formed which would house both the administrative and convener positions, to be operated by BEC. Second, coordination "of services to support the work of the Advisory Committee" was necessary (COM 08-2009, page 3), and should prioritize seven tasks:

- Develop and enhance community partnerships with business, funders and service providers as a means to create capacity;
- Explore alternative solutions as a means to extend current resources, or create new resources;
- Build capacity within employment, housing, education and health sectors to better integrate health and prosperity responses;
- Establish and oversee an Advisory Committee that will guide the investment of funding to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty;
- Engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways in order to ensure that investments reflect need;
- Educate and engage stakeholders regarding strategies to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty;
- Work to create trust and reduce competitiveness between service providers; Inform advocacy activity based on the outcomes achieved and stakeholder feedback

(COM 08-2009, page 3).

To be clear, some of these seven are larger projects than others. Despite that, though, it is useful to consider these as criteria against which NPI's progress should be measured.

While interviewees alluded to these events in broad strokes, they did not provide this level of detail. In this document, and all previous ones, this poverty-reduction initiative is

never called the Niagara Prosperity Initiative or NPI until 2009. However, in the September 2008 COM 53-2008, the term 'prosperity' is sprinkled throughout the document, and this continues in later documents to perhaps 2013, possibly speaking to a sort of whitewashing the word 'poverty' for the sake of public consumption. This, reference to prosperity instead of poverty, however, might also have reflected the anti-oppression impetus motivating NPI's designers. Here, empowering people is a way to create prosperity.

Central to NPI are the roles of Secretariat and Convener. The **Secretariat**, while the job description changes slightly over the years, involves the adjudication, allocation and monitoring of funds used for NPI's **prosperity projects** (as they were called between 2009 and 2012)[10]. A 2012 COM report further describes the Secretariat's tasks as:

> There are ten main objectives that have been contracted with the BEC as Secretariat for NPI:
> 1 Administer all contracts with Prosperity Project Partners including monitoring and auditing of financial and operational details.
> 2 Provide administrative support to the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) (formerly the Niagara Prosperity Community Committee)
> 3 Act as a communication conduit between funder (Niagara Region Community Services), service providers and Convener.
> 4 Seek and find resources to leverage Niagara Prosperity Initiative investments, strategies and actions.
> 5 Develop and conduct requests for proposals ("RFP") funding process for Prosperity Projects.
> 6 Development of a marketing strategy that would solicit interest from community stakeholders in the requests for proposals for the delivery of the prosperity projects and involvement with NPI and NPRN strategies and goals.
> 7 Administer funds for the prosperity projects.
> 8 Contractual agreements are developed with all parties involved in the delivery of the prosperity projects for whom funding will be provided.
> 9 Facilitate meetings with successful NPI funded Prosperity Project Partners to enhance collaborative community development.
> 10 Collection and reporting of financial and service data to the Niagara Region.
>
> (COM 41-2012, page 10)

When comparing these ten tasks to other descriptions of the Secretariat (e.g., COM 45-2010, 05-2011: 4-6, 44-2011: 9-11, 41-2012: 10-11, 37-2013: 3-4, 15-2014, 23-2014: 3 / Appendix A, 13-2015), they do not change appreciably.

The **Convener**'s role involves organizing and operating an advisory committee to develop plans to reduce poverty, in addition to liaising with community organizations including service providers and the business community. By tendering contracts for these

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[10] Descriptions of the role of Secretariat are available in the following PHSS COM reports: 45-2010; 05-2011: 4-6; 44-2011: 9-11; 41-2012: 10-11; 37-2013: 3-4; 15-2014; 23-2014: 3 / Appendix A; 13-2015; These also contain descriptions of the Convener role.

two roles at the behest of Regional Council, an arm's-length relation existed between the Department of Public Housing and Community Services.

Regardless of whether or not they spoke of poverty or prosperity, some interviewees did speak of conflict or muddled competencies with this initial configuration, as the NPI Advisory Committee seemed to be the venue in which agencies fought over funding, instead of developing partnerships or plans to reduce poverty. Reading between the lines, in early 2009 NPI consisted of an Advisory Committee operating in a fraught relationship with BEC. Despite the difficulties in articulating and harmonizing local efforts, committee reports indicate that this work was unfolding against the backdrop of a new Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy (COM 08-2009).

By July 2009, the moniker Niagara Prosperity Initiative and NPI are being consistently applied to this poverty reduction intervention (COM 44-2009). The same document provided the terms of reference for the NPI Advisory Committee (COM 44-2009, pages 12-13). These terms of reference explicitly identified procedures for identifying conflicts of interest and conflict resolution. This report also delineates a division of labor between BEC in its role managing NPI and the Advisory Council in its role as funding proposal adjudicator.

COM 44-2009 also announces that the **NPI Mapping Tool** was deployed. Earlier in the year, Niagara Region staff had already been directed to develop neighborhood profiles (COM 08-2009 page 4). Originally a written document, in later years this Mapping Tool became an online portal which users could operate. In either case, the Mapping Tool broke Niagara into 74 neighborhoods, using the boundaries created under a collaborative exercise between the Niagara Region's Ontario Early Center coordinator and their service-users (COM 44-2009, pages 5-8). The portal relied on a range of indicators to identify some neighborhoods as high priority sites of NPI intervention. To be eligible for funding, proposals submitted to NPI had to identify locations in need as designated by the Mapping Tool. Interviews indicate that staff had been influenced by a Toronto neighborhood mapping tool, though were critical of that tool for focusing only on the need and not also the strengths (such as community centers, churches and the like) found in a community. The Mapping Tool also provided the added benefit of making transparent which locations were eligible for funding, as well as toppling the claims that poverty was only found in Niagara's biggest urban centers.

At this point, though, we should mention an interesting omission. Lacking in either the committee reports or the interviews were justifications for the assumptions about the locational fixity of poverty over time. Here Sarah Pennesi's 2011 report titled *Building A New Legacy: Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Residents by Improving the Quality of Neighborhood Life* provides clarification: "…[I]ndividuals and families living in poverty

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tend to live close to each other; poverty is concentrated in places and segments of the population" (Pennesi 2011: 20). Reading between the lines, NPI's architects assume that poverty is clustered geographically, and in particular, assume some locations reproduce poverty over time.

While a reasonable assumption, to our knowledge the empirical validity of this assumption has never been tested[11]. That is, because the Mapping Tool relies on cross-sectional and longitudinal data gathered at the scale of the neighborhood and not individual level, we do not know if the poor in location A at one time are the same poor people in location A at a later time. While this is locational stability is probably a reasonable assumption, it would be worth investigating further, as Xu and Ren (2016) note that the differences between the short-term and chronic poor are fairly profound. It may be that the short-term poor are able to move to opportunities located elsewhere, whereas the chontic poor cannot. Likewise, reading between the lines, for instance, Opportunity Niagara's call for Wraparound coordinators, suggests NPI is designed to help the chronic poor, but again interviews and documentation rarely made a distinction. This is important because different reasons for poverty likely shape the efficacy of a given intervention. Starting in 2010, the topic of accountability surfaces in the committee reports. Among all our interviewees, accountability was a common theme, be it accountability to local taxpayers, Regional Council, service-users, Niagara's taxpayers, Niagara's poor or Canadian society at large. For instance, COM 10-2010 introduces the practice of a social audit, routinely used to better match the services provided by public and non-profit agencies with the experience of their service-users. The act of informing Regional Council (ostensibly the goal of all committee reports) of this practice might be read as an attempt to educate council members about the progressive and participatory vision motivating NPI. Doing so would be certainly consistent with the anti-oppressive agenda espoused by some of the interviewees.

Consistent with interviewees' reports, the Regional Council also explored the re-organization of NPI in 2010:

> In response to Public Health and Social Services Committee's direction on May 25, 2010, Community Services staff evaluated the current administration of NPI. Staff explored three options: 1) maintain the status quo; 2) bring the Secretariat and Convener role internal to the Region; and 3) retendering the Secretariat and Convener roles. Details of this evaluation are outlined below:
>
> (COM 45-2010, page 4)

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[11] For instance, with access to multiple years of Tax-Filer data, one could track the mobility of persons by income to see if persons of low-income tend to remain in the same neighborhood for multiple years at a rate higher than that of the general population. This would have benefits over the Census, which tends to provide cross-sectional data, and not longitudinal data. Furthermore, one could compare if those with low-income tend to move to other areas of low-income at a higher rate than the general population. Given confidentiality issues, this is the sort of exercise best conducted by Niagara Region.

While never explicitly noted in the interviews, one wonders if this points to some sort of struggle for resources between one or more service-providers, in addition to questions about accountability and efficiency. The upshot of the report is that Housing Services and Social Services recommend staying the course; BEC remained the Secretariat, but the Convener contract was re-tendered at the end of 2010 (COM 45-2010) , when the Niagara Community Foundation was awarded it.

This notion of accountability arises again with the election of a new and explicitly more conservative Regional Council (COM 05-2011). While never described as such by interviewees, their collective discussion of the 2011 Council discussions suggest that this posed a new crisis, though as much one of accountability as legitimacy. Some interviewees reported that some of the new council members elected in late 2010 were initially critical of NPI. It would appear that NPI weathered this scrutiny through three ways. Firstly, the new Council was reminded of the past decade's calls for a poverty-reduction plan. Secondly, Council was shown that running NPI as an arms-length operation instead of internal to Public Health and Social Services was more cost-effective. Thirdly, Council members were invited to participate directly in the funding application review process by volunteering to staff what eventually became the NPI Proposal Review Committee.

Collectively, these three maneuvers brought Council into the orbit of NPI. While building on the legacy of past elected officials, their participation allowed them to see better the inner-workings of NPI. Through this work at making NPI more transparent, more than one interviewee indicated that some of NPI's critics on Council became advocates for NPI.

At this stage, it is worth speaking to the proposal review process. COM reports and interviews suggest that initially in late 2008 this was the bailiwick of the Convener and the **NPI Advisory Committee**. However, given the muddled competencies, this meant that the NPI Advisory Committee became a site of conflict over funding and not one of collaboration and long-term planning, as intended. Based on interviews and COM reports, it would appear that by 2010 the **NPI Proposal Review Committee** was seconded to the Secretariat.

While the exact dates for when this began are unclear[12], by 2013, the NPI Proposal Review Committee consisted of 12 members:

> As with previous NPI RFPs and as noted in COM 07-2013, a review committee was established to review the proposals. Review committee members included: 1 person living in poverty; 1 Brock University student; 1 representative from the Niagara Community Foundation; 3 community members; 3 social service agency

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[12] As the paragraph below refers to a document we did not receive, it is possible that even earlier reports containing information on the make-up of the NPI Proposal Review Committee existed than the one mentioned for 2013 in this 2014 report. Given the large number of reports we received, missing one or more is not unexpected. In any case, interviews suggested that this NPI Proposal Review Committee, even if its name changed at times, had been in operation since early on in NPI's history.

representatives (employment, literacy, and newcomer); 1 Public Health representative and two Regional Councillors. Meetings took place throughout April 2014. Each proposal was reviewed independently by two assessors. The criteria for assessment match the proposal criteria.

(COM 15-2014, page 2)

The following year, though, the make-up of the NPI Proposal Review Committee has changed again, pointing to the evolving nature of the program. As we see in the excerpt below, an additional person living in poverty was included in the review committee, a further nod to the anti-oppressive origins of NPI.

> Review committee members included: 2 people living in poverty; 1 representative from the Niagara Community Foundation; 2 community members; 2 social service agency representatives (employment and literacy); 1 Children's Services representative and three Regional Councillors. Meetings took place throughout October 2015. Each proposal was reviewed independently by two assessors.

(Memo NPI-funded Projects Dec 2015, page 1)

Of interest to the researcher is that the term 'assessor' is used in this context consistently from 2011 onwards in the COM reports (COM 44-2011, 19-2012, 41-2012, 37-2013, 15-2014, 14-2015, Memo-NPI-funded projects Dec 2015, 21-2016, 18-2017 13-2018). Unlike other terms (e.g., the NPI Advisory Council eventually becoming the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, or community consultations being called communities of practice), this points to a degree of nomenclatural stability that has weathered changing constellations of actors.

To aid the assessor and applicants, the NPI applications were expected to address a series of points. These were laid out in the **NPI Request for Funding** (NPI RFP hereafter). This excerpt from 2011 provides an overview:

> A Request for Proposals (RFP) for 2011 NPI was issued by the BEC in April 2011. The proposal criterion was as follows:
>
> - Proposals must have targeted a specific neighbourhood and address an indicator that requires attention.
> - Proposals needed to address the recommendations from the *Legacy of Poverty* report.
> - Proposals were required to target at least one of the four dimensions of poverty from the Legacy of Poverty report.
> - Proposals needed to explain how proponents would gather outcome measures for the following:
>   - Number of people served (children 0-12; youth 13-18; adults 19-64; seniors 65+).
>   - Number of units of service provided (i.e. # of group sessions provided).
>   - Number of networks, links and/or partnerships formed in the community.

- o Number of people directly or indirectly involved in civic engagement
    activities.
- Proposals were open for a one or two year timeframe.
- Proposals were for projects that will make a long term difference in people's
  lives and in the communities where they live.
- Proposals were required to specify how the submitting agency would work
  collaboratively with other agencies and groups to enhance partnerships in order
  to achieve mutual outcomes and reduce duplication.
- Proposals needed to be for neighbourhoods and all individuals who live in that
  neighbourhood, not just for people receiving social assistance.

(COM 44-2011, page 7)

While the wording in the NPI RFP has changed over the years, such changes have been
fairly minor. As can be seen, already at this stage the RFP process had become fairly robust.
It likewise pointed to the *A Legacy of Poverty* report as a guiding document, likely further
harmonizing the mindset of the applicants with that of the emerging NPI community.

According to some interviewees (and hinted at in Appendix D of COM 37-2013)
Niagara's service-delivery agencies had to be coached along the RFP process. This
happened in two ways. First, interviewees noted that it took some number of years to
develop the capacity of service-delivery agencies to conform to these guidelines. While the
year was never specified, one interviewee shared that the Niagara Community Foundation
was key in providing workshops on proposal writing. Interviewees seem to have also
suggested that in some cases, some service-delivery agencies stopped applying because they
felt the application process was too onerous. Thus, there has been a process of mutual
habituation: NPI learns of service-deliverer's capacities, and service-deliverers learn of
NPI's expectations[13]. Second, our understanding is that all applicants are required, and have
been for some time, to contact the Secretariat's project manager. In doing so, the project
manager is kept appraised of what applicants are hoping to accomplish in their prosperity
project, determine if the intended prosperity projects fits within the strictures of NPI,
suggests how the application might be made to conform, and reduces duplication of service
by pointing applicants towards potential collaborators.

Fitting the nature of NPI as a dynamic organization ostensibly operating under the
guise of an anti-oppressive poverty reduction program, the RFPs vary from year to year in
light of **community consultations[14]**. During this process, which consists of multiple

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[13] And to be clear, these are at least in part Regional Council's expectations regarding transparency and
accountability.

[14] The term community conversations and the procedures for carrying out community conversations appear to
be another concept in the toolkit of the Vibrant Communities Initiative championed by the Tamarack Institute
(Born 2012).The term community conversations is championed by Tamarack, evidently since before 2012.
Relying on Amazon.ca, the copyright information on Born (2012) indicates the first edition was printed in
2008. This would mean that it was written before then. Furthermore, Paul Born's biography (Born 2012)

meetings with community groups, themes (and what is later called **priority areas of need**) for intervention are selected. While it is not clear if this is always organized by the Secretariat or the Convener, these themes are used to orient calls for prosperity projects. For instance:

> From September to October 2009 eleven community conversation sessions were held across Niagara with input from over 400 people on what was needed to improve the quality of life in their neighbourhoods. The information gathered from these sessions was incorporated into the approval criteria for the 2010 RFP. Six themes emerged from the conversations identifying where improvements were needed.
>
> 1. Transportation
> 2. Income/Employment
> 3. Health/Activities
> 4. Shelter
> 5. Education
> 6. Service Delivery
>
> (COM 24-2010, page 2)

While interviewees indicated that community consultations took place in other years, relevant documents (e.g., COM 18-2017, COM 21-2016, COM 14-2015, COM 15-2014, COM 37-2013 (though here they relate it to the Legacy of Poverty Report), COM 41-2012 and COM 44-2011) provide no evidence of organizing these RFPs by themes until 2018 (COM 13-2018: 2), when they are instead called **priority areas of need**. To standardize the assessment process, the Secretariat provided assessors with a series of questions, derived in turn from the application process. However, prior to 2014, assessors relied on a precursor to the scoring matrix. For instance, the November 2009 RFP for the 2010 funding made use of these six criteria to score the proposals:

> The six criteria used to review proposals measured projects on a scale of "Strong", "Average", and "Weak"; this criteria is:
> 1. The project has measurable quantitative results;
> 2. The project effectively addresses recommendations from the report "A Legacy of Poverty? Addressing Cycles of Poverty & The Impact on Child Health in Niagara Region";
> 3. The project effectively addresses the themes from community conversations;
> 4. Does the project address poverty in a targeted neighbourhood?;
> 5. Will this project build a stronger community/neighbourhood?; and
> 6. Grant request is reasonable given project objective.
>
> (COM 44-2011, page 5)

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indicates he had been involved in Opportunities 2000 and other anti-poverty initiatives before then, suggesting he had been working on these ideas for some time, either while or before he was affiliated with Tamarack.

To standardize further the review process as much as to signal a change in nomenclature, a **proposal scoring matrix** was adopted by 2014. Interviews suggest this was done as much to guide the reviewers as to make the application process more transparent. With over twice as many criteria as that used in 2011, the 2014 scoring matrix was a clear improvement:

1. Project Description (10%)
2. How does the mission of your organization relate to the project's objective? (3%)
3. Describe your experience in delivering a similar project and explain why your agency is suitable to deliver this particular project. (3%)
4. What is your plan to involve clients in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the project? (5%)
5. What does your project hope to achieve? How does this fit with NPI's recommendations? (10%)
6. How will the project raise community awareness on the issues of poverty? How will the project be promoted? (3%)
7. Which neighbourhood(s) and indicator(s) will the project target? (5% + 5%)
8. Complete the following milestones timeline. (3%)
9. List and describe how your project will increase assets for individuals living in poverty. (10%)
10. List the anticipated outputs of the project in the following categories[15]. Enter only numerical values except where a description is required. (10%)
11. Name and describe how you will partner with other organizations in the neighbourhood to foster sustainable and collaborative approaches to increasing prosperity. (10%)
12. How do you plan to evaluate the success of the project? What is the method of your evaluation? (e.g. survey, verbal feedback, questionnaire) (5%)
13. What are your plans for sustainability? (5%)
14. Budget (10%) and In-kind (3%)

(COM 15-2014, page 2)

While the wording and number of questions shifted slightly since 2014, these are changes of a slight and not radical nature (e.g., COM 14-2015, 21-2016, 18-2017, 13-2018).

The last few pages have dealt with the operation of the Secretariat. We should not forget, however, that NPI also relies on a Convener. Recalling the problems encountered by Opportunities Niagara, the utility of the convener is clear:

In December 2008, sixteen community agencies recommended that a committee to oversee the prosperity initiative was needed but that the goal of reducing poverty could only be achieved through concerted, collective and community based work. Another clear message that emerged from this day was that this work could not be assumed by agencies with already stretched resources; that is, funding should accompany the responsibility. The BEC agreed to assume the role of Convener along with their role as Secretariat. The BEC hired an individual to fill this role part-time.

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[15] These categories were not included in the cited report.

That role brings together various actors in a sustained way to develop strategies and coalitions for reducing poverty. As noted earlier in the same document, when originally conceived with Opportunities Niagara in mind:

> […t]he main objective of the Convener was to build capacity to respond to strategic imperatives linked to the prosperity projects. These were identified as:
>
> • Develop and enhance community partnerships with business, funders and service providers as a means to create capacity;
> • Explore alternative solutions as a means to extend current resources, or create new resources;
> • Build capacity within employment, housing, education and health sectors to better integrate health and prosperity responses;
> • Establish and oversee an Advisory Committee that will guide the investment of funding to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty;
> • Engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways in order to ensure that investments reflect need;
> • Educate and engage stakeholders regarding strategies to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty;
> • Work to create trust and reduce competitiveness between service providers; and
> • Inform advocacy activity based on the outcomes achieved and stakeholder feedback.
>
> (COM 45-2010, page 3)

Noted in later reports (COM 05-2011: 3) a convener function was integral to the 15 communities throughout Canada operating under the Vibrant Communities initiative. Common to all the organizations operating under that initiative were six governance elements:

> 1. A person(s)/organization(s) that convene the members of the change effort.
> 2. A leadership group – with a variety of work groups and committees with broader participation – that give direction, make decisions, and – usually - 'do' the work.
> 3. A staff support group to support the members carry out their strategic and operational work.
> 4. A fiscal/legal agent(s) that manages the human resource and financial arrangements to support the change effort.
> 5. An executive or coordinating committee that deals with specific issues related to strategy or operations on behalf of the leadership group and fiscal/legal agent.
> 6. The broader community that provides input, support and feedback on the effort.
>
> (COM 05-2011, page 3)

The first two elements correspond to the Convener, whereas the fourth and perhaps fifth correspond to the Secretariat. It would seem the remaining elements are shared within NPI between the Secretariat, Convener, NPI Proposal Review Committee and NPI Advisory Committee (which by 2012 became the **Niagara Poverty Reduction Network** or **NPRN**, according to COM 41-2012).

What then emerges between this constellation of Secretariat, Proposal Review Committee, Community Conversations, Convener, NPRN, Department of Housing Services and Social Services, and Regional Council is a program intended to reduce poverty in Niagara by spending 1.5 million dollars annually (or 1.35 million after the cost of Secretariat and Convener are subtracted). In the process of getting this affair running, safeguards for accountability and transparency have been built in. What is not built in, however, are effective means of evaluating the long-term impacts of prosperity projects on poverty reduction.

There have been evaluations, of a sort, of the short-term effects to evaluate the impacts of NPI prosperity projects on service-users. In 2010, Latis Research Consultants was contracted to evaluate the 2009 NPI prosperity projects (COM 12-2010). Their findings were delivered in 2011 (COM 05-2011). For each project, they identified number of units provided or users served, the outcome described in general terms (e.g., "increased access to services and programs," "increased household income"), and feedback organized by relevant Sustainable Livelihood Assets.

Later evaluations appear to have been conducted largely in-house, sometimes with the help of Niagara College students. One interviewee indicated that J. Sinclair & Associates also provided assistance coding the data, though the COM reports made no mention of this. Table 1 below provides an overview of the evaluations as of early in 2019.

Table 1: Prosperity project evaluations incorporating MSC questionnaire.

Responses from programs funded in[16]	Impacts reported by	Analyst, sample size and coding criteria	Source
2008	N/A	No MSC data collected.	N/A
2009	Nov 2012	Latis Consulting. Unknown.	COM 12-2010
2010[17]		Unknown.; n= unknown; code for Measures of poverty, Social determinants of health, Experiences of powerlessness and social exclusion, and Neighbourhoods and communities.	COM 44-2011;
2011	Dec 2013	Unknown analyst; n=295; code for 1+ of Sustainable Livelihood Assets for individual or household	COM 37-2013, page 4
2012	June 2015	Unknown analyst; n=245; code for 1+ of Sustainable Livelihood Assets for individual or household	COM 13-2015 & COM 13-2015 Appendix A

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[16] This includes either round of funding in a given year for years in which there are two RFPs issued.

[17] These data appear to have been analyzed again in 2013, though combined with the 2011 data (COM 37-2013: 5).

2013	May 2016	Unknown analyst; n=663; code for 1+ of Sustainable Livelihood Assets for individual or household	COM 12-2016 & Appendix A
2014	Nov 2016	Unknown analyst; n=453; coded for only one kind of Sustainable Livelihood asset.	COM 28-2016
2015	Not yet released	N/A	N/A
2016	Not yet released	N/A	N/A
2017	Not yet released	N/A	N/A
2018	Not yet released	N/A	N/A

NB: **n** refers to the number of responses collected and analyzed for that year. Current as of December 2018.

Drawing on practices espoused by the Vibrant Communities Initiative, a key mechanism for evaluating the success of any given prosperity project was the Most Significant Change (or MSC) Questionnaire. Apparently, this began with the 2009 prosperity projects, as we could find no mention in the COM reports regarding the 2008 round. Because its strengths and weaknesses are discussed at length in our report for Phase 2b, what follows is perfunctory.

In theory this instrument can generate lengthy responses[18]; when used to measure the impact of prosperity projects, it generally provided one to three sentences of responses. Over the years, the number of responses required from each prosperity project has fluctuated. The sampling procedure was never clearly explained in the COM reports, though interviews suggest that it is largely left to the whims of the service providers. Reportedly, it is often seen as a bother by agencies.

In practice, NPI uses these data collected using the MSC Questionnaire in two ways. First, each response is coded manually for the most relevant Sustainable Livelihoods Asset. In some years, all responses only received one code. In other years, all responses were eligible to be coded as multiple assets. This makes comparisons over time difficult. Second, a handful of responses are used to illustrate the effects of a particular prosperity program. While agencies may well use these data to inform their practice (as would be consistent with an anti-oppressive philosophy) interviewees did not mention if they knew of that happening.

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[18] The literature on the Most Significant Change technique refers to the output as 'testimonials' (e.g., Davis 2005). However, the vast majority of 3,000+ responses we observed did not meet the minimum length of the example testimonials shown in Davis (2005). In fact, most did not even answer all of the four questions.

As such, as noted on page 16 of our Phase 2B report, the NPI evaluations seem to be used primarily for external evaluation.

It should be noted that some interviewees were concerned that the MSC responses were not particularly useful. Their one use, if one reads between the lines, is that Regional Council seems to like them, as the selection of particularly evocative responses drove home the human dimension of poverty in Niagara.

More generally, some interviewees noted that much of what NPI collects about its prosperity programs are **measures of output** and not outcomes. While measures of output such as number of service-users served or number of persons directly employed is useful for describing and monitoring the kinds of services provided, such data are not useful for evaluating the short or long-term impact on poverty reduction, NPI's ostensible goal.

On a related note, interviewees reported that NPI received more data, broadly speaking, than they could analyze. While some of these data are necessary for compliance and monitoring (e.g., receipts, number of service-users), interviewees seemed to suggest that sometimes they collected data simply because they were told to. Interviewees also reported that service agencies not only complained about the amount of filing they have to do to operate an NPI prosperity project, but also argued this was time better spent with service-users.

Central to the NPI project today is the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework**. While four interviewees spoke of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework at length, their responses were unclear as to when NPI explicitly incorporated it. While we originally thought it had been incorporated from the start of NPI, documentary evidence suggests this framework was incorporated into NPI circa 2011-2012[19]. Recognizing this later addition underscores the iterative nature of how NPI has been designed over the years.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework originated in the field of international development for the purpose of informing rural poverty interventions in the Global South (e.g., Carloni and Crowley 2005; Krantz 2001; Solesbury 2003, Morse and McNamare 2013; The Tamarack Institute n.d.). Ignoring the issue of whether or not a model developed to reduce poverty in the Global South is appropriate for reducing poverty in the Global North[20], it seems to have entered into circulation in Canada largely through Tamarack's

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[19] By 2011, the responses from the MSC instrument are being organized along the five sustainable livelihood assets (COM 5-2011, Appendix B). None of the literature on Opportunities Niagara makes reference to it (Makhoul and Leviten-Reid 2006; Loewen and Makhoul 2009). Not until 2013 (COM 37-2013) is the term 'sustainable livelihood' found in the PHSS reports. Thus, while it is possible that the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (or Sustainable Livelihood Approach) influenced the formation of NPI before it was formally constituted in late 2008 and early 2009, we are aware of no documentary evidence to this point.

[20] In the Global South of the late 1980s and 1990s when the roots of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach were being developed, the extent and magnitude of poverty in those national contexts was substantially different from that of those experiencing poverty in the Global North. In most cases, the poor in the Global

Vibrant Communities Initiative. Central to this model are the **Five Sustainable Livelihood Assets**: human; social; physical; personal; and financial[21]. **Human assets** are roughly akin to traditional measures found in the economics literature on human capital: education, skills, training and health (COM 37-2013: 12; Tamarack n.d.). **Social assets** correspond to a sense of community and feeling of belonging, as well as the ability to call on those personal connections in times of need. **Physical assets** denote access to shelter, transportation, childcare, eldercare, food, access to food, and the like. **Personal assets** include self-esteem, self-control, self-knowledge, affect and attitude. **Financial capital** captures not just income, but also credit rating, savings, pensions and the like. Collectively, these five assets are known as the **Sustainable Livelihoods Pentagon**.

These five assets allow for not just a more nuanced understanding of prosperity and poverty[22], but in theory also provide additional avenues for measuring change at the individual and household level. Thus, poverty is viewed not as merely a financial state, but more generally related to one's ability to access a given **opportunity structure**. Acquiring 'more' of the five Sustainable Livelihood Assets is argued to provide a path out of poverty, as these lead to more opportunities as well as create more resilience among individuals, households, their communities and their neighborhoods[23].

By 2013 (NPI Logic Model Community Impact Report n.d.), NPI had revised the original **logic model** (COM 53-2008: 3-4) that had guided the development of NPI. Table 2 contains the 2008 logic model; Figure 2 shows the circa 2013 logic map. Comparing these reveals two features. Whereas the 2009 logic model linked objectives to outputs, and outputs to outcomes, the 2013 logic map incorporated a feedback loop between these three components, as well as adding more in-between steps. More importantly, comparing these

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North would not be considered poor in the Global South by many measures of poverty used in the Global South. Compared to the Global North, a much larger share of the population in the Global South still lives in poverty, and the extent of their deprivation is objectively worse. If we can be so crude, the opportunity structure confronting the poor in the Global North are much more amenable to reducing chronic and intergenerational poverty than those in the Global South. While it is beyond the scope of this report to develop this point further, it is worth seriously considering if the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is fit for purpose to guide poverty reduction interventions in the Global North.

[21] Sometimes 'assets' is replaced by 'capital' in the literature, including that of Tamarack, but not generally by NPI.

[22] Ebenzer Scrooge, for instance, would rank quite highly in terms of human, physical and financial assets, but poorly in terms of social assets. Being visited by the ghosts of Christmas might well cause him to re-evaluate his personal assets.

[23] Here the term *community* refers to a collection of persons with some tie between them, whether or nor they live close to each other. Examples include Italian immigrants to Ontario and their offspring, members of a Federal political party or adherents to religion. Conversely, the term *neighborhood* refers to a collection of persons who live in close geographical proximity to each other. Persons in a neighborhood may or may not also share a community with their neighbors. Bedroom communities, in which most residents commute far away to work and purchase many of their amenities in a more distant central city provide a modern-day example. However, neighbors can also share a community. Examples of such a shared community enabled by proximity are families who children all attend the same local school or members of the same neighborhood watch program.

two models reveals NPI continuing to use indicators that primarily measure outputs and not outcomes, even if the 2013 refers to these indicators as measures of outcomes[24]. Thus, while

Table 2 : Precursor Logic Model, 2008 (COM 53-2008: 3-4)

Objective	Output	Outcomes
1 To inform Council and the general public about the impact of poverty on our community and the strategies to reduce poverty	1a Reports prepared by staff to inform council's position regarding the following: ☐ Increase the amount of Working Income Tax Benefits ☐ Expand eligibility for Employment Insurance ☐ Increase the amount of Ontario Child Benefits ☐ Increase investment in early learning and child development ☐ Increase income assistance for food and shelter to lessen the social determinants of health gap ☐ Create a national affordable housing strategy ☐ Continue the Homelessness Partnership Strategy (HPS) 1b Showcase strategies that contribute to Niagara's positive economic growth 1c Market current transportation options to potential riders	1 Decrease poverty in Niagara through advocacy
2 To address the basic needs of Niagara's adults living in poverty through appropriate and flexible supports	2a Create an integrated labour market development plan 2b Launch Niagara Region's low-income household bursary program 2c Create a local housing strategy 2d Create a package of resources for distribution to local municipalities about human/social services 2e Create tools for local municipalities to use in investing in identified at-risk neighbourhoods; maps, data and resources 2f Double the allocation available in Niagara's Emergency Energy Fund 2g Develop opportunities for families to participate in recreational and cultural activities	2 Mitigate the effects of living in poverty on adults in Niagara
3 To increase programs and services for children living in poverty in Niagara	3a (i) Implement the Extended Employment Program to assist families with affordable housing	3 Mitigate the effects of poverty through programs

[24] Measures of outcome, to be effective for assessing short-term or long-term change, need to measure a variable of interest before and then after the intervention. In both logic maps, the preponderance of indicators measure quantities of intervention (e.g., number of NPI prosperity projects in a neighborhood; number of service-users), but don't actually measure if these projects were effective in reducing short- or long-term poverty.

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	(ii) Create an inventory of Breakfast Programs in Niagara (iii) Develop a plan to increase the # of children accessing Breakfast Programs in Niagara (iv) Distribute food vouchers to local food banks for families to use at local grocery stores 3b (i) Develop marketing strategies to increase parents' use of "Be a Good Parent" website (ii) Produce brochures to inform parents about OEYC and Family Resource Centres (iii) Develop a targeted resource centre for adolescent parents 3c Develop marketing strategies to increase the # of families that receive child care fee subsidy 3d (i) Provide allocations to each Mayor's Youth Advisory Council (ii) Provide bus passes for one year for youth to access public transportation (iii) Launch the Fort Erie Youth without Secure Housing and YWCA Transition Housing projects	and services for youth and children
4 To understand the relationship between the strategies used and outcomes achieved	4a (i) Develop a reporting framework and data tracking tools that link outcomes to strategies (e.g. Niagara Children's Charter) (ii) Analyze data and maps used to inform strategies and track outcomes	4 Monitor the progress of Niagara's strategies in reducing poverty

NB: This logic model was created before NPI was formally approved by Regional Council.

there was a new logic model (Figure 1), it did not appreciably improve how NPI evaluated its impact on long-term poverty reduction.

Figure 1: Revised NPI Logic Model, circa 2013.

NPI Logic Model

Vision			
Prosperity for Niagara Residents by Improving the Quality of Neighbourhood Life			

Community Outcomes

Strong and prosperous neighbourhoods (positive community impacts) neighbourhoods becoming cleaner, safer, friendlier, with more and better social supports	Greater engagement and inclusion (exclusion and powerlessness) - more neighbourhood residents are involved in civic life, identifying and analyzing issues and taking action to deal with community issues	Improved social determinants of health – improved collaboration between neighbourhood residents; and also between residents and institutions and among institutions and organizations themselves that are stakeholders in the neighbourhood	Improved economic prosperity (measures of poverty) – improved Early Development Instrument scores; increased rate of high school graduates; reduction of persons living below LICO; less unemployment; more affordable accommodations; increased health

En Route Outcomes Resulting from Actions

	Positive Community Impact	Indicator	Engagement & Inclusion	Indicator	Improving the Social Determinants of Health	Indicator	Measures of Prosperity	Indicator
Individual/household	**1A** - Improved public spaces in neighbourhoods	# of additional/transformed community spaces	**2A** - Increase opportunities for civic engagement	# of people directly or indirectly involved	**3A** - Increased access to services and programs	# of people served	**4A** - Increasing household income	Increased household income, better health outcomes
Organizations	**1B** - Strengthened capacity to lead and produce local change	# of networks or links formed	**2B** - Increased engagement with a broad and diverse set of organizations and leaders	# of diverse stakeholders	**3B** - Improved service delivery in neighbourhood	# of people served	**4B** - Increased resource sharing and integrated services	Amount & type of resources ($, #s)
Neighbourhoods	**1C** - Increased interventions that yield concrete benefits	# of programs and services	**2C** - Increased social capital and/or private sector investments	# of increases & decreases	**3C** - Increased resources dedicated to reducing poverty.	Amount & type of resources ($, #s)	**4C** - Increased resources dedicated to reducing poverty	Variances in neighbourhoods in need of attention and baseline
Region	**1D** - Contributes to poverty reduction activities at other levels of government	# of locally championed initiatives that began with NPI	**2D** - Contributes to initiatives that address more than one root cause of poverty.	# of NPI projects & # of neighbourhoods invested in	**3D** - Strengthened links between organizations and neighbourhood residents	# of neighbourhood partnerships resulting from NPI	**4D** - The number of neighbourhoods in need of attention decrease across the region	Variance between baseline neighbourhoods in need of attention & across the region

Actions

Neighbourhood leadership development and resident participation;	Mobilizing support in order to make systemic changes either by better alignment or advocating for more/better resources	Developing a neighbourhood plan	Increase capacity to attract private sector supports and engagement

Mechanisms

NPI Working tables, Community Developers	NPRN and Convener	Action research and learning from neighbourhood activities and engagement	Business Caucus and Convener

Inputs

Neighbourhood specific needs and assets	Knowledge and research	Across sector collaborations, partnerships and networks	Investment of financial and other resources

Feedback loop

Phase 3: NPI after the BEC (2015-present)

Whereas phase 2 in NPI's evolution was marked by getting it up and running, the third and current phase of NPI is marked by a pattern of normalcy. In part this can be detected by the reduction in the number of COM reports dealing with NPI. It is likewise consistent with the nature of COM reports dealing with NPI. Whereas in its early years, COM reports related to NPI took many different forms, by 2014 or so they began to appear in one of three varieties: reports about the upcoming round of funding; evaluations of completed prosperity projects; or RFPs for the Secretariat or Convener contracts.

Perhaps the biggest change during this phase was the movement of the Secretariat position from BEC to the United Way of Greater Fort Erie and Niagara Falls. In 2014, the Niagara Region tendered interest in bids for the Convener and Secretariat positions for 2015 (COM 23-3014). Unlike previous years, BEC did not receive the Secretariat contract. Instead, it went to United Way of Greater Fort Erie and Niagara Falls. Drawing on interviews, it appears that this had as much to do with the loss of key staff responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Secretariat since the start of NPI. Lacking a suitable replacement, BEC lost the contract to the United Way of Greater Fort Erie and Niagara Falls. It seems likely that the contract was awarded to them because they planned to employ the person who had previously been responsible for the day-to-day operations as the Project Manager (and now, the Secretariat's sole employee).

Aside from shifting the Secretariat contract to a new organization while retaining the person with the most institutional knowledge about running NPI, the remaining changes were of the fairly incremental variety. This can be seen as a reflection of NPI's organizational ethos, in turn influenced by the 'tinker with it until it works' practice of the Vibrant Communities Initiative.

By and large these changes had to do with improving the Secretariat's application, adjudication, monitoring and evaluation workflow. Perhaps the most significant change in the application process was the development of an online entry portal. While applicants were still expected to contact the Secretariat's project manager, interviews suggest the intention of the online entry portal was not only to reduce the amount of paperwork required for submission, but also to further standardize the application process with, for instance, the use of character limits on entry fields so as to train applicants to be succinct.

This also then fed through to the adjudication workflow, as some of the adjudicators on the NPI Proposal Review Committee favoured electronic copies of the applications. The 2015 Proposal Review Committee added an additional person in poverty (COM 14-2015), bringing the number of persons in poverty on the review committee to two. Additionally, there were slight changes in the proposal scoring process, a practice already underway before 2015.

Monitoring of contracts was likewise easier given the relative ease of searching electronic documents compared to paper ones.

With regards to evaluation, this online portal likely enabled some of the changes seen in the more recent COM reports. For instance, beginning with the 2013 evaluations, COM reports began noting discrepancies between estimated (or expected) and actual numbers of service-users:

> A tally of the final reports from the 2013 projects funded showed that:
>
> □ The expected number of people to be served from the 2013 projects was estimated at 8,346. The actual total number of people served as reported by the projects was 10,462, an increase of 25%
>
> □ The total number of networks, links and/or partnerships formed in the community was estimated at 1,058 but reported at being 1,294
>
> □ The number of people directly or indirectly involved in civic engagement activities was estimated at 7,640 but was reported at 10,860
>
> □ The number of jobs created and filled by people living in poverty was estimated in the applications at 33 but was reported at 30.
>
> (COM 12-2016, page 5)

While not described, it appears that these estimated and expected values are taken from the original applications for funding, whereas the actual numbers are taken from the end-of-project reporting. Likewise, these later evaluations provide these values for each project, usually in an appendix attached to the relevant COM report (COM 12-2016).

The final change of note is NPI's seeking assistance in evaluating its efficacy. COM C 6-2017 (that title is correct, including the C) from November 2017 reports on Community Services in partnership with Brock University being awarded $476,763 from the province's Local Poverty Fund Reduction (LPRF) to produce "a report outlining the state of poverty in Niagara using data from the 2016 census, an analysis on the impacts, outcomes, and value of Niagara Region's poverty reduction strategy (NPI) and offer recommendations on best practices moving forward" (page 1). This one-time funding begins in 2018 and terminates after three years.

IV. CONCLUSION

Given the role of Sustainable Livelihood framework, it is worth exploring its shortcomings. In particular, (Serrat 2008: 4) identifies four general weaknesses of the sustainable livelihood approach. He contends that it:

> [1] Underplays elements of the vulnerability context, such as macroeconomic trends and conflict;
> [2] Assumes that capital assets can be expanded in generalized and incremental fashion;
> [3] Does not pay enough attention to inequalities of power; and
> [4] Underplays the fact that enhancing the livelihoods of one group can undermine those of another.

> [Numbers and punctuation conventions not in original]

While his experiences are from the Global South, these are worth elaboration. His first speaks to the structural barriers or conditions that trap some people in poverty, but which are not amenable to any kind of neighborhood-based, let alone provincial policy. Exchange rates, for instance, are ostensibly the domain of the Bank of Canada, and even then only indirectly given the nature of free-floating exchange rates in the global economy. Likewise, trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but also General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and World Trade Organization (WTO) rulings, act at the scale of the national state, with peripheral localities, let alone their poorest residents, having essentially no power to force the federal government's hand.

Serrat's second point, given the nature of NPI's interventions, is not worth exploring. While in the Global South, rural poverty-reduction investments are often used to spur entrepreneurship by assisting with the purchase of machinery, tools, livestock and the like, NPI's prosperity programs by-and-large do not. Very few of NPI's programs are geared toward entrepreneurship. His third point, however, is worth exploring. In interviews, as well as in some documents --- most notably COM 37-2013 --- members of Niagara's anti-poverty community expressed concerns about differential access to NPI funding. Given the application process, agencies require competent grant writers. Likewise, to keep their grants, they require sufficient administrative infrastructure to meet NPI's reporting requirements. We suspect that this gives the larger organizations an advantage over smaller ones, all other things being equal. At the same time, NPI operates in an environment of limited budgets and high public scrutiny. Abolishing the reporting requirements is out of the question. Even relaxing reporting requirements should only be undertaken with the utmost care. Nonetheless, NPI navigates a knife edge between accountability and accessibility.

Serrat's fourth point may well be mitigated by and large, given that NPI operates with an ethos that their programs should not be means-tested, which in turn means that most groups would not be excluded. However, groups can also be organized by location. And complaints about the distribution of funding across the twelve municipalities are one example of his critique.

The Secretariat and its affiliated prosperity projects are unlikely to do more than alleviate poverty given it does little to fund interventions that reduce or eliminate the structural causes of poverty. The MSC tool is useful for identifying how NPI's prosperity programs in a general sense alleviate poverty. However, the MSC tool is not suitable for identifying any sort of long-lasting reductions in poverty. To be clear, neither rely on ecological indicators of the sort found in the NPI Mapping Tool.

The Convener position, though it only receives $50,000 --- one-thirtieth of NPI's annual funding --- paradoxically is more likely to influence the structures that produce long-term poverty. In particular, this is most likely to happen through NPRN's lobbying work (carried out not by the Convener, but members of various NPRN Working Groups), and in particular its members' ability to pose long-term solutions to policy makers of all political parties in regard to reducing precarity, considering living wage legislation, or extending dental care to more Ontarians. These observations are drawn from Boggs' indirect affiliation with the NPRN's Working Group on Wages and Employment, in the guise of the PEPiN project and attendance of meetings regarding dental care from 2017 to 2019. However, doing this requires it to be staffed by someone who collaborates effectively with the NPRN. Another necessary but not sufficient condition is that the convener avoids any kind of municipal parochialism.

At the same time, this division of labor, with the Secretariat focusing on short-term poverty alleviation and perhaps capacity building, and the Convener enabling legislative work, does suggests that NPI is meeting all its original mandates, even if its project evaluation process falls short. Furthermore, the existence of NPI funding employs a cadre of anti-poverty service-providers who frequently populate the NPRN, allowing them to draw on their professional experience to inform the direction of legislative advocacy.

At this juncture, the question is how to keep what works and fix what doesn't. The devil's advocate would argue that until NPI develops and implements a mechanism for measuring the impact of any given prosperity project in reducing participants' poverty, they will never know what does work, let alone what doesn't. In its current form, NPI exists in a state shared with that of Schroedinger's Cat, although unlike the cat, the two states are 'NPI is / is not effective at reducing poverty.' After more than ten years and 15 million dollars, it is time to know.

And this solution might involve abandoning the Sustainable Livelihoods framework. COM records (i.e., COM 37-2013) suggest that this framework was not initially used explicitly but instead was grafted into the NPI structure sometime after NPI's foundation. Because we did not ask interviewees to reconstruct a year-by-year timeline, we cannot be sure if this framework informed NPI's foundation. If it did not, it might explain some of NPI's evaluation problems. Being informed by the Vibrant Communities Initiative, NPI's supporters adopted a reflexive, learning-by-doing approach to running the program and eschewed a rigid evaluation scheme with numerical targets or one-size-fits-all indicators.

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Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation Research Project, Phase 1C Report

A Qualitative Study of the Impacts of the NPI's Poverty-Reduction Projects

Brock University

February 2021

REPORT CONTENTS

Introduction

Since 2008, the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) has worked closely with community leaders to identify the needs of low-income families and communities in Niagara and to provide funding to respond to these needs through neighbourhood-based projects delivered by nonprofit agencies and community organizations. In the first decade of making poverty-reduction grants, 2009-2018, the NPI worked with 85 organizations in the Niagara Region to support over 350 projects.

This report presents findings one phase of a multi-phase evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. The goal of Phase 1C is to describe long-term impacts of these NPI-supported projects and the NPI's funding program overall. While annual reporting provides a snapshot of projects' immediate outcomes, the purpose of this study is to take a longer-term view by identifying benefits and limitations of the projects that have taken place since 2009. Nonprofit agency staff who delivered projects during this first decade are best positioned to evaluate the impacts of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative beyond the one or two-year duration of their projects. Their insights provide the substance of this report. In addition to describing impacts, project leaders were invited to comment on their experiences applying for funding, evaluating their projects and reporting outcomes to the NPI.

After a brief description of how this research was designed, we contextualize poverty-reduction efforts by describing some of the wider social conditions that project leaders said limits their work. We start with obstacles to poverty-reduction in order to emphasize the monumental challenges nonprofit agencies face as they try to make a difference locally without access to policy levers or sustained and substantial resources. Next, we describe the variety of ways NPI-funded projects have been impactful through the services they provide to individuals and families, as well as communities. We also consider the impacts of the NPI on grant-recipient agencies and the staff who carry out projects. Finally, we convey the critical feedback project leaders had about the NPI with respect to the length of funding terms, competitiveness among agencies generated by the proposal model, and the NPI's reporting requirements.

Research Design

This report on Phase 1c is the culmination of a two-year process combining educational and research goals. The data for the report was generated by students in a Brock University Sociology course, SOCI4P00 Engaging the Sociological Imagination. In fall 2018 and 2019, 65 senior undergraduate students, whose names are listed in the appendix, collaborated in this research by interviewing former NPI project leaders and transcribing their interviews. The report was authored by the course instructor, Dr. MB Raddon, the research coordinator for Phase 1C, Sarah Morningstar, and a former student who took the course in 2019 and conducted one of the interviews, Rahima Bouchaffra.

The findings of this report are based on 46 interviews with former NPI project leaders about the long-term impacts of their NPI funding. The design of this interview study was reviewed by the Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance (REB 18-004) shortly after the larger NPI Evaluation Research Project also received clearance (File REB 17-411). In this report, we refer to project leaders by first name pseudonyms. We generally indicate the category of project they describe, unless doing so would

increase the likelihood that a participant would be identifiable to readers familiar with the NPI or Niagara's nonprofit poverty-reduction agencies.

Project leaders were selected from a list of all NPI-funded projects based on how long it had been since the program received funding. We omitted some of the earliest projects and some of the most recent, choosing a timeframe long enough for long-term impacts to be revealed but not so long in the past that project leaders could not be reasonably expected to recall details. Using the NPI's categorization of the projects, for the 2018 interviews, we selected projects from four categories:

- Assistance with Shelter
- Community Gardens
- Direct Services
- Education and Literacy

For the 2019 interviews, we selected from the remaining categories and continued to research in the category of Education and Literacy:

- Access to Food
- Community Development and Engagement
- Education and Literacy
- Job Specific Skills
- Life Skills
- Transportation Initiatives

In our selection of projects, we also sought to include a diversity of agencies, large and small, and a range of geographical locations, as well as projects that served distinctive groups in Niagara such as Indigenous peoples and people with disabilities.

Within these parameters and with the goal of approximately 25 interviews a year, we refined the list of NPI-funded projects to be included to this study. The research coordinator, Sarah Morningstar, confirmed contact information for project leaders and initiated contact through telephone calls. A follow up email included a letter of invitation and consent form describing the study and what participation would entail. Upon agreement to participate, project leaders were advised that they would be contacted directly by student interviewers four to six weeks later. As mentioned, the interviews were conducted by fourth-year Sociology students enrolled in SOCI4P00, a course in problem-based learning, which guides students to integrate theory and practice and develop skills in applied research. In 2018 and 2019, to prepare for this interview study, the students read and engaged in discussion about complex poverty, generated reports on their prior knowledge and emerging questions, and wrote formal literature reviews about the categories of NPI's work that their interviews would address.

Although the SOCI4P00 students were novice researchers, their unfamiliarity with the field of nonprofit social services and their lack of specialized language in some ways contributed to their effectiveness as interviewers. Project leaders needed to use everyday language to be sure to be understood by their interviewers. What's more, project leaders' interest in teaching about the urgency of poverty reduction, and the students' receptivity to learning about the needs of clients, the work of the agencies, and the obstacles they faced in delivering services, and so on, gave the interview data a quality of earnestness.

The students' interest in the issues, coupled with their inexperience with the field of nonprofit social services, served to remind seasoned practitioners that their stories were important and not outworn.

In August 2018, 31 project leaders were contacted, of whom 28 agreed to an interview, 26 were ultimately interviewed and consented to their interviews being included in the study. Interviews were conducted in late October and early November by individual students at the participants' choice of location, whether at the Brock campus or their workplace. The following year, 46 project leaders were contacted, of whom 25 agreed, 21 were interviewed and 20 consented to their interview being included in the study. The project chosen for 2019 interviews tended to have taken place earlier in the NPI's history, which accounts for the lower rate of former leaders agreeing to take part in an interview. In the second year, interviews were conducted by pairs of student interviewers, which improved the quality of the data because students tended to feel more confident in pairs and asked more follow-up questions. During the 2019 selection process, a list of potential participants was divided between the SOCI4P00 course and other members of the Brock NPI Evaluation research team to ensure that the research team was not over-burdening participants. This cooperation with other researchers narrowed the list of potential participants for students to interview about long-term impacts and required that we draw from older projects.

Students were instructed to familiarize themselves with the agency and the specific project prior to the interview, rehearse with the interview guide, and be clear about the meaning of each question. Furthermore, student interviewers were encouraged to follow the interview guide closely, including the ordering and wording of the questions, and, if needed, repeat questions for the participant. Student interviewers were taught to ask open-ended questions and encourage participants to illustrate their experiences with specific stories. Lastly, because agencies often run multiple, inter-related projects, the student interviewers were advised to focus the interview on one specified project and, if necessary, gently guide the participant back to discussion of that project. In the second year, Sarah Morningstar reviewed transcripts from the previous year's interviews and prepared a set of tips to help the next group of student interviewers improve upon the work of their peers.

The overarching goal of the interviews was to understand the long-term impacts of these NPI-funded projects, especially those that may have gone unnoticed when the immediate outcomes were documented. The interviews were organized around seven broad topics. Project leaders were first asked to discuss results that were planned, as well as any unexpected outcomes or impacts of their projects, and to think about all the ways in which the program lives on, as far as they are aware. This first set of questions concerned the impacts of the project over time by asking the participants to describe what happened as a result of this project in a general way, and how the project continued, grew or changed, if at all. For example, did the project influence any future projects or programs? Were any community assets generated as a result of the original project? Which of these impacts continue to be important? The second topic focused on impacts related to people and explored how the project impacted the lives of participants, volunteers and staff over time. The third part focused on the impacts the project had on the leader's organization. For example, did the project shape the organization's relationships, partnerships or reputation, and were there any key lessons learned as a result of the NPI-funded project? The fourth set of questions discussed the projects' impacts on the leaders themselves. This question touched on a range of possible impacts, from life lessons to career advancement, including changes to employment, professional knowledge and skills, expanded interpersonal networks or new

relationships that came about as a result of the project. The fifth set of questions explored any missed opportunities or unanticipated negative impacts. Here interviewers inquired about any changes the project leader would make in the design of the project if they could go back in time, as well as factors beyond their control that may have limited the project's long-term impacts. The overall legacy of the project was the focus of the sixth set of questions, which asked participants to reflect on all the ways the project touched people and brought about change. What legacies should be remembered from the project and what was its most important legacy? The last set of questions delved into lessons for the NPI that could be taken away as a result of funding the specified project. Participants were asked to comment on the process of evaluating their project and how, from their perspective, evaluation could be made more informative and easier to perform. To conclude the interview, participants were asked to draw lessons for poverty reduction advocates in the Niagara Region. Specifically, what might we learn from having funded this project through the Niagara Prosperity Initiative?

In total 77 project leaders from 28 agencies were contacted over the two-year period resulting in the 46 interviews about 40 unique projects in the Niagara Region.

Limitations on Projects' Outcomes

Before reporting on the long-term impacts of NPI funding for grant recipients and their service-users, we need to consider the complex barriers to reducing the incidence and severity of poverty. Leaders acknowledged that they were not always able to intervene in systemic conditions that prevail in Niagara, which are not unique to this region. As project leaders delivered time-limited, small scale projects, they were forced to acknowledge the extent to which factors beyond their control undermined their ability to support clients and help them prosper. The major barriers they described included Niagara's low-wage service economy and the inadequacy of income supports for those who lack paid work or are unable to work, a lack of mental health and psychiatric services, unaffordable housing, and limited access to transportation. Some also spoke about their agencies' lack of resources to meet demand for their services, which forced them to implement waitlists, acknowledging that waitlists were a limited strategy and an indicator of enormous unmet need for the kinds of services their projects offer.

Lack of Jobs and Insufficient Income Supports

As poverty is, by definition, tied to low income, efforts to remediate poverty are circumscribed by job availability, legislated minimum wage levels that are inadequate to help people escape poverty even when working full time hours, and insufficient income supports for people who cannot work at a job due to disability, poor health, or care-giving responsibilities. This set of interviews about the long-term impacts of poverty reduction projects did not set out to discuss causes of poverty, so some of the fundamental and self-evident social conditions affecting participation in poverty-reduction programs-- particularly, lack of jobs and weak income support programs--were not discussed overtly. Leaders of projects geared at job readiness or income generation sometimes reflected on how Niagara's labour market affects their clients' job prospects and their projects' effectiveness, but most leaders understood that their interventions would not greatly alter clients' financial circumstances. In other words, a lack of good jobs in Niagara combined with ungenerous income support programs evidently keep clients poor, but changing these circumstances requires policy interventions and programs that are beyond the scope of NPI-funded projects.

The limitations of projects to significantly raise clients' incomes does not diminish the importance of what they do contribute. For example, in many cases, poverty-reduction workers served clients who were not "job-ready," as Colleen explained:

> In terms of employment, and being realistic, that was not going to happen for this particular project and the population that we were working with. It could happen maybe five years down the road but not immediately because of their physical and mental health issues to overcome.

Barbara's agency served a similar population and in her experience over 18 years, "employment, self-employment and mental health issues were just the tip of the iceberg" of clients' needs. For some clients with complex needs, access to jobs and better income supports would not be a complete solution to their chronic poverty. Nevertheless, the many NPI-funded projects designed to help people overcome the social isolation, shame and trauma associated with poverty would be many times more effective if clients were also guaranteed sufficient income supports and access to gainful employment.

Mental Health and Psychiatric Services

Agencies delivering poverty-reduction programs with a singular, material focus to their work, such as food security, housing, literacy, employment or transportation services, often commented on the limitations they experienced serving people with complex needs related to emotional and psychiatric health. As Colleen described the problem in relation to her efforts to provide housing support, the program was vital but "the support ratio was unrealistic." In particular, the clients she served had suffered complex trauma and needed healing supports, including psychiatric services, in order to fully benefit from the programs her agency offered:

> People need more intensive psychiatric treatment and there was no treatment in the area. Assessment would be nice and there was not any of that. So, we found that Niagara is lacking in services that could really make a difference for people.

Community development-oriented projects that sought to support people with a range of basic everyday needs such as safety, companionship and life skills also noted clients' mental health and psychiatric needs as barrier to program participation. Agencies were often understaffed or struggled to properly train staff and volunteers to support their neediest clients, as Paul explained:

> So, if you're a paid receptionist at a [nonprofit agency], then you're trained to deal with conflict resolution but you're in a different state than someone with intensive mental health disorders who is just trying to learn to get their feet in the workplace again. [When you put service users in reception roles as volunteers without good training], you could wreck it. So that's the last thing I want to see, but it is what happens at drop-in centers. Hang out for a day and you're going to see someone scream at someone.

More mental health and psychiatric services designed for and accessible to people experiencing persistent, complex poverty was identified as a requirement for NPI-funded projects to be more effective.

Affordable Housing

Project leaders observed that their clients commonly struggle with life problems stemming from unaffordable housing, which NPI programs had limited ability to ameliorate on a significant scale. Housing unaffordability resulted from the combination of substantial rent increases in recent years and

the failure of income support programs and the minimum wage to keep up with rent hikes and inflation more generally. As Paul indicated, Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program have increased by only 1.5 percent over the past five years, while housing rents increased by 1.8 percent each year, and hydro and gas increased by up to 10 percent some years. Consequently, many more people are unable to sustain themselves in their current rental situations or afford to move into more affordable housing. Waitlists for subsidized housing take up to seven years. Agencies that aim to help people find affordable housing are hampered by increasing living costs and stagnant incomes, as Tanya pointed out:

> The hideous increase in rents available for housing is beyond my control. I think that the inability of the system to actually have benefits for social assistance that are actually adequate for your basic standard of living [and] even things like the [insufficient] minimum wage, keep trapping people in poverty.

In the face of low-income renters' systemic economic disadvantage, Paul added that working to house people in Niagara is a mounting challenge for service providers:

> Even if I house you today, there's no long-term guarantee that your income is going to follow that trajectory [of inflation].

Housing affordability has been affected by the economic strategy of Niagara's municipalities to promote tourism and cultural industries. Kim stated that within the last two years about 2,000 rental housing units in Niagara Falls had been converted into Airbnb vacation accommodations, which has contributed to a low vacancy rate and shortage of affordable apartments for low-income residents. A similar conversion of rental housing has been occurring with motels in St. Catharines and elsewhere in Niagara. Motels that until recently housed people in single-room occupancy rentals have been sold to high-end developers seeking to expand beyond Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area to tourist destinations like Niagara.

Motel retrofitting to create tourist-oriented luxury accommodations is but one example of downtown gentrification, a multi-faceted process that has reduced the supply of affordable housing and displaced low-income residents across many parts of Niagara, but especially in cities such as St. Catharines. As Barbara explained, gentrification also takes place through the rental housing market.

> [Low-income renters are pushed out of the market through] the conversion of rentals, called 'reno-victions,' where landlords are coming in and wanting [to buy up] these lower priced units. They're going to renovate them, and these people have to leave. That whole housing scene is probably affecting the long-term success of any housing program.

Barbara stressed that communities in Niagara are gentrifying so rapidly that current housing programs cannot respond to prevent displacement and assist those affected. Kim pointed out that low-income people seeking affordable housing cannot easily cross over into rental markets aimed at a higher income demographic:

> If [I am] a landlord and somebody comes to me saying, 'I just graduated from Brock with my Masters,' and then somebody comes, 'well, I'm on ODSP,' you know, I'm going to rent to the person with the potential of getting a job. For that client group that NPI is helping, we've run out of a very important resource, the housing market.

Demand for student rentals also drives up housing costs, as Maria explained:

> The pressure on the housing market with students, especially-- Say there is a three- to four-bedroom house, which we need for the larger families. A landlord can get $2,500 to $3000 a month from students, versus, there is no way a family on social assistance, like a family of five, a woman and four children, the max they get for shelter is $815 dollars. I have not been able to find housing below $1500 plus bills.

Mark commented that different clients need different types of housing: affordable rental housing, emergency housing, and transitional housing. The Niagara Region lacks capacity to meet housing needs across all types of housing resources. More purpose-built affordable housing is needed to meet this range of needs, as Mark pointed out:

> We need to build more units. We have thousands of people on waiting lists, and these are not easy clients to bring to landlords either. Some might have two pets, and landlords don't want pets, and they [renters] don't want to give their pet up.

Leslie remarked that the importance of secure housing to human health and quality of life is seldom understood in a deeply felt sense by people who have never themselves experienced homelessness:

> Housing, as everyone knows, is essential but something no one thinks about until they find themselves homeless. Having safe, secure, affordable housing helps people excel at other things.

Insecurely housed clients are unable to receive the benefits of many NPI programs. For instance, Maria's organization ran an educational program for women, but her participants were too concerned with their housing needs to learn much:

> We've started classes and we have maybe five percent of their attention. The majority is, where am I going to live, I need to move, I need to get housing, because majority of these women are in shelters or a room in someone's house.

As Maria explained, for clients in improvised sleeping arrangements or shelters, finding and keeping an affordable home is a full-time mental preoccupation, which limits their ability to fully participate in opportunities that would otherwise help them.

Access to transportation

Another significant issue that limited participation in NPI-supported projects was clients' lack of transportation to project sites. Like the problem of unaffordable housing, lack of access to transportation is a poverty trap: a form of deprivation in itself and an impediment to attaining other needs such as better housing, employment, education, health and social services, household provisioning, community involvement, and a personal support system of friends and family. As Amanda stated about transportation issues generally: "We know our clients still spend a day for a one-hour appointment somewhere. That's unreasonable!"

Interview participants representing agencies across various geographical locations in Niagara explained how clients' transportation needs restricted access to the services and programs they offered. Geographical immobility due to low income affected some demographics more than others: children who depend on an adult to bring them to programs; young people and seniors who do not drive, and

anyone with a suspended driver's license; people with disabilities who need assistance or specialized vehicles to get places; and parents of babies and toddlers whose need for car seats and strollers complicates getting around. Clients from rural areas, towns and parts of cities under-served by public transportation reported difficulties getting to appointments. Across the region, many people simply could not afford to get to programs because of the costs of bus fare, vehicle ownership, maintenance, and fuel.

In the experience of NPI-funded project leaders, low-income residents in the Niagara Region and its municipalities are not well served by public transportation. For example, reliable, accessible bus service is needed by those who rely on overnight shelter, as Paul explained: "Because there's only two cities that have shelters in the whole region, ...you have to get on a bus. And you must be in the shelter the moment it's open." However, interview participants argued that city transit systems can be difficult to navigate because of confusing schedules or long, complex routes with many stops. They pointed out that less affluent neighbourhoods often lack bus routes and weekend services. Clients are exposed to summer heat or winter cold during long walks and bus shelters waits. Project leaders also considered the intermunicipal transit system inadequate to the needs of their clients. Even when the NPI provided agencies with bus tickets for service users, as several did in more recent years, taxis were sometimes the best available option, despite being the most expensive, as Amanda explained:

> It is very difficult to demonstrate to someone why the public transportation system might be an option for them rather than you know a very expensive cab ride. And for some who is marginalized, for someone who is dealing with mental health issues or trauma, is the conventional transit system the best way to transport them to particularly sensitive appointments or outside of their own community?

For this complex array of reasons, transportation issues often prevented people who needed NPI-funded projects attending regularly or even finding programs in the first place because clients often learned about services through outdoor signage. Transportation issues also limited the number of volunteers who could be involved with projects.

Agencies' Inability to Meet Demand for Services

The final limitation that some organizations experienced was simply that they were unable to meet the demand for their services, which included but was not limited to their NPI-funded projects. Four interview participants reported that they needed to implement waitlists for various types of services. These waitlists tended to be long, even beyond the duration of the project. In one case, a community garden had more demand than they could meet for individual plots. At another agency, a waitlist was created for young clients who wanted to participate in educational workshops and programs that focused on self-esteem and skill-building. Elsewhere, individuals were unable to access housing services, and others were unable to stay at a shelter due to time limits on the length of stay. The long waitlists for shelters can have severe consequences for clients as housing instability can create or exacerbate mental illnesses. One agency managed to adjust to this limitation by sending outreach workers to assist clients in need while they were on a waiting list. The outreach workers helped monitor clients' well-being, but more material support was always needed. In most cases, as interview participants pointed out, the waitlist problem could be rectified only through increased agency funding to hire more staff, which is beyond the parameters of the NPI.

Long-term Impacts of NPI Funding

Having acknowledged that there are serious structural obstacles to raising incomes and living standards and lifting people out of poverty, the next part of this report shows that NPI grant-recipients have spearheaded many valuable initiatives, which do a lot to alleviate socio-economic hardship and make a difference to poverty in the Region despite limitations.

The NPI has documented the *outputs* and *outcomes* of the hundreds of projects it has funded to date through quarterly and final reporting by recipient organizations. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the *impact* of the NPI as a continuous program. "Impact" refers to the long-term or systemic difference a program makes, which service-providers seldom attempt to research in a systematic way.[1] When speaking of impact, we are asking about lasting changes that have come about as a result of the NPI's funding of many different organizations and projects. In other words, how effective has the NPI been in its goal to alleviate and prevent poverty when viewed as a unified program and as more than a collection of projects?

To show the NPI's impact over time is not straightforward, as individual projects' reporting data is insufficient to this task and population-level statistics are not fine-grained enough to measure the NPI's effects. There is no natural experiment that could allow us to show what the Niagara Region would be like if we did not have the NPI's annual investment. Even though the funded projects have been numerous and have touched thousands of people, they have been relatively small scale and short-lived interventions, which cannot be expected to 'move the needle' on the nine key indicators of poverty that the NPI has mapped by neighbourhood at the population level.[2]

Qualitative analysis of in-depth retrospective interviews across the spectrum of NPI-funded projects can provide insight into the NPI's impact. The project leaders described how their work affected the individuals or families who received benefits, the communities or neighbourhoods that were bolstered, the nonprofit organizations that grew more adept in their responses to poverty, the service providers who developed skills and leadership capacities, and the field of poverty reduction in Niagara as a whole, which became better resourced and resourceful over time. By connecting the dots across the set of interviews, we bring into view a picture of the various ways the NPI has made a long-term difference.

Impacts on Individuals and Families

Taking the preponderance of project leaders' accounts as evidence, the NPI's strongest impact was achieved through supportive interventions that changed the lives of individuals and families (in contrast to projects aimed at communities or neighbourhoods). This finding is to be expected as at least a third of NPI funded projects within the first decade targeted outcomes at the level of the individual. Also, most

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[1] According to Lasby, David. 2019. *The State of Evaluation: Measurement and Evaluation Practices in Canada's Charitable Sector*, only about a third of Canadian charities evaluate impact. Accessed at https://www.imaginecanada.ca/sites/default/files/2019-06/state_of_evaluation-national_report.pdf

[2] The following key indicators of poverty inform the NPI's identification of priority neighbourhoods: percent of households below the low income measure, household income under $20,000 after tax, working poverty, income inequality, tenants paying 30% or more income on rent, percent unemployed, percent of adults (age 25 to 64) without a high school diploma, percent of kindergarten children measuring low on the early development instrument (EDI), and the number of child care subsidy recipients per 100 children.

projects, including those aimed at community level outcomes, allowed project leaders and volunteers to get to know service users personally and engage them in caring, respectful interpersonal relationships that generate psycho-social wellbeing.

Discussions of impact carry implicit theories of the causes of poverty. After all, to reduce poverty requires resolving its contributing factors. Through the lens of social work theory and related fields, poverty-reduction strategies that intervene mainly on the level of the individual are controversial.[3] Indeed, interventions focusing on individuals are sometimes cast on the wrong side of poverty-reduction debates, the side that critical scholars tend to repudiate.[4] At their most polarized, such debates pit behavioral approaches, including coaching, training and education, against more structurally and politically oriented strategies and ask "whether social work can actually combat poverty by empowering individuals or should [interventions] rather invest in changing the structural conditions in which people in poverty live."[5] Critics of individualized projects, programs and policies contend that such approaches sometimes succeed in lifting specific people out of poverty but do little to change overall rates of poverty.[6] In fact, many of the NPI project leaders we spoke with held this critique and admitted that their work felt more like a "stop gap measure" than a lasting solution, or more like a "band-aid" than effective medicine to cure a major social malady.

Some critics worry that individualized poverty-reduction approaches may actually do harm to the extent that they locate the problem of poverty in individual deficiencies, thus appearing to blame the victim rather than point attention and resources toward changing larger processes such as the loss of unionized work and growth of precarious jobs, declining real wages, fragmentated social safety nets, structural racism, and lack of affordability of major expenses such as childcare, housing, and post-secondary education. In light of these critiques of approaches to poverty that seek to change individuals' behaviour, it is important to recognize that we saw no indication that poverty workers interviewed for this study blame project participants for their hardships. Nor did the project leaders we interviewed give any indication of holding naïve beliefs, either that the service-users they helped could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, or that their projects were a panacea for poverty on the population level.

A wise intervention in this debate about the best way nonprofits can be impactful in reducing and preventing poverty comes from social work scholars, Michael Jindra and Ines Jindra. They argue that the dilemma between "transforming society vs transforming the self" is unnecessary and unproductive as "both are important."[7] They prescribe a diverse set of approaches by nonprofits, which they characterize as "relational work." As mentioned earlier in this report, the anti-poverty relational work of nonprofits involves helping people set goals while giving them the individualized coaching, training and referrals they need to gain control over the aspects of their lives that are within their control. The concept of relational work describes many of the NPI-funded projects that achieve impact by making a long-term

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[3] Jindra, Michael, and Ines W. Jindra. 2016. "Poverty and the Controversial Work of Nonprofits." *Society* 53 (6):634-640. doi: 10.1007/s12115-016-0077-6.

[4] see Fischer, Andrew Martin. 2018. *Poverty as Ideology: Rescuing Social Justice from Global Development Agendas*. London: Zed.

[5] Boone, Katrien, Griet Roets, and Rudi Roose. 2018. "Social Work, Poverty and Anti-Poverty Strategies: Creating Cultural Forums." *The British Journal of Social Work* 48 (8), p. 2382.

[6] Mark, R. Rank. 2011. "Rethinking American Poverty." *Contexts* 10 (2):16-21. doi: 10.1177/1536504211408794.

[7] Jindra, Michael, and Ines W. Jindra. 2016. "Poverty and the Controversial Work of Nonprofits." *Society* 53 (6): 634.

difference in people's quality of life. According to our interviews with project leaders, individual-level interventions have mainly supported people in the following four ways: employment and self-employment, education and training, social integration, and compassionate responses to complex poverty with an emphasis on palliative public health care for people with chronic conditions who are not well served by the formal health care system.

1. Employment and Self-employment

Several NPI project leaders indicated that participants had been helped to find paid work, in some cases, their first job. Success stories on the theme of employment were not limited to projects that provided job training, skills matching, interview practice or resumé preparation; leaders of many different projects could point to a participant who had moved on to find work after participating in a project. Service users who struggled with traditional employment were sometimes supported to pursue self-employment through a microenterprise such a yard work business or the sale of artwork or crafts. Although research shows that micro-enterprises seldom provide more than supplemental income, project leaders noted that participants took satisfaction from having entrepreneurial and creative outlets.[8]

Gaining employment is often presumed to be the most promising pathway out of poverty. The strategy involves starting out in the low-wage labour market to gain experience before moving up to a higher-paying job. The support of intermediaries, especially those who help match people to jobs, makes all the difference to anti-poverty employment strategies, and some NPI project served in this way.[9] However, some project leaders argued that their employment-related impacts were only part of their broad mission to help all clients. The emphasized that their energies were not directed only toward those with the best job prospects. For example, Michelle, who led an NPI-funded project that combined upcycling of donated goods with labour market preparation, reported on participants gaining a sense of inclusion as a lasting outcome of her project:

> There have been so many people through so many years that have success stories… People sort of move along. It is all about people engaging in society, in the community, in some way. We really have to build a community that is inclusive, and we see success in smaller ways too. Maybe that you actually came back the next day, maybe you sat down and started to engage with staff.

Michelle affirmed her project's success in terms of helping people attain paid work, but she also placed importance on relational work with all participants, including whose who are a long way from job readiness.

2. Education and Skills Training

A second type of lasting impact for individuals was derived from education and training, whose benefits were thought to be experienced over a lifetime. Given that social disadvantage, especially deficits in education, accumulate over time and generation, projects for new parents, children, and youth

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[8] Jurik, Nancy C. 2005. *Bootstrap Dreams: U.S. Microenterprise Development in an Era of Welfare Reform*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
[9] Rank, Mark R. 2006. "Pathways Out of Poverty." *Work and Occupations* 33 (3):263-270.

potentially have the largest impact of all educational projects.[10] Over the years, NPI-funded projects have delivered education and skill development in many areas: literacy skills, academic skills for children and youth, gardening and food preparation, parenting, personal finance, conflict resolution, and other life skills.

These educational projects also sought to teach less tangible social skills and foster psycho-emotional well-being. For example, Lindsay, the project leader of a summer camp for low-income children, who came to know the same children over a two-year period, commented on the long-term impact of fostering children's self-confidence and hope for their future selves: [11]

> Conversations shifted over the couple of years. You could start seeing the kids being able to articulate the difference [in their self-concept]. For example, there was one little boy who always said he was going to deliver pizzas when he grew up, but he changed his story because now he knew he could deliver pizzas to pay for university, then after university do something else.

Project leaders recognized that teaching skills was not enough in itself to make a difference in people's lives. The benefits of educational projects could be realized only when new skills or know-how stimulated self-efficacy, the perception that one is capable of meeting challenges. As project leader Eva explained,

> You definitely need to have skills with cooking, skills with budgeting, or whatever, those are all important skills, but our project was [also] about people seeing and finding some inner strength and being able to start to take some control in their lives where things didn't ever feel like they had control.

For Eva, who led a life skills project, self-efficacy and agentic behaviour was the most important outgrowth of learning to apply the skills she taught. Further, many project leaders saw self-efficacy as a foundation for further learning. Considering the damage poverty does to self-efficacy, achieving psychosocial change in this area can have long term benefits.[12]

3. Inclusion and Belonging

Jim Silver, a scholar of urban poverty who works on anti-poverty initiatives in Winnipeg, describes complex poverty as a process of social exclusion and marginalization with a devastating, self-reinforcing psychological element:

> People who are poor, especially those who experience complex poverty, often blame themselves for their circumstances... This may especially be the case for the racialized poor and for Aboriginal people with their experience of colonialism. Blaming themselves and their own personal failings--consistent with what society tells them--often produces a lack of self-

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[10] Heckman, James J. 2013. *Giving Kids a Fair Chance: A Strategy that Works*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

[11] See also Gomez, Karen and Floyd D. Beachum. 2019. "The 'Voice' of Children of Poverty: Candid Insights to Their Career Aspirations and Perceptions of Self-Efficacy." *The Urban Review* 51 (5): 724–747.

[12] Callander, E. J. and D. J. Schofield. 2016. The impact of poverty on self-efficacy: an Australian longitudinal study. *Occupational Medicine (Oxford)*. 66 (4): 320–325.

confidence, a lack of self-esteem, and in some cases even a sense of personal worthlessness and hopelessness. These attitudes dramatically increase the likelihood that a person will stay poor and, to the extent that they are passed on to children, poverty will be reproduced across generations.[13]

In a society that attributes economic success to individual talent and hard work, an insidious aspect of poverty is the way it appears and feels symptomatic of personal failure. The internalized shame of poverty is debilitating, leading to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal.[14]

Many NPI-funded projects exert a lasting impact through counteracting the dynamics of shame and loneliness by drawing people into interpersonal relationships and kindling positive emotions. For example, Rachel, a project leader of a community garden, described how people left group gardening sessions feeling happier than when they came. While Rachel described these impacts as somewhat "nebulous," she was convinced that contributing to the garden was a way of growing a sense of belonging. Other leaders of various projects similarly spoke of the positive feelings--from the moments of ebullient celebration to that time a taciturn participant simply cracked a smile--that were generated within "judgement free spaces" in the course of leisure activities.[15]

Another community garden project leader, Julie, described the primary impact of her work in terms of bringing people into connection with a broader community:

> Clearly, [community gardens] are not going to put them in a different housing situation, nor are they going to provide them with an income, which is something that granters are looking for. It's not going to do that. But what [this project] is going to do is that it helps with food security, it helps with mental health and isolation. People in poverty are so isolated because they don't have money to go out and do things. We found that people who come here often have said that they haven't talked to anybody in four to five weeks, and they often stay for the day because it's their first outing, and they are connecting with people, so it has a lot of different benefits.

The benefits to being engaged in casual social relationships, which Julie observed, are well supported in the scholarly poverty-reduction literature and include reduced stress, improved health, and a bundle of resources that are often conveyed under the rubric of "social capital": interpersonal interactions that generate understanding, trust, mutual aid, and a sense of belonging.[16]

Driving toward social inclusion, the relational work within poverty-reduction programs can help people move, not necessarily out of poverty, but out of crisis and toward a sense of normalcy, connection, recovery, and emotional well-being. For example, Maria, whose project provided housing supports, used the metaphor of a bridge to describe the work of accompanying and guiding people transitioning from acute vulnerability to more stable emotional states and situations.

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[13] Silver, Jim. 2016. *Solving Poverty: Innovative Strategies from Winnipeg's Inner City*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, p. 113

[14] Walker, Robert. 2014. *The Shame of Poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[15] Trussell, Dawn E., and Heather Mair. 2010. "Seeking Judgment Free Spaces: Poverty, Leisure, and Social Inclusion." *Journal of Leisure Research* 42 (4):513-533.

[16] Uphoff, Eleonora P., Kate E. Pickett, Baltica Cabieses, Neil Small, and John Wright. 2013. "A systematic review of the relationships between social capital and socioeconomic inequalities in health: a contribution to understanding the psychosocial pathway of health inequalities." *International Journal for Equity in Health* 12 (1):54.

The risk taking to move out of that survival mode to thriving, you're asking for a large leap of faith, and it's wide. While we are asking for [risk-taking], we're trying to build those supports and safety nets to help them get across. And we're maybe only here and there is still a gap (gestures with space between palms), a next step they maybe don't see, or a next step after that. So we are trying to create that [faith] while we are all still on that bridge together.

The experience of increased social safety, acceptance, and support, as indicated by Maria among others, can be impactful by giving people forward momentum toward better ways of coping with and recovering from the social-emotional injuries of poverty. While creating spaces of inclusion and belonging will never be sufficient to ending poverty, this work can provide a much needed foundation for other positive life changes.

4. Compassionate Responses to Chronic Poverty

In considering the NPI's impact, we cannot assume that all beneficiaries of poverty-reduction projects can overcome their severely limiting circumstances, especially as many live with chronic health conditions at various stages of progression. For these service users, sustained compassionate responses are called for. In recent years, some health care practitioners, public health care workers, and poverty-workers have been recognizing that people experiencing poverty in combination with debilitating health conditions need a range of supports that include palliative care delivered in community settings.[17]

Generally speaking, palliative care refers to supports for people near the end of life including but not limited to care-giving in the process of dying. Whether health decline is gradual or steep, people with life-threatening and life-limiting illness often require intensive support. Unfortunately, people disadvantaged by complex poverty often lack family care givers and also experience barriers to receiving institutional care for their health needs.[18]

Consistent with the primary goal of palliative care, to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life, several of the NPI-funded agencies and projects take this compassionate approach. Though not all name it as palliative care, these projects work to create safety, enhance dignity, relieve symptoms, and prevent harm, especially through drop-in programs, homeless outreach, and efforts to maintain people in livable housing. However, such compassionate interventions present a challenge for programs seeking to show long-term impact: palliative outcomes are difficult to define, the need for care extends beyond project timelines, and the gains of some projects may be reversed when funding runs out.

Interpreting impact in a palliative context, Barbara, who led an NPI-funded housing project reframed her expired project as a "building block" rather than an aborted mission when the project ended:

You can't undo good. If somebody has been in this project and has been supported for a while, and they've done well, you have to celebrate. That is two whole years that they've done well. If

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[17] Crawford, Blair. 2019. "Blue Roses documentary shines light on Ottawa rooming houses." *Ottawa Citizen*, 12/8/2019. Accessed at
http://www.bluerosesdocumentary.ca/uploads/1/1/9/9/119934098/ottawa_ciutizen_article_30_nov_19.pdf.
[18] Huynh, Lise, Blair Henry, and Naheed Dosani. 2015. "Minding the gap: access to palliative care and the homeless." *BMC Palliative Care* 14 (1):62. doi: 10.1186/s12904-015-0059-2.

things kind of go apart, then you have to think that those two years were building blocks, and that maybe things can come together again.

Nevertheless, setbacks, such as loss of housing, ravage vulnerable people's sense of hope, as Barbara went on to explain:

The whole challenge was to increase the amount of time people were successfully housed, so that we could break the cycle of people getting housed, losing housing, and getting housed again. Because every time you get housed you have this hope that this is going to be okay and without these skills, it's not okay. Then you lose it and sink further into a hole and it takes a lot to get you back out. So that's the gist of the project and I think that it's been extremely successful.

When the work of poverty alleviation takes the form of holistic palliative care, the long-term impact should not be evaluated merely in terms of reducing poverty but also in terms of fulfilling social responsibility. Compassionate responses to poverty are necessary and impactful from the perspective of enabling regional and city governments and their publics to live up to collective ideals. For example, municipalities and communities around the world, including Brock University, have signed onto the "Compassionate Communities" charter of Public Health Palliative Care International. Similarly, the City of St. Catharines seeks to be a "Compassionate City" by inviting citizens to sign a charter affirming a commitment to health, well-being, and dignity of all citizens.[19] The work of the NPI brings the Niagara Region closer to fulfilling the goals of such charters.

Impacts on Neighbourhoods and Communities

In addition to making a difference to individuals, the NPI can celebrate its projects' multi-faceted impacts on neighbourhoods and communities. Occasionally, NPI-funded projects generated amenities that people continued to make use of after the project had wrapped up, such as educational materials and community garden plots, garden boxes and tools. More commonly, project leaders reported on the lasting impact of bringing people together and cultivating supportive networks among service users and between project leaders and service users. Neighbourhood-based friendship networks emerged through a number of projects and became an ongoing source of material and social support. Project leaders described former participants offering each other advice about jobs and parenting, getting together to celebrate life transitions such as weddings, births and deaths, helping each other with moves and childcare, and checking in to offer help when people were sick.

We have already referred to the benefits of a sense of belonging for individuals. However, the effects of mutual support also extend like ripples on a pond to friends of friends, children and parents of friends, and community resource people who were not part of the original NPI project. These networks of support counteract what scholar Meg Luxton has called the "perverse individualism" of neoliberal society, referring to the false but prevalent idea that people can meet their everyday needs just by

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[19] See "Public Health Palliative Care International: Creating Compassionate Communities," accessed at https://phpci.info and "St. Catharines: A Compassionate City," accessed at https://www.compassionatestc.ca.

purchasing services and relying on their own nuclear family.[20] Recognizing the "community cultural wealth" that exists to some degree in low income communities, particularly racialized communities, many of the NPI-funded projects seek to widen participants' circles of supportive social relationships.[21] Such relationships often live on beyond the project's duration.

Impacts on Organizations

While the NPI's primary poverty-reduction focus is on service users and their neighbourhoods, a secondary area of impact is the nonprofit organizations and their workers who have received grants. Client and agency impacts are intertwined, as good projects draw new clients to agencies and strengthen agencies' relationships with existing clients, thus improving the effectiveness of other programs. Additionally, successful NPI-funded projects seed ideas for new projects and also enable agencies to demonstrate the effectiveness of their pilots when seeking funding from other sources. While receiving grant funding to carry out a program was never a bad thing, in some ways the NPI's impact on recipient organizations was mixed.

On the one hand, almost all grant recipients were grateful for the funding and affirmed that their projects helped them further their mission. In addition, funding gave agencies positive exposure in Niagara. Many former leaders explained that their funding catalyzed new professional networks or working partnerships not limited to the following, which were mentioned:

> branches of municipal, regional and provincial government, legal clinics and lawyers, school boards and schools, hotels, retail stores, community colleges and universities, First Nations organizations, small businesses and corporate firms, labour organizations, farms and farmers markets, charities and foundations, shelters, cultural associations, service groups, social justice groups, recreational clubs, places of worship, dentists and denturists, public health nurses, local media, and other non-profit sector organizations.

In addition to facilitating partnerships, many project leaders said receiving an NPI grant enhanced their agency's reputation or gave them credibility when they took on a new type of initiative or a project that broadened the scope of their work.

On the other hand, former project leaders also spoke of significant work associated with applying for and reporting on grants within the short funding cycle of one to two years. Short-term contract funding tied up staff in administration, necessitated hiring temporary, low-waged staff or recruiting volunteers, placed demands on organizations to recruit, train and retain skilled workers, and detracted from

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[20] Luxton, Meg. 2010. "Doing neoliberalism: Perverse individualism in personal life." In *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, edited by Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton, 163-183. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

[21] Yosso, Tara J. 2005. "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education*. 8 (1): 69–91. See also Gosine, Kevin, and Islam Faisal. 2014. "'It's Like We're One Big Family': Marginalized Young People, Community, and the Implications for Urban Schooling." *The School Community Journal* 24 (2):33.

agencies' core work with clients.[22] For example, Richard, who led a small project in the area of community development, attempted to monetize the value of the time he spent just fulfilling NPI's accountability requirements:

> NPI had a very structured evaluation template that did not fit with our project in the slightest. It was sort of, you had testimonials and you had to have pictures and you had to do a number of reports on this. So, for a project that was funded at like $4,500 dollars, it cost me probably $2,000 to $3,000 dollars in my time to report on this project.

In this case, Richard's organization happened to be relatively large, and the grant was unusually small, but more commonly, small and medium sized organizations experienced higher opportunity costs and risks with short-term grant programs than do large organizations with full-time professional administrative staff on board.[23]

Nonprofit sector research elsewhere has found that short-term contract funding tends to divert resources from service delivery.[24] Certainly, several respondents disclosed that the NPI's application and reporting requirements imposed a drag on what they could accomplish. Two former project leaders had concluded that their participation in the NPI was not worth their time. Most nonprofits in Niagara, however, are not in a position to choose among prospective funders. The annual or biannual application for new funding could be a matter of organizational survival for smaller agencies, a situation that impedes long-term planning.[25] Facing uncertainty about whether their projects would continue to align with the NPI's future funding priorities, and not knowing from year to year if they would be able to re-hire staff into short-term contracts, some project leaders expressed discouragement. As June put it, "Once a program is running well, why wouldn't they just continue to support it?" For nonprofit staff steeped in the distress of their clients and knowing they provide vital services on which the Region depends, short-term contract funding generates a climate of precarity within organizations and a sense among leaders of their work being undervalued.

Impacts on Poverty Workers

In many ways, agency staff and volunteers were also secondary beneficiaries of NPI funding, especially in terms of their learning. We heard from project leaders about how they and other staff honed

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[22] Akingbola, Kunle. 2004. "Staffing, retention, and government funding: A case study." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *14*(4): 453-465.

[23] Besel, Karl, Charlotte Lewellyn Williams, and Joanna Klak. 2011. Nonprofit sustainability during times of uncertainty. *Nonprofit management and leadership*, *22*(1): 53-65.

[24] Levasseur, Karine and Sid Frankel. (2017). Situating a public funding experiment within the landscape of political ideas about the non-profit sector. *Voluntary Sector Review*, *8*(1): 67-88.

Meinhard, Agnes, Lucia Lo, and Ilene Hyman. 2015. The Provision of Services to New Immigrants in Canada: Characteristics of Government-Non-profit Partnerships. Working Paper Series 2015(2). Accessed at: https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA%3A7415/datastream/OBJ/view

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[25] Clancey, Garner and Harriet Westcott. 2017. "'This rabid fight for survival': Small NGO manager's experiences of funding reform." *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *52*(2): 163-179.

professional office skills (computer software, writing policy and procedures, scheduling, and tracking), project management skills (volunteer coordination, communication, grant writing, networking, legal and procedural know-how, and evaluation), and skills in conducting trauma-informed, relational anti-poverty work. Some of former project leaders movingly described their work as personally transformative and reciprocal in relation to the people they set out to help. We heard expressions of gratitude for "priceless" moments, "when you change someone's life" (said Lucy about the direct services she provided), for performing the work of "giving back" (said Gloria about her service to newcomers), and for doing work that "opened my eyes" (said Jeremy about his housing help). We also heard that the work could be emotionally painful, frustrating, and stressful.

Because most interviews were with poverty workers who remained in Niagara, we did not hear from anyone who had quit due to the low wages, poor work-life balance, or the difficult working conditions for which the sector is known.[26] But several former project leaders had already moved to a different organization by the time of the interview, and we heard second-hand accounts of high job turnover, which one interview participant referred to as the "revolving door" of nonprofit social service work.

With the specter of emotional burnout in the background, some of the seasoned poverty workers spoke with us about how working on their NPI project deepened their ethical and political commitments to combatting poverty and increased their courage to act in an advocacy role. For example, Natasha, explained how her work on an NPI project in community development prepared her to transition toward her present work in advocacy and community organizing by teaching her about leadership:

> It made me fearless in a leadership role… It strengthened my understanding of what good leadership is: that you're sensitive to people and respectful to people and that you're not just someone walking around with stilts compared to everybody else. You really have to have a relationship with the people who honour you [and] you have to honour them. So that, for me, will benefit me for the future.

Another outcome of several NPI projects was to recruit former service users into staff positions where their lived experience could be indispensable to outreach and trust-building with people with similar social backgrounds or life experiences. For example, Mark, who worked in a housing project, described "an individual who had been homeless and worked his way through the system and is now employed full-time [in homelessness prevention]."

> And this individual comes to our sector with a different perspective because he is coming with the experience which balances his professional side. Even though people might have a masters [degree], lived experience has a lot of value and just reinforces to people who struggle that good things can happen in their life.

These former service-users who had been hired as staff, it must be recognized, were a vulnerable category of worker given that they had few other employment options and considering that many

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[26] Cunningham, Ian, Donna Baines, John Shields, Pier-Luc Bilodeau, and Martine D'Amours. 2017. "'You've Just Cursed Us': Precarity, Austerity and Worker's Participation in the Non-Profit Social Services." *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*. *72*(2): 370-393.

others would be available to take their place if they were not accepting of their working conditions.[27] Nevertheless, five of our interviews were with former service users who had gone on to a paid position involving leadership of an NPI-funded project and they considered their opportunity to work in poverty-reduction as deeply meaningful. As one former service-user, Anna, said of the personal impact of her NPI project in the area of community development: "It's changed my entire life."

Impacts on the field

As the NPI serves as a model for poverty reduction programs, its impact needs to be assessed in terms of the value it brings to the Niagara Region overall. On a fundamental level, NPI-funded projects make a difference by reducing social and economic costs associated with poverty.[28] This cost-saving effect is true of a variety of types of NPI-funded projects. For example, Shauna, who led a parenting program, said:

> We're raising children and giving knowledge to parents to become more successful. So, the strain on our judicial system, on our health system, all of that is kind of being alleviated when you're in a better place.

Similarly, Mark, cited earlier, explained that his project's supportive housing averted problems that would imminently require greater levels of social spending:

> We've created stability. We have provided support that allows people to stay housed in their homes. They're not getting hospitalized on a regular basis, they're not getting incarcerated, so there's a lot of cost savings that we provide.

In addition, the NPI creates impact by stimulating new thinking by nonprofit organizations about how to deliver poverty alleviation and prevention projects and by testing these ideas in practice. Through the grant competition, several groups end up piloting new ideas each year. Their innovation helps identify the kinds of interventions that are needed and effective, such as the variations on relational approaches to poverty reduction we have referred to in this report. Even funded projects that turn out to be less effective than others have the value of increasing awareness of poverty-related needs and barriers to service.

Most NPI-funded projects have not continued beyond the end of the funding term. This result is not uncommon, as researchers have observed that short-term seed money for nonprofits tends to lead to a "graveyard of projects."[29] Some project leaders argued that more time would have reduced this tendency. For example, Stacey, who led a food security project, made the case most forcefully that

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[27] Cunningham, Baines, Shields, "Precarity, Austerity and Worker's Participation," *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*.

[28] Hagar, Doug, and Sophia Papastavrou. 2012. "Are the Consequences of Poverty Holding Niagara Back." Policy Brief 13. Niagara Community Observatory. Accessed at https://brocku.ca/niagara-community-observatory/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/Are-the-Consequences-of-Poverty-Holding-Niagara-Back.pdf

[29] Schickner, Annabel, and Sanne Raggers. 2017. "No shared vision for the sharing economy? Exploring the transformative potential of the non-profit sharing economy in Southern Sweden." Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, Masters Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science. Accessed at: https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/8912814

poverty-reduction efforts tend to become "inconsequential" if projects are not given enough time to operate: "If you're looking for impact," she said, "impact doesn't happen in eighteen months." Several other former leaders appealed for longer funding periods to increase the potential of projects achieving a lifespan beyond NPI-funding.

Finally, our interviews suggest that for some project leaders, the experience of working on poverty alleviation inspired them to take up advocacy work, which has the potential to make a difference through more political and systemic channels of change. Eva, for example, was challenged by her life skills education project into a new awareness of poverty and developed the motivation to educate change-makers:

> … recognizing that the participants' struggles are complex and [I] to try to get that across whenever I'm in a meeting with a politician… I tell you that's what's carried forward with me [and] strengthened and deepened my work, my understanding of other people's issues and lives.

This motivation was also true of Carol, who led a project in community development but explained that she and others she knew were doing advocacy "off the side of their desk."

In conclusion, by many indications, the NPI's poverty alleviation funds have been well stewarded in that recipient agencies have delivered quality programs that serve the most socially disadvantaged populations and neighbourhoods in Niagara. However, considerations of long-term impact are more complex than reports on outcomes and service-user satisfaction. In this qualitative evaluation based on former project leaders' accounts, we have illustrated a number of ways in which NPI projects' varied approaches to poverty reduction multiply over time to make a difference in the lives of individuals and families, neighbourhoods, agencies, workers, and the Niagara region as a whole. We have also suggested some limitations on impact, particularly those stemming from projects' short duration.

Project Leaders' Critiques of the NPI

While recognizing that NPI-funded projects have limited ability to significantly alter socio-economic conditions that generate poverty, some project leaders also commented on specific ways they thought that the NPI's model or practices hindered their goals. To be clear, the purpose of the Phase 1C interviews with project leaders was to assess the long-term impact of NPI funding, not to elicit critical feedback on the NPI as a granting program. However, we did ask project leaders a summative question about what we should learn from the grant funding for their project. A minority of interview participants offered critiques of the NPI, which we report on here. Most commonly, some people wanted to see basic changes to the model of short-term project funding. In addition, whether they were skeptical of or satisfied with the granting model and term lengths, some wanted to see changes to NPI's selection processes or reporting requirements.

Some project leaders were anxious that their comments be delivered anonymously, worrying that they would come across as ungrateful or that their negativity would hurt their organization's or the NPI's reputation. Also, most participants we cite in this part of the report tempered their criticisms with overriding appreciation for having been awarded funding. Even the most critical project leader wanted the NPI to continue to exist as a resource for poverty alleviation in Niagara.

Short-term Project Funding

The first critique of the NPI's model was offered by project leaders who worried that the program's impact is too moderate, not only because the amount of funding the NPI has to offer is sparse relative to the need, but more importantly because the funding is allocated for short-term projects, which limits their ambition and what they can deliver in terms of poverty reduction. For instance, Colleen spoke of what she called the "stop-gap" nature of the type of interventions that project funding tends to support. By this, she was referring to poverty alleviation projects that provide relief from certain hardships but do not improve people's life circumstances in comprehensive or lasting ways.

> In terms of NPI, when you're looking at the people we are serving, it would take a lot more intensive, long-term work to get them out of poverty or to get them employed… And it's really hard. I have had to work here for fifteen years to wrap my head around how difficult it really is. And when you look at that [difficulty] in relation to poverty it's (pause), I don't know how you get people out of poverty when it is short-term interventions all the time. And I think that is the thing that everyone faces around the NPI, that they are all short-term pilot projects. For me that's the biggest issue.

Stacey, echoed Colleen's description of NPI projects as "stop-gap":

> NPI stands for Niagara Prosperity Initiative. Prosperity is an interesting concept. I think we need to talk about prosperity more and what that means because if we're talking about prosperity, in a meaningful sense, we're not hitting the mark because what we're doing in all these NPI projects is just for those stop-gap measures.

As explained earlier, some project leaders explained that short-term projects are most appropriate for service users experiencing transitory poverty. For this segment of service users, various types of targeted interventions can make a significant difference to helping them achieve higher incomes and greater income security. Short-term projects are less advantageous for service users with longstanding and complex needs. It stands to reason that the neediest benefit the most from continuous programs. Members of on-going programs have the chance to get to know, and become known by, service providers. Ideally, members also become contributors to long-term programs through their participation, referrals, and volunteering.

People experiencing chronic poverty often need to seek out and cobble together resources from a variety of sources, including poverty alleviation projects that come and go. The NPI's short-term project-funding model tends to reinforce service users' recurrent, disheartening experience that their supports will be short-lived, as Julie remarked:

> The length [of grants] needs to be longer… I realize they [NPI] want the money to go to different areas, but once something is working well, and is proven to work well, to have that funding be sustainable (pause), it's disappointing for people if they get going on something and then it stops. And I don't mean the people running it, I mean the participants.

Short-term project funding also strains small and medium-sized nonprofit agencies and community organizations. These agencies' own income precarity, and their existential need to participate in a competitive hustle for grants, in some ways mirrors the experience of low-income people. Organizations expect opportunity costs associated with applying for grants in that grant-writing detracts from their

core work. They also understand the risk involved in investing time in an application without a guarantee it will succeed. However, some project leaders perceived the application process as unnecessarily onerous. Preparing an application can take a couple of months to a year and that funding must be applied for every year or two. Given the short cycle of applying for funding and quarterly reporting, organizations must always have some of their focus on administrative aspects of their NPI funding. These costs fall disproportionately on small and medium-sized organizations, which have fewer staff. Application costs would be mitigated by longer funding terms.

For staff and volunteers who understand their work as vital to the people they serve, the necessity of repeatedly applying for funding within a short cycle can be demoralizing. June, for example, expressed frustration at her project funding coming to an end as the work was gaining momentum:

> Instead of being like, 'Okay we gave you money,' and thinking it should be sustainable, [the NPI model implies,] 'now you need to come up with something new.' So, a lot of what happens is that [agencies] twist [completed projects] so they can get the money to continue what they were doing.

Short-term project funding is used most advantageously to support innovative ideas for poverty reduction programs. Ideally, agencies would attain short-term funding to try out new types of services, achieve evidence that their service model is successful, and provide such evidence in future grant applications that could turn the projects into on-going programs. In practice, however, only rarely were projects sustained as programs in this way. With the exception of social enterprises, not many organizations can make services sustainable by generating an income stream or attaining long-term funding.

Some interview participants described a fatiguing process of inventing variations on existing projects in the attempt to make them into a program of sorts. Shauna argued that, given the sparce resources for nonprofits serving people in poverty in Niagara, the expectation that most agencies could sustain new programs is unrealistic: "I don't know of any agency, if there are, they are few and far between, an agency that has the capability of providing [program sustainably without long-term funding]."

Another project leader, Tanya said the funding period was too short to allow her organization to review the project, identify changes that could make it more effective, and implement these refinements. While the project succeeded in many ways, Tanya regretted that the project's timeframe was too short to "work out the kinks." In this case, new funding for Tanya's project was not forthcoming from any source and she considered the lessons from this NPI-funded project to be lost when the funding ended.

Competition among Applicants

Although interview participants were not asked to comment on the NPI's process of reviewing and selecting applicants, a few project leaders volunteered their opinions. One person questioned whether all reviewers had a clear understanding of the proposals based on some of the questions that reviewers had asked. Another argued that the reviewers should include more people with lived experience of poverty in order to better understand the population that the projects would serve.

The more common concern about the NPI was that the granting program exacerbates competition among agencies in Niagara. For example, a staff member of a large agency, Rachel, discussed how

applying for NPI funding puts organizations in competition with each other in an already competitive sector. The application process, she said, "could be a lot better":

> I think a lot more supportive versus competitive. Once you're in, they are flexible and great to work with. And small, new organizations, they barely stand a chance competing against the major charity organizations. They are big organizations and some of them can pay for a grant writer like me.

Colleen agreed that an unfortunate effect of the grant program was the way it fosters unhealthy competition between agencies that have a common purpose:

> We all want to work together in theory but when it comes to the money being on the table, all of a sudden there are silos. Everyone's creating projects and doing different things just to get the money to keep the doors open.

To be sure, the NPI funds a wide variety of nonprofit organizations that differ in terms of financial and human resources, geographical location, mission and vision. Through the NPI, small organizations have the chance to receive small grants, commensurate with their scale, which some other funders would not have considered. However, differences among competitors can give the impression of unfairness in the selection process. For example, large agencies have the advantage of paid staff and even dedicated professional grant-writers when applying for, implementing and reporting on projects. To the extent that adjudicators can take into consideration that applications from large and small agencies will look different, these differences need not disadvantage applicants. Unfortunately, mistrust of the grant adjudication process was evident in some of the interviews, as the following comment illustrates:

> The political way that they award funding, it's become an infrastructure into its own... I've been around the block long enough to know that it's not a pure merit process. There's political influence there, there's personal influence there. Bottom line, there's the elephant in the room. Again, they have to find a different way to engage organizations and interests because it's seen in some centers or some perspectives that if you're not part of that kind of clique, you're not going to get funding.

Mistrust is partly a function of the competitive nature of the short-term granting program and the lack of funds available for worthy projects. Whatever its merits, this highly critical statement is evidence that a culture of competition fostered through the funding process can be corrosive.

Reporting Requirements

While the interview did not explicitly seek to evaluate NPI's administrative and selection processes, it did include questions about project evaluation. These questions generated much critical commentary about the NPI's reporting requirements. The general consensus among those who responded was that the NPI's expectations for reporting were excessive. For example, project leader Abby compared the reporting expectations of her relatively small NPI grant with a $1 million contract from a different funder that asked for "much less in accountability." She was one of a number of interview participants who suggested the NPI's reporting processes be simplified and scaled back in proportion to the size of the grant.

Interview participants' feedback generally called for a "quality over quantity" approach to reporting. While much of the critical response about reporting was addressed to the requirement to gather testimonials, this criticism mainly related to the number of testimonials required, not to using testimonials as a form of qualitative evaluation. For example, Alicia represents those who favour qualitative approaches to evaluation, including testimonials, with reasonable limits on their numbers:

> I am always a fan of more qualitative storytelling. I think it has a greater impact than how many widgets you produced. I found that the approach NPI took was on the mark. I don't have a problem with it. I know others have. Sometimes it was the amount [of stories] that [were] collected.

Some project leaders wanted the evaluation process to tilt even more strongly toward the qualitative. Isabel, for example, said her biggest issue with the NPI was that reporting procedures did not allow for enough anecdotal evidence of impact. Aside from testimonials and photographs, the reporting she did seemed to be "all about numbers," or in other words, related to simple output measures.

Similarly, Amanda sympathized with the NPI's challenge of identifying common reporting categories for the outputs and outcomes that are relevant to a range of projects. However, she was concerned that the NPI's reporting process did not show enough appreciation for a projects' impact on individuals.

> There was a lot of focus on number of meals, number of volunteers, number of kids that showed up, but they should ask each program to come up with their own outcomes for how they're going to measure the impact of the project.

Some project leaders wanted the opportunity to demonstrate that their projects had profound impacts on specific individuals, irrespective of the number of people participating in the project. Evaluation, they said, needs to consider the how deeply a project has changed an individual's life, perhaps resulting in them moving into housing, gaining a stable income, or experiencing heighened life satisfaction through closer relationships or gratifying volunteer work. The many short testimonials that the NPI required were not the same as in-depth reporting on impact.

Even though qualitative reporting was generally favoured, some project leaders objected to gathering several testimonials for a couple of reasons. First, asking for testimonials felt inappropriate for some groups of service users. Second, and relatedly, fulfilling the testimonial requirement was found to be labour-intensive for staff.

Focusing first on the needs and characteristics of service-users, concerns about the requirement to collect testimonials ranged from maintaining confidentiality to feeling that the testimonials were intrusive and even exploitive. After all, testimonials are asking individuals to be self-disclosing and vulnerable as a condition of receiving services to alleviate poverty. Colleen reported that one of her organization's frontline staff refused to solicit testimonials due to his concern about the social and emotional discomfort they create:

> He thought that they were extremely intrusive, and we often are extremely sensitive and have a heightened awareness that the funders often don't have. People have to bare their souls to get any kind of help. You and I don't have to go into an agency and show all.

Colleen elaborated on the experience of some service users when asked to provide testimonials:

> If you really put yourself in that person's position, it is not comfortable, and people do have pride, and it can be embarrassing. And they are already coming from a shame-based [response to trauma], being in the position they are in.

People who take part in one NPI-funded project are likely to be involved with other organizations and other NPI-funded projects concurrently or over time. The result is that already vulnerable individuals are asked to repeatedly tell a story about their needs to help a project meet the NPI's testimonial quotas.

From a practical standpoint, project leaders who served unhoused or underhoused people, in particular, had difficulty gathering testimonials because of frequent moves, inconsistent contact information, and irregular participation in projects. As Jordyn explained about the challenges of fulfilling the testimonial requirement for her program:

> The agency would be trying to contact that person to get them to complete the follow up evaluation to see how this program helped them, and sometimes, especially when we are dealing with individuals who might be homeless or not have a phone to be reached at, it is very difficult to collect those evaluation forms.

Service users with low literacy levels struggled to provide testimonials for projects whose benefits were intangible. For example, a program that helped someone get ID and open a bank account provided a straightforward benefit that could be conveyed through a short testimonial. However, many projects aimed to meet more complex needs. In such cases, some service-users found it more difficult to articulate how they were benefitting. As a result, project leaders often found that testimonial responses were insubstantial. Often, it was difficult to get service users to say more than "it was good." This left project leaders in the position of having to coax more detailed responses from people who lacked the language facility, time or inclination to tell a good story, even though project leaders were aware they were receiving valuable help.

The second major concern regarding testimonials was the labour involved in collecting them. To quote Isabel, organizations found the reporting, "just too laborious," and the number of testimonials required, "unrealistic." Cathy found that if service-users took the testimonial template home, they were difficult to get back. Her organization tried to get people to fill them out while they were on site and created incentives at their own cost for returning completed testimonial forms. Sometimes staff would sit down with participants and go through the questions one-by-one, having to interpret the questions and answers for people whose first language is not English.

Stacey was another project leader who found the reporting requirements to be overwhelming. In her view, the requirements illustrated one of the ways NPI has come to represent "the industry of poverty," having grown into a "mammoth" over time. She urged the program to, "come back to its core… as something that is in the spirit of helping those who are most in need."

To briefly summarize the critiques we heard, project leaders recognized the need for evaluation, but the generic reporting requirements were considered inappropriate for some NPI projects. The qualitative nature of the Most Significant Change testimonial was appreciated but the quota was considered onerous and forced some organizations to either incentivize completing the forms or dedicate staff time to helping service users write down how they benefitted.

Some project leaders were troubled by the competitiveness among Niagara's nonprofit social service organizations, to which they see the NPI's grant programs contributing. Others questioned the costs associated with applying for and reporting on NPI grants, especially in terms of labour that was diverted from service delivery and other priorities. Two project leaders mentioned that due to the labour involved with the NPI grants they no longer apply for funding.

While a minority of project leaders who were interviewed spontaneously shared critiques, there is reason to believe that some project leaders held back critical feedback. Project leaders expressed appreciation for the NPI and the funding that it provides but they wanted to ensure that they did not sound ungrateful. A few even worried that critical feedback would negatively impact their future applications. The fact that the non-profit service sector in the Niagara Region is relatively small may explain these concerns. Despite researchers' assurances, some project leaders appeared concerned about the confidentiality of their comments due to the familiarity among people engaged poverty-reduction work in the region.

Recommendations:

1. Expand the NPI's impacts by increasing the amount of funding available annually for poverty-reduction projects that target a range of needs of the individuals (children, youth, adults, seniors), families, and neighbourhoods most affected by poverty across the Niagara region.

2. Allow more flexibility in how projects may report on outcomes, including customizable reporting templates. Continue to encourage qualitative reporting but reduce the number of testimonials required in favour of in-depth storytelling.

3. Enhance impact and reduce agency strain by providing multi-year funding terms and the possibility of funding renewal for successful projects.

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Appendix 1: Student Interviewers from Brock Sociology, 2018 and 2019

Emily Bagshaw
Joe Becevel
Rahima Bouchaffra
Meaghan Brown
Christian Bui
Lindsay Bushey
Erin Coon
Hailey Demelo
Sarah Fadlalla
Jessica Falk
Stephen Farkas
Samantha Fisher
Hillary Flokstra
Bailey Forde
Kendra Case Freethy
Jessica Gauvreau
Jeanmarc Geronimo
Taylor Glodziak
Garrett Gullett
Breanna Gunnyon
Liam Hellewell Clews
Kelsey Hiles

Ashley Hogan
Victoria Holcombe
Claudia Ike
Kendra Johnston
Victoria Kaczmarczyk
Daniel Kapuscinski
Jayne Kelly
Riley Kerr
Ashley Kukovica
Sarah Kulig
Nicole Lattanzi
Daniel Leblanc
Kalvin Lindsay
Emily MacNeil
Ushna Malik
Francesco Mancini
Jessica Marlow
Jasmine Mehta
Reid Morgan
Felicia Muraco
Kaho Nishibu
Tyler Normandeau

Katja Odegaard
Brittany Osti
Bethany Payne
Christina Phillip
Paige Phillips
Ava Pozojevic
Jared Reid
Aleisha Riddell
Tiyanna Schooley
Tayler Shannon
Robert Shaw
Jordan Sider
Sarah Stein
Nano Taleb
Kaley Taylor
Evan Vuong
Liz Wheadon
Breanna Willms
Jackson Wills
Chloe Wright
Shangjie Zhu

Appendix 2: Interview Guide for past NPI-funded Project Managers

Preamble:
For this interview, our goal is to understand the long-term impacts of NPI-funded projects. Some of the immediate outcomes were documented by participants' evaluations. However, we are interested in changes over time that may have gone unnoticed. We would like you to tell us about the planned results, as well as any unexpected outcomes and impacts. As you reflect on the project, please think about all the ways the project lives on, as far as you are aware.

Impacts of the Project over Time
In a general way, please describe what happened as a result of this project.
After the project funding ended, how did the project continue, grow or transform in any way?
How would you describe the project's ripple effects? Did the project influence any future projects?
Were any community assets generated as a result of the original project?
Which of these impacts continue to be important?

Impacts related to People
How has the project impacted the lives of participants, volunteers and staff over time?
Please discuss the impacts on each (participants, volunteers, staff) in turn. Please be specific. We would love to hear stories about the way this project has made a difference in people's lives over time.

Impacts on the Organization
How has the project contributed to the evolution of the organization? (e.g., subsequent projects, relationships, partnerships, key lessons, reputation in the community?

Impacts on Leaders
What was the project's long-term impact on you? (e.g., your employment, professional knowledge, life lessons, skill development, interpersonal networks, relationships)

Missed Opportunities or Negative Impacts
Were any of the project's unanticipated impacts problematic from your point of view?
If you could go back in time, is there anything you would you have changed about the project's design?
What kinds of factors beyond your control may have limited the project's long-term impacts?
Could you identify any missed opportunities for the project to have had better or more lasting impacts?

Overall Legacy
When you reflect on all the ways the project touched people and brought about change, what would you say was its most important legacy?
What other legacies should we remember?

Lessons for the Niagara Prosperity Initiative
What problems (difficulties/frustrations) have you experienced in trying to evaluate this project?
If this project had to be evaluated, how could evaluation be made easier?
How could evaluation be made more meaningful and informative?
Overall, what should the Niagara Region learn from having funded this project through the NPI?

December 12, 2018

Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) Testimonials

Phase 2B- Final Report

The purpose of this phase of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) program evaluation was to explore the narrative testimonials of NPI participants, analyze the satisfaction of participants with the program and assess the extent to which the participants' perceptions were congruent with the stated goals of NPI (n.d.) which are as follows:

- To guide and direct investments on identified initiatives to alleviate poverty in neighborhoods across Niagara
- To advocate for change that will reduce and prevent poverty in the community
- To develop and enhance collaborative relationships between stakeholders
- To engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways to ensure that investments reflect need

Method

Sample

- 3494 testimonials from 77 agencies that had been completed by staff, volunteers and the individuals who had participated in one or more of the NPI funded programs.
- Each NPI funded program obtained a certain percentage of testimonials each year based on the number of program participants.
- The same questions have been in place since 2010.

Data Analysis

- A qualitative methodology was used.
- The testimonials were collated and converted to a MS Word document by the research coordinator and uploaded to NVivo 12 (2018).
- Content and summative analysis approaches were used for data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005).
- A word cloud comprised of word frequencies was completed (see Appendix) and although the words *program* and *community* were used most often, they were not included in the analysis because they were expected due to the nature of the funding. Words that were most frequently occurred (both positive and negative) were included in the analysis.

- The two researchers developed a coding scheme and coded the data together. Subsequent coding was done to verify codes and identify possible new codes, as well as to identify overlaps between codes. In the final phase, the codes were collapsed into three major themes.
- Ethics clearance was provided by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (file # 17-41).
- Tracy's (2010) criteria for promoting excellence in qualitative research were used

Findings

Data analysis resulted in the development of three themes: 1) Developing Social Networks, 2) Learning Comes in Various Forms, and 3) Developing Self-Efficacy.

Theme #1: Developing Social Networks

Participants' comments related to the NPI funded programs being a place where they can meet others, either for learning purposes or to have fun while participating in activities, was an element of the first theme. The opportunity to make friends and increase connections was an important aspect of this theme. Through socialization opportunities, the participants commented that they felt connected and less isolated.

> I received a flyer in my mailbox about the program and decided to attend. This program has been great in helping to promote physical fitness as well as gives me a chance to me new people and make new friends. I really like the activities and would like to continue to come. [good will industry]

With the youth participants, the opportunity to develop social networks meant that they could meet new friends, connect with new friends in a safe environment, and learn from new role models. For others, the opportunity to develop new social networks provided fresh or additional perspectives as well as friends and expanded support.

> …I suffer from severe depression/anxiety and thought it would be a good opportunity to get involved in this small, intimate group. I try my very best to attend every Thursday. I have become such good friends with all the people involved that I really consider all of them family. This group has taken me out of my comfort zone and taught me a lot. I needed to take the first step away from my disease and it really has changed and helped me - the support I get is priceless. Also, it has taught me so many things such as cooking/crafts/sewing.

Having fun was an important element mentioned frequently by the participants. Through participation in the various programs, the participants alleviated their boredom and felt better about themselves. Participants discussed their enjoyment with attending activities that they considered fun and spending time with their family members. They also encouraged others to join.

> I am the mother of four children. Two are special needs. Unfortunately this doesn't give me too much time for myself or my youngest daughter. The best thing about the hip hop program is the quality time I get to spend with my daughter. We have fun dancing, exercising, and we enjoy ourselves while taking a break from my home life. We get to make new friends and learn new things.

> I heard about the FORT when you [name] visited the school in September. I come to the FORT about 4 times a week. The best thing that had happened from coming to the FORT is that I get to hang out with my friends all the time after school and I get to do a lot of art projects that I really like that are different from the projects that we do at school. Coming to the FORT also keeps me from getting bored after school and I like that we have a say and get to do what we want to do (in terms of programming). I didn't used to hang out with my friends as much after school before I started coming to the FORT and now I see them almost every night which is really fun.

Engaging with others in the community was the final element in this theme. Through their testimonials, participants described becoming involved in programs that will assist to improve the quality of life for others, helping to improve the community together with others, and advocating for change to make their community a better place where they can help others and give back to the community.

> I have been working at the clinic since March and find it very interesting. It has been an eye opening experience and it has made me so much more aware of issues in my community. I feel better about myself for helping at the clinic and it has inspired me to open myself up to the rewards of giving your time. This is significant because while I have been unemployed it has given me more confidence and the feeling of fulfillment. It has also made me feel like a contributor to society. This has been a great experience and I recommend it to all my friends.

Theme #2: Learning Comes in Various Forms

Through their participation in NPI funded programs, participants were able to learn many new skills that ranged from learning how to play musical instruments to learning how to improve their English language skills. Engagement in new experiences and in learning new skills built a sense of achievement and increased the confidence of participants in their ability to learn, as well as expanded their openness to other new experiences and skills

> If it hadn't been for [name]and the other ladies support and advice it would have been so much harder for me. I have learned so much about cooking, sewing, crafts and so much fun. We have also learned a lot about other cultures. We all look forward to Thursday mornings.

Enjoyment with learning was an element in the testimonials. A positive approach to learning in a relaxed environment helped to reduce stress for parents, was engaging for participants, and contributed to self-improvement through the learning of new skills.

> I've learned how I can improve my parenting skills and how important the first year is to a child. I've also learned the importance of reading to our child to get them ready for school. This class

> has also helped me to think positively because when I think and act positive, my daughter also will think and be positive. This program is significant because without all the information I've been learning I wouldn't be the mom I am today, and wouldn't know how a child's development. Even when I'm done here, I will take everything I've learned to raise my daughter properly and give my daughter a better life.

Through the various programs, participants learned about making good food choices and healthy eating while they developed an understanding of the need for exercise, stress reduction, awareness of the dimensions of mental health and healthy coping, and how all these factors contribute to overall good health. In addition, through participation in NPI funded programs, the participants noted they had an increased knowledge and awareness of health promotion and illness prevention.

> I heard about the FORT this summer when I was going into grade six and finally old enough to come to the program. I now come 4-5 times a week I have learned a lot of new things about healthy eating, exercise and how to take care of my body (by not smoking or doing things that would be bad for my health) [through the Young Adult Peer Leader program (YAPL program through Public Health)]. I have also learned how to be a better cook and how to read recipes. My favourite thing that we made at the FORT was healthy banana bread!

Theme #3: Developing Self-Efficacy

 "Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave" (Bandura (1994 p.1). The third theme, developing self-efficacy, includes the impact of the NPI programs at the self or individual level. Participants spoke about the self-confidence that they developed through the NPI programs by having new opportunities, making better choices, and learning new skills, which, in turn, helped to improve self-confidence and in turn, a sense of "can do", either for themselves or for others. NPI programs provided access to transportation, financial assistance, assistance in accessing healthy food and removed barriers that assisted the participants to improve their quality of life.

> Because I saw a flyer, so I came to the office to get more information about the program I feel that I have improved my grammar and I can feel that at work I can communicate better, also my colleague told me that they understand better when I talk. Because I want to communicate better with my friends at work and especially when I have a meeting with my boss.

Some of the programs funded by NPI, for example, the denture program and the mattress program, impacted on participants' quality of life because they felt better physically and emotionally, which improved their level of self-confidence. Finally, developing self-confidence enabled some of the participants to become better leaders because they saw themselves as able to provide knowledge of the program and help others to give back and they learned how to take charge in social situations, work, and in learning situations.

I'm sleeping in a bed for the first time in over a year and I have been rebuilding my home with furnishing which I couldn't have afforded to do without the help of Niagara furniture bank .The furniture bank helped give me a good sense of wellbeing; to know that no one can take away my furniture is a great feeling.

I went to get a quote for some dentures and the clinic that I went to referred me to SMUN. I have received my dentures and am paying back the loan at a significantly lower price. I went to my daughter's wedding feeling like a million bucks .I have always taken pride in myself and I felt so unattractive that I did not even want to smile because of my mouth. Greatly appreciated service.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that the integration of developing social networks, fun and learning and self-development occurred because of participation in the NPI funded programs. Through NPI funded programs, participants were involved in learning and enjoyment and this participation empowered individuals to make changes in their own lives or the lives of their children.

The major stakeholders in these programs (clients and volunteers), felt included in learning and in the development of self, which suggested a high level of satisfaction and engagement and an investment in areas that reflected their needs. Participation in an NPI funded project helped to promote the self-confidence of both clients and volunteers.

Participants spoke about being able to help others as an important component of the development of self-efficacy. Through NPI programs, there was an opportunity for participants to give back or engage with their community.

One of the stated goals of NPI is to "to engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways to ensure that investments reflect need" which is supported by the findings from this study. Participants discussed the benefits of participation in NPI programs, how it gave meaning to their lives or to the lives of their children, and provided opportunities to learn in a fun environment. Satisfaction with the programs was evident.

In summary, the NPI funded programs are seen to be worthwhile because they provide an array of variety in programming from recreation and fun to providing opportunities to learn in a fun environment. The programs also offer services to a range of ages that appeal to many participants.

Recommendations

- The provision of programs that enable participants to learn and develop social networks are important. Additionally, offering programs that provide opportunities for individuals to create and develop knowledge about access to different services (e.g., how to replace their lost social insurance number) is also an important area for continued consideration.
- Consider revising the feedback questions and posing a question that directly asks for suggestions about program improvement. Soliciting feedback from participants may help to strengthen future programming.
- Akelson and colleagues (2017) suggest that effective program planning points to the importance of matching evaluation methods to the population in order to recruit participants who are able to speak relevantly about the intervention. This is especially important with persons who might be vulnerable, such as those who live in poverty and who might not otherwise have opportunity to voice their needs. Testimonials provide a meaningful and easy to use format, as well as a potentially valuable source of information among participants who may be less familiar with formal surveys.

Limitations

- Testimonials are generally positive and therefore may not encompass the views of the clients who were not satisfied with the programs funded through NPI or even invite expression of a negative perspective.

Conclusion

- Based on analysis of the testimonials, participants found the programs to be both worthwhile and meaningful, which met the fourth goal of NPI (n.d.) *to engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways to ensure that investments reflect need.* As demonstrated in the excerpts, the funded programs had a positive impact on the lives of the participants.
- While these testimonials provide a helpful means of evaluating NPI programs, we recommend development and implementation of additional and alternate mechanisms for evaluation that will augment and add to what is captured in the testimonials.

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Appendix

Analysis of Niagara Prosperity Initiative Projects
Phase 2A of [name of the contract]

Brock University   April 3, 2019

Contents

Executive Summary

Materials related to 351 funded projects, 2008 to 2018, were provided by the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI). The number of projects trended downwards over the 2009-2018 period, falling from 41 per year, on average 2009 to 2011, to an average of 25 per year 2016 to 2018. The decline in the number of projects was not matched by a decline in the amounts awarded each year. The nominal dollar contract amounts trended upwards after 2011 (after smoothing out year to year variations) and $1.5 million was awarded to projects in 2018. If one adjusts for the effects of inflation, the constant dollar value of the total amounts awarded remained roughly constant after 2011 (again, after smoothing out year to year variations).

Rising nominal dollars awarded and declining numbers of projects means that the average and median amounts awarded per project increased from 2009 to 2018, with an especially large increase from 2016 to 2017. In 2017 and 2018, both the average and median amounts awarded, per project, were around $67,000.

But most contract/project amounts, over the 2008 to 2018 period, were small. Almost 40 percent were for less than $20,800. Altogether, slightly more than 70% of the contracts provided less than $50,000. As noted, this changed in 2017 and 2018 with half of the projects receiving more than $67,000. The dollar amounts awarded also became much more equal across projects in 2018.

Projects targeting just a single municipality became less common over the latter part of the 2008-2018 period. Put another way, projects serving multiple municipalities and the Niagara Region as a whole become more common in recent years.

Not surprisingly, given its population, St. Catharines received the most projects and total funding with around 30 percent of the projects and funds awarded over the period. St. Catharines' share of projects and funding peaked (strongly) in 2014 and declined thereafter.

Welland and Niagara Falls are the next most common municipalities for projects with 16 to 17 percent of projects (each) and 13 to 14 percent of the total funds awarded from 2008 to 2018. Welland's share of projects and funds declined from peaks in 2012/2013. Niagara Falls' shares varied substantially from year to year but did not suffer the same declines in recent years.

Port Colborne and Fort Erie make up a third group of most common municipalities, with shares of projects and funds awarded between 8 and 9.5 percent. Both received declining shares of projects and funds from 2010 or 2011 to 2018.

Projects covering the Niagara region as a whole lie between the second and third group of municipalities with 9.5 percent of the projects and 11.7 percent of the funding. Most of the Niagara region projects occurred in the later years when the amounts awarded per project were larger.

The next most common municipalities are Grimsby, Thorold, and West Lincoln; in that order, each with less than 5 percent of the projects and funding. Grimsby's and Thorold's shares varied

substantially from year to year, but Grimsby's shares of projects and funds were a lot higher over the 2016 to 2018 period, compared to previous years.

Personnel was, by far, the biggest expense for projects, averaging around 60 percent of total expenditures. Materials and services formed the next largest cost category with 18 percent and a gently rising share of expenditures from 2011 to 2018.   Professional fees accounted for 16.5 percent of expenditures in 2011 but their share declined steadily to less than 2 percent in 2018. Purchases of items transferred directly to clients (e.g. transportation passes or vouchers) peaked at 10 percent of costs in 2016 but declined to between 5 and 6 percent in both 2017 and 2018.

The projects served an average of 8,930 people per year from 2013 to 2017.   Almost 60 percent were adults. Children were the next largest category (averaging 26 percent) while youth and seniors accounted for less than 10 percent each. Most projects served small numbers of people and the average and median number served fell from 2011 to 2017. In 2015 and 2016 over half of the projects served fewer than 110 people, although the median did rise to 120 in 2017. The mode or most common range for projects (2011 to 2017) is 40 to 60 served

In their applications, projects name indicators of the issues they are planning to address. Measures of poverty such as LICO and LIM, low incomes (less than $20,000 or working poverty), and spending more than 30% of one's income on rent were the most common, but they were not included as indicator options in every year. Other frequently named indicators (also related to income) were unemployment and no high school diploma. Income inequality and other indicators related to children's health and care were much less common.

Projected in-kind contributions were included in the project applications in 2013 and later years. The expected in-kind contributions were large. They grew over the 2013 to 2018 period and summed to 63.4 percent of the total contract amount in 2018.   Not all projects expected to receive in-kind contributions. But the mean and median expected amounts were $41,432 (mean) and $31,000 (median) per project in 2018, even with the zero amounts included.

Recommendations

The NPI program has been operating for 12 years and it has evolved significantly through the thoughtful, reflective, and productive changes effected by the administrators. As a result my recommendations are few and minor.   The current data collected on the projects are reasonable, useful, and a clear result of the careful refinements to the program.

One small improvement (I believe) would be to ask for a rough breakdown of the in-kind contributions, both in the applications (expected/projected) and in the final reports (for the actual amounts). For example, the in-kind contributions could be dis-aggregated into just three categories: personnel, capital, and materials. I recognize that the temptation to ask for more and more data is always strong and should, therefore, be regarded skeptically. But I believe that the extra time and effort required would be worth it.

The in kind contributions cited in the applications are large, so it is worth knowing more about them. Knowing how much of the contributions is capital or materials (i.e. physical donations) rather than volunteer time would provide a new measure of how much support projects have in the community. And knowing how much of the expected amounts were actually delivered would also help demonstrate support from the community. I believe that both of these would improve administrators ability to: a) understand and document what actually occurs in the projects and b) continue to make convincing arguments to the budget keepers to keep funding the program.

The evolution of the streams set out in the applications over the years of the program is extremely interesting and informative. I like very much the current four streams. They are simple and compact, but they cover the full range of likely successful projects. They are far superior to the "Type" classification scheme set out in the database (which I find stilted, overly specific, and not very helpful or informative). My understanding is that the "Type" classification comes from the province. I recommend using the current four streams to characterize or classify projects rather than the "Type" classification set out in the database. The four stream classification could still be used for internal purposes if the "Type" classification is required to meet other administrative requirements.

The reader may note that I have not included any analysis of the 'units served' data. I do not believe that any aggregate analysis (like what is done below) of those data are useful because the service provided varies so much across projects.   That does not mean, however, that the program should stop asking for projections/expectations of units of service in the applications, or for the actual numbers of units served by the end of the projects. I believe that developing the projected number to be served helps applicants work out what their project will actually be doing and helps adjudicators understand better what the project plans to accomplish. The reports of units actually served at the end of the project are useful for maintaining accountability and continuing to make the argument for continued funding of the program.

A. Introduction

Materials related to 351 funded projects, 2008 to 2018, were provided by the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI). Adam Fischer conducted an initial analysis of the materials and I would like to thank him for his help in the production of this report.

Notes on data cleaning and manipulation are presented at the end of this report. Briefly, two 2009 projects were removed completely from the analysis due to missing data so the starting data set consists of 349 funded projects. Three other projects were excluded from some parts of the analysis, also due to missing data.

There is also the issue of whether to include the 2008 projects in the analysis. Only 12 projects were funded that year and the total amount of funding was far below the amounts awarded in other years. It seems clear that 2008 was a start-up year and an outlier compared to the data for

the other years. Consequently, 2008 is ignored in the analysis when including it would affect the basic conclusions of the analysis. However, data for 2008 are included for completeness when their inclusion does not affect the analysis materially. Accordingly, 2008 data are included in graphs as long as they do not cause the scale of the vertical axis to be less informative than it would be with 2008 omitted.

B. Numbers of projects

Figure 1 shows the total number of funded projects, by year. The number of funded projects varies significantly from year to year, ranging from a high of 58 in 2010 to a low of 18 in 2014, and it trends downwards over the 2009-2018 period. For example, the average number of projects per year is 41 in the first three years (2009 to 2011) while the average number over the last three years is 25.   The overall average number of projects, 2009 to 2018, is 33.7 and the median number is 32.5.

Figure 1
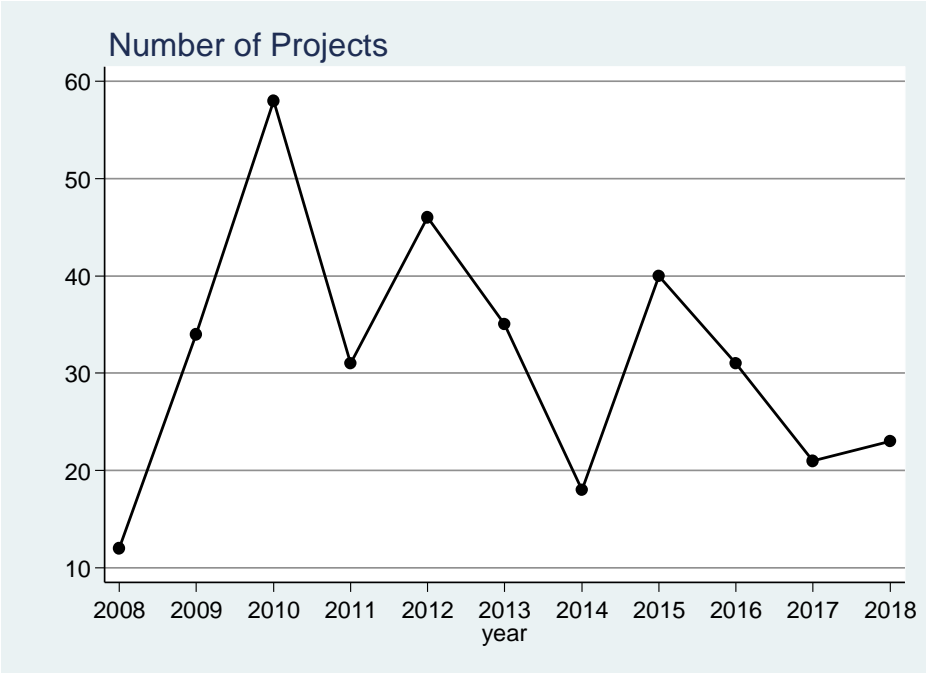
do graph_agg_by_year.do

B.1 Distribution of projects across municipalities or regions of Niagara

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of projects serving the various municipalities or combinations of municipalities in Niagara, 2008 to 2018, in descending order of the number of projects. Altogether, 34 separate municipalities or combinations of municipalities were the target areas of the projects.

Table 1

Rank/ Row	Municipality or area	Number Projects	% of Total # of Projects
1	St. Catharines	91	26.07
2	Welland	53	15.19
3	Niagara Falls	48	13.75
4	Region of Niagara	33	9.46
5	Fort Erie	28	8.02
6	Port Colborne	25	7.16
7	Grimsby	13	3.72
8	St. Catharines, Thorold	9	2.58
9	Niagara Falls, St. Catharines	8	2.29
10	Grimsby, Lincoln, West Lincoln	4	1.15
11	West Lincoln	4	1.15
12	Thorold	3	0.86
13	Fort Erie, Niagara Falls	2	0.57
14	Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Port Colborne, Welland	2	0.57
15	Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Welland	2	0.57
16	Fort Erie, Port Colborne	2	0.57
17	Pelham	2	0.57
18	Port Colborne, Wainfleet	2	0.57
19	St. Catharines, Welland	2	0.57
20	West Lincoln, Lincoln	2	0.57
21	Fort Erie, Niagara on the Lake	1	0.29
22	Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Pelham, St. Catharines, Welland	1	0.29
23	Fort Erie, Grimsby, St. Catharines, Welland	1	0.29
24	Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, St. Catharines	1	0.29
25	Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Welland	1	0.29
26	Fort Erie, St. Catharines, Welland	1	0.29
27	Grimsby; Thorold	1	0.29
28	Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Welland	1	0.29
29	Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Welland, Thorold	1	0.29
30	Niagara Falls, Port Colborne, St. Catharines, Welland, Fort Erie	1	0.29
31	Niagara Falls, Thorold, Welland	1	0.29
32	Niagara Falls, Welland	1	0.29
33	Niagara on the Lake, St. Catharines, Thorold	1	0.29
34	Port Colborne, Wainfleet, Welland	1	0.29
	Total	349	100

The top 12 municipalities or combinations of municipalities cover 91.4 percent of projects and their shares are shown in Figure 2. Projects serving St. Catharines dominate with 26.1 percent of the projects. There is a big drop to Welland and Niagara Falls, the second and third most common municipalities, with 15.2 percent and 13.8 percent of the projects, respectively.
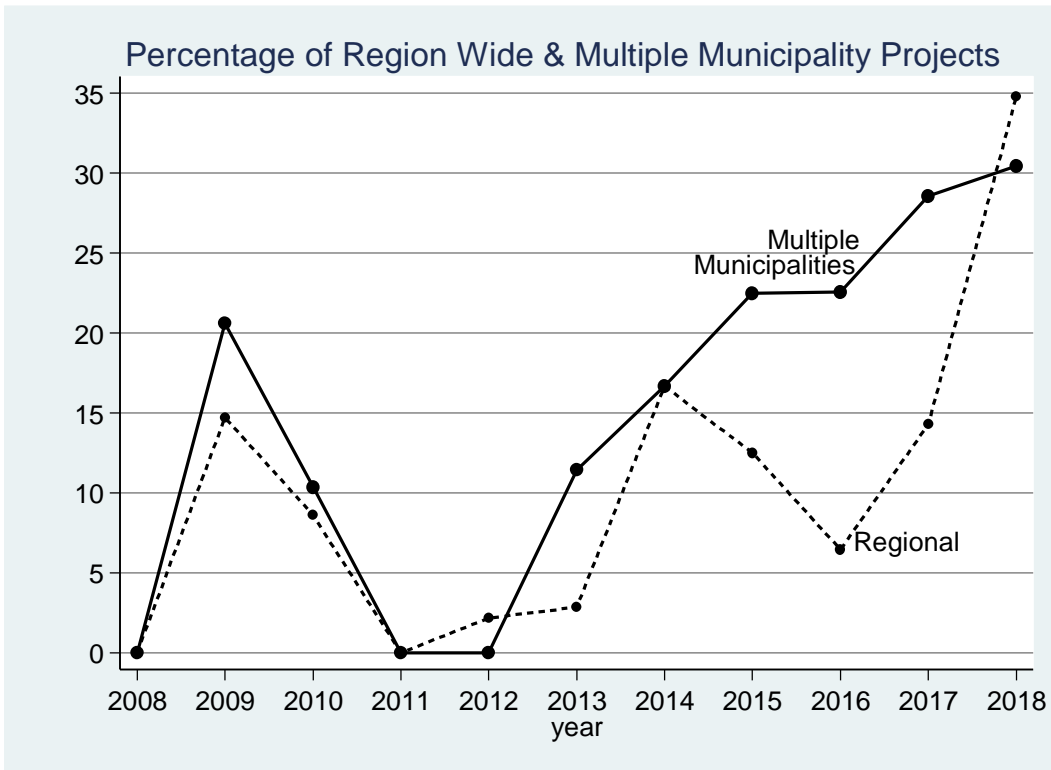
Figure 2
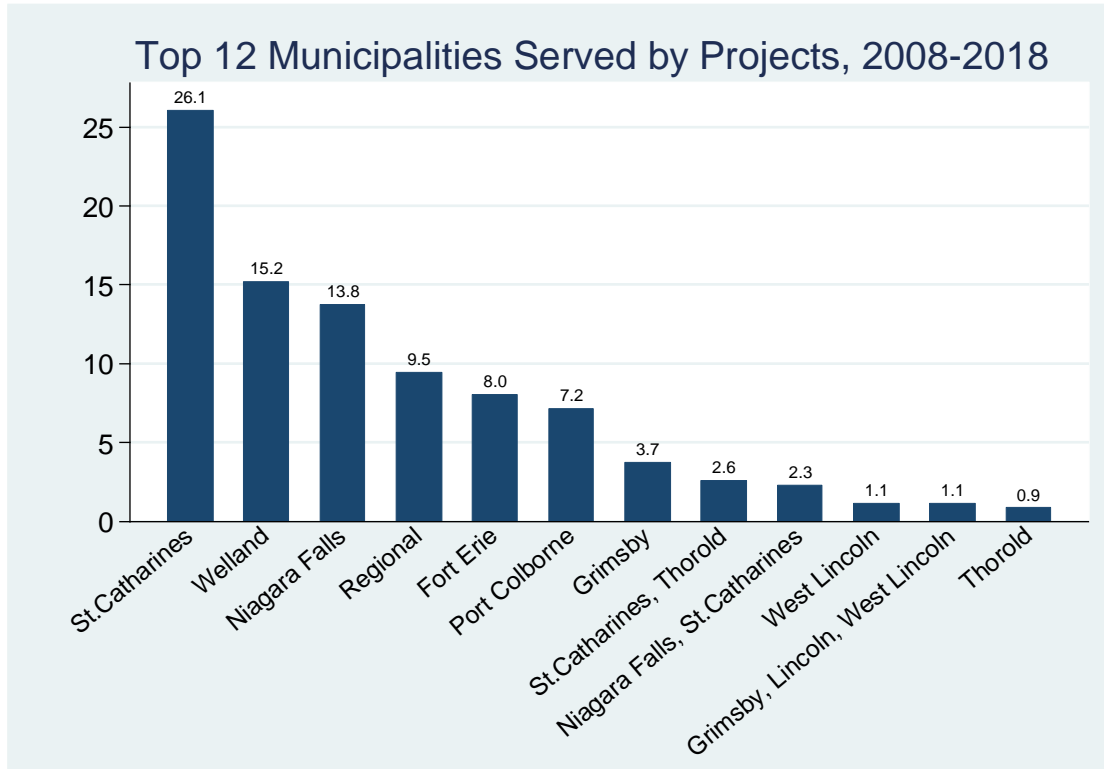
graph_cities.do

The Niagara region, Fort Erie and Port Colborne form the next tier of municipalities served by the projects. The Niagara region as a whole has 9.5 percent of the projects while Fort Erie and Port Colborne have similar percentages between 7 and 8 percent. The percentages of projects drop quickly and steadily after that to the other listed municipalities/regions. It seems clear that the population of municipalities is an important determinant of the number of projects it receives, with the larger municipalities hosting more projects.

The most common combinations of municipalities for projects are St. Catharines and Thorold; Niagara Falls and St. Catharines; and Grimsby, Lincoln, and West Lincoln.

Twenty two other Niagara municipalities or combinations or municipalities had projects. These are shown in rows 13 to 34 of Table 1 and their projects account for the remaining 8.6 percent (30 of 349 projects) of the total number of projects. Almost all serve combinations of municipalities. But none of these 22 municipalities or combinations of municipalities received more than two projects.

One interesting feature is that projects targeting just a single municipality became less common over the latter part of the 2008-2018 period. Figure 3 shows that projects serving multiple municipalities or the Niagara region as a whole became much more common after 2012. Multiple municipalities or the whole Niagara region were the focus of more than 42 percent of all projects in 2017 and over 65 percent for 2018.
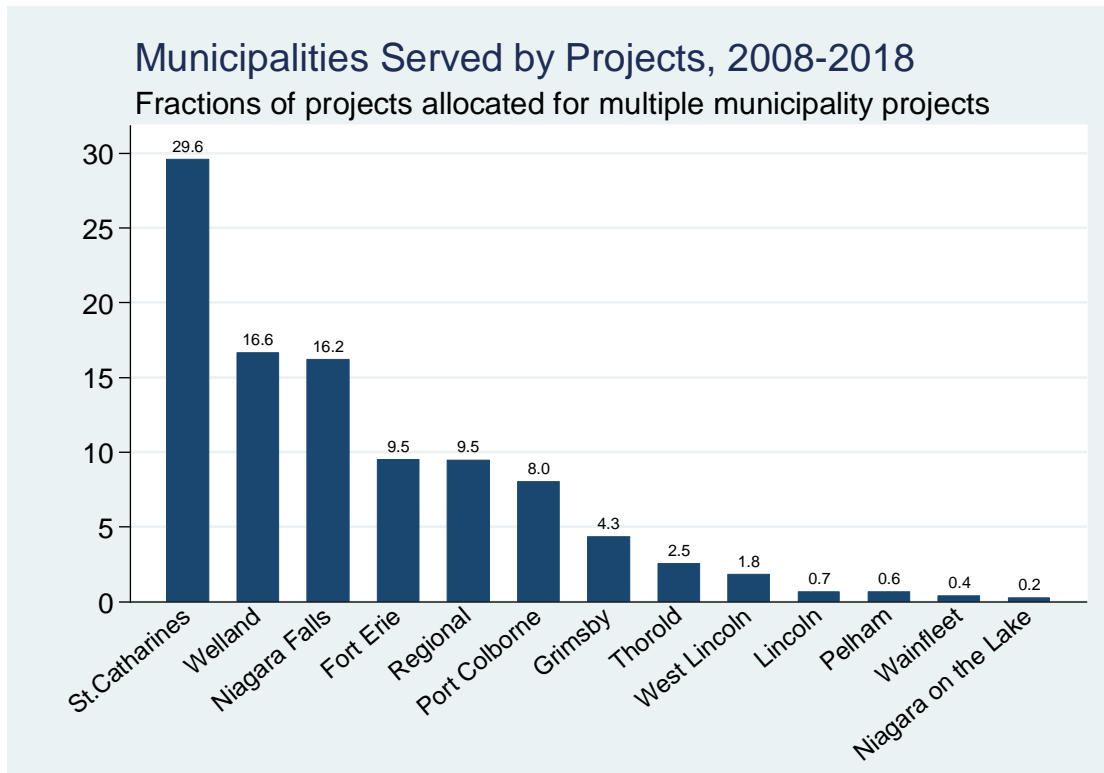
Figure 3

Percentage of Region Wide & Multiple Municipality Projects

graph_num_combs_regnal.do

The percentages shown in Figure 2 do not reflect all of the projects serving those municipalities. There are, for example, another 11 projects (occurring in rows 13 to 34 of Table 1) that include St. Catharines in their service area. Thus it is useful to calculate the total number of projects serving each municipality. To accomplish this, assume that if more than one municipality is listed, the project is divided equally between those municipalities. For example, a project targeting two municipalities (e.g. St. Catharines and Thorold) counts as half a project for each municipality. Similarly, the four projects covering Grimsby, Lincoln, and West Lincoln, are counted as four-thirds of a project for each of Grimsby, Lincoln, and West Lincoln. This method of allocating fractions of projects across multiple municipalities keeps the total number of projects unchanged.

Figure 4 shows the resulting distribution of projects across regions and it is quite similar to what is shown in Figure 2. St. Catharines still receives the biggest share of projects, but it is by an even bigger margin at 29.6 percent; close to double the next most common municipality. The increase occurs because St. Catharines is also named in many of the multiple municipality projects. Welland and Niagara Falls again form the next most common tier, with between 16 and

8

17 percent of projects, and now their percentages are almost equal. As in Figure 2, the Niagara Region, Fort Erie and Port Colborne make up the next tier receiving between 8 and 9.5 percent of the projects. As with Welland and Niagara Falls, the differences between municipalities in this third tier are smaller once the multiple municipality projects are allocated. Grimsby follows with 4.3% of the projects and the remaining municipalities show steadily decreasing numbers of projects.
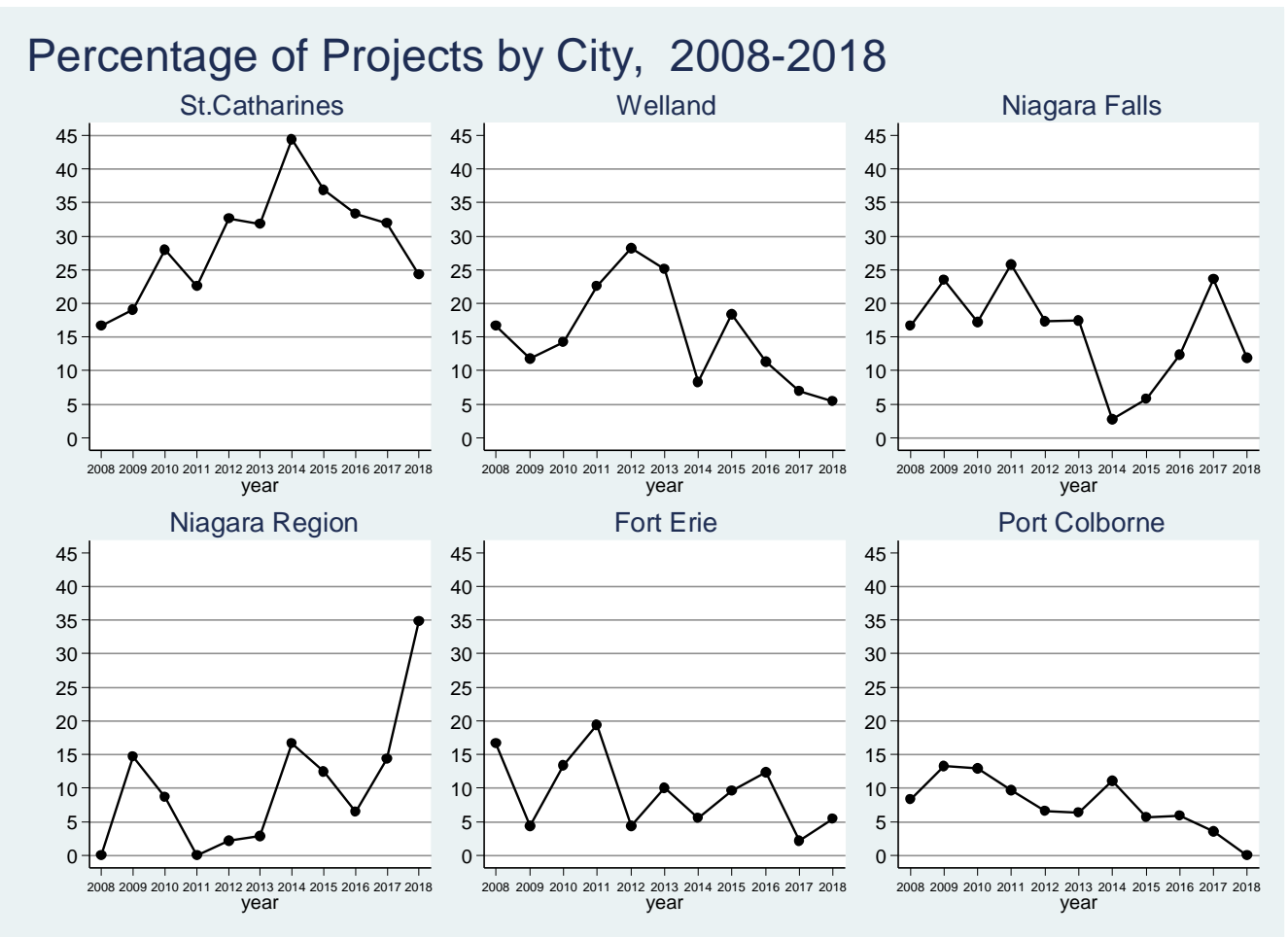
Figure 4

Municipalities Served by Projects, 2008-2018
Fractions of projects allocated for multiple municipality projects

do graph_cities_allocated.do

Although the overall distributions of projects across municipalities shown in Figures 2 or 4 look basically the same if only the later years of the programs are considered, it is interesting to examine whether municipalities received increasing or decreasing shares of the funded projects. Again, equal fractions of projects are allocated to each of the municipalities when more than one municipality is named in a project. Projects targeting the Niagara region as a whole are left as their own category.

Figure 5 shows that St. Catharines received an increasing share of projects up to 2014 and then a decreasing share thereafter. The proportions of projects going to Welland, Fort Erie, and Port Colborne all declined over the latter half of the period while (as shown above) the share serving the Niagara region as a whole increased sharply after 2013. Niagara Falls also experienced a large decrease in 2014 and 2015 but its share of the projects has rebounded since then.

Figure 5

Percentage of Projects by City, 2008-2018

graph_cities_by_year_allocated.do

Figure 6 shows the percentages for municipalities with fewer projects. Note that the range or scale of the vertical axis is roughly only one third as large as that used in Figure 5. Lincoln, Wainfleet and Niagara on the Lake were only named in projects in 2015 or later. Grimsby. Thorold, and West Lincoln received projects in most but not all years. The shares of projects in Thorold and West Lincoln vary from year to year with no real trend while Grimsby's share increased substantially 2016 to 2018.

Figure 6

Percentage of Projects by City, 2008-2018
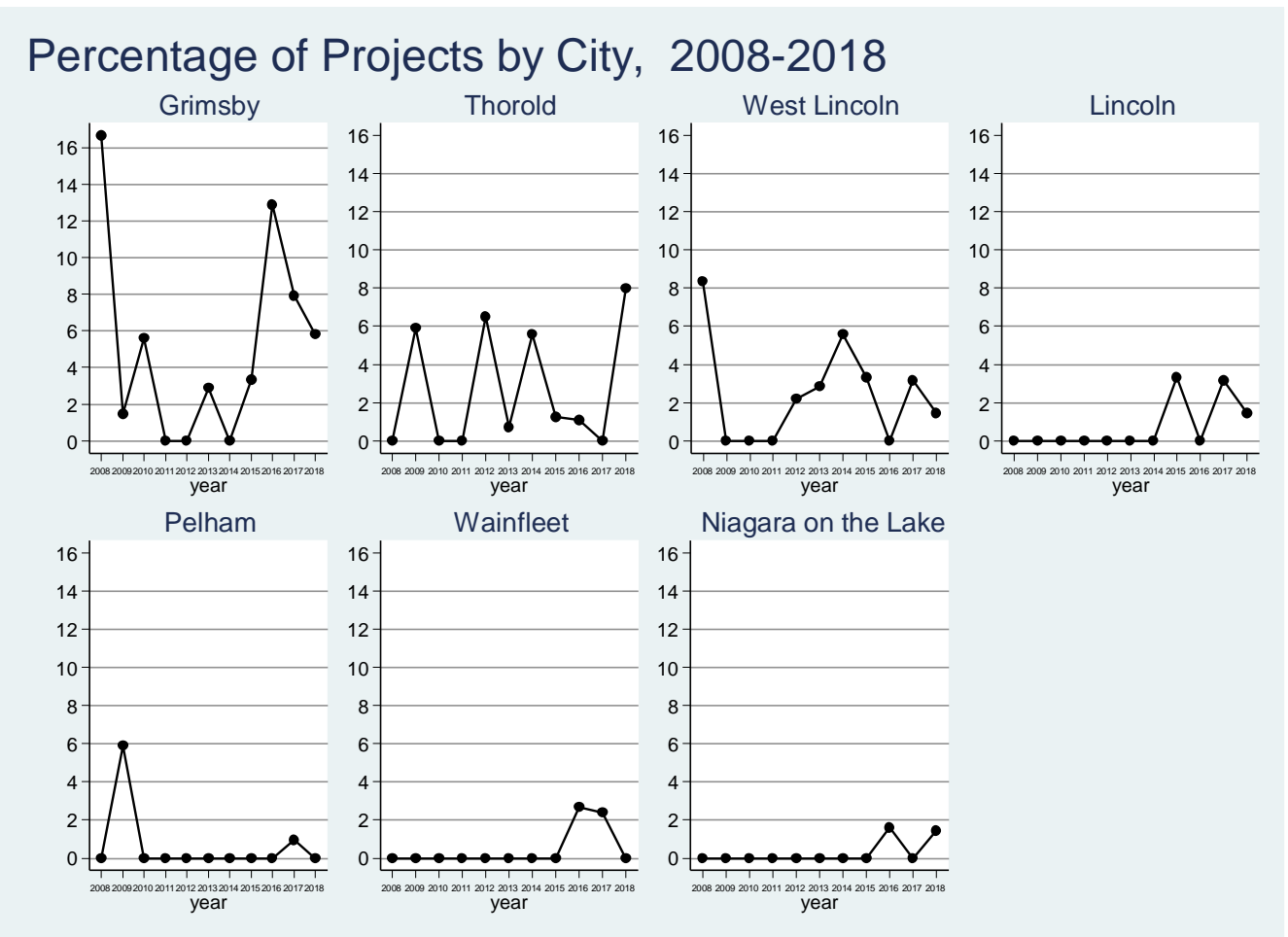
graph_cities_by_year_allocated.do

C. Contract Amounts Awarded and Spent

C.1 Total Contract Amounts

The official amount allocated for the program is $1.5 million every year, but the actual contract amounts given out for projects vary from year to year. There are three reasons for this. First, $150,000 of the $1.5 million can be allocated for administrative overhead and expenses. Administrative costs have not consumed the full $150,000 in every year, however, and any remaining funds have been allocated to projects. Second, some projects do not spend their full contract amounts, in which case all of the unspent funds are re-allocated to new contracts. This was especially important is some of the earlier years when a few projects ended early or barely got started and their funds were re-allocated to new projects. Reallocating unspent funds means that some of the monies are awarded as contract amounts more than once. Third, in some years, interest accrued on the funds and it was included in the amount given to projects.

Figure 7 shows the total amount awarded to projects in each year, in nominal dollars and adjusted for inflation. The inflation adjusted totals provide estimates of the actual purchasing power of the amounts awarded each year, relative to 2009. The Ontario "all items" Consumer Price Index (CPI) was used to adjust for inflation. The total contract amount awarded in 2008 is only around $270,000, so it is omitted improve the scaling of the graph.
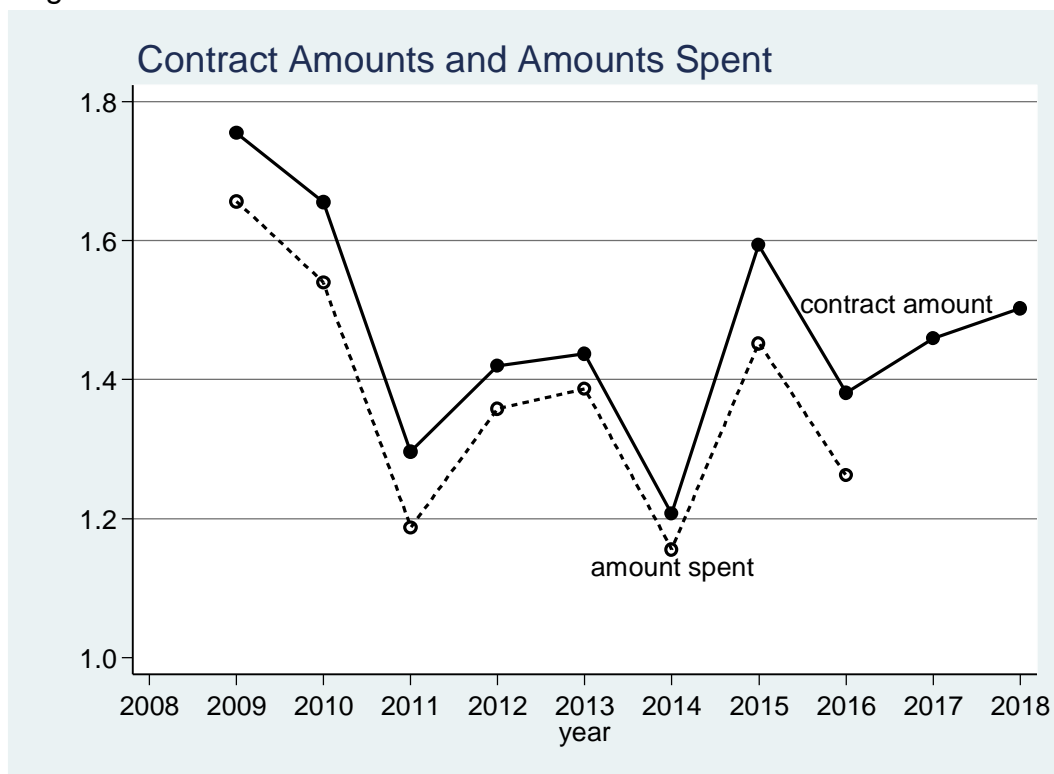
Figure 7
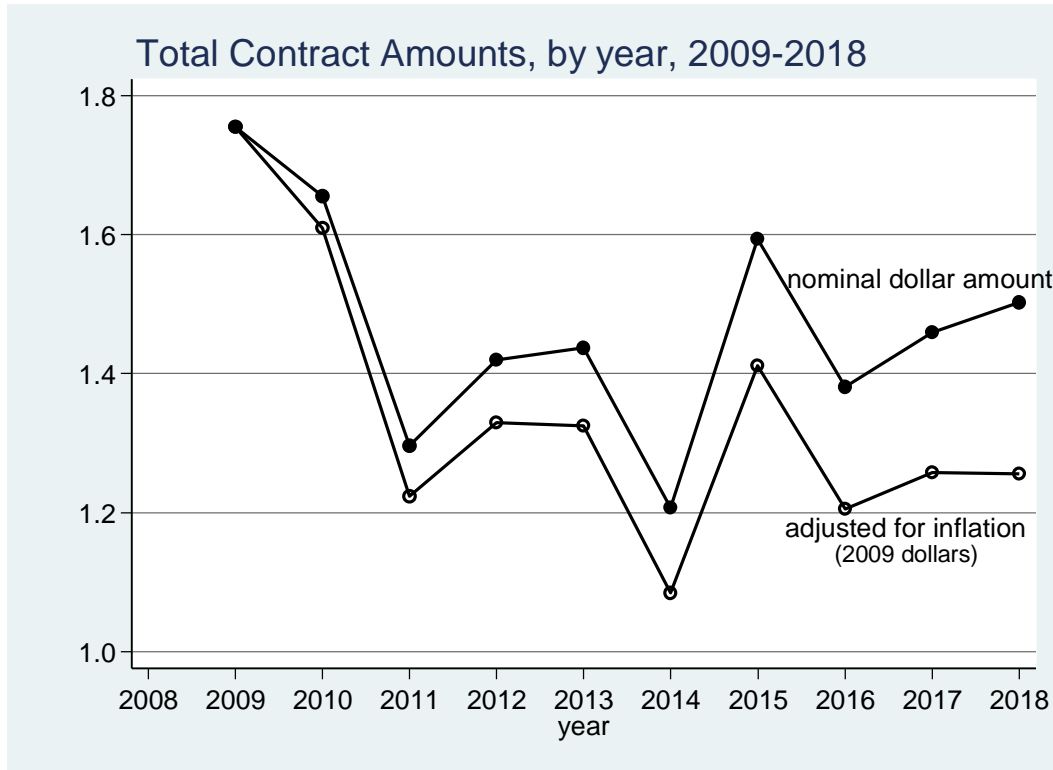
graph_agg_by_year.do

Figure 7 shows that the total amounts awarded (both nominal and inflation adjusted) were relatively high in 2009 and 2010. Recall that some large unspent amounts in some early projects were re-allocated to new contracts. The total amounts awarded decreased sharply in 2011 and remained relatively stable at a bit over $1.4 million in 2012 and 2013. The contract amount awarded dropped sharply in 2014 because there was no second round of contracts awarded out of unspent funds. The 2104 unspent funds were given out in 2015, resulting in almost $1.6 million awarded in that year. The amount awarded fell to below $1.4 million in 2016 but increased steadily in the following two years. The total contract amounts awarded in 2018 was slightly over $1.5 million.

The inflation adjusted plot shows that inflation has eroded the purchasing power of the awards over time. While the nominal dollar amounts have trended upwards since 2011 (after smoothing out the year to year variation) the inflation adjusted amounts have basically been constant since 2011 (again, after smoothing out the year to year variation). The contract amounts awarded in both 2017 and 2018 were both $1.25 million in 2009 constant value dollars

C.2 Total Amounts Spent

The amounts spent (as opposed to the amounts awarded) are only available from 2008 to 2016, since the more recent projects have not been completed. In 2008 the amount spent is exactly equal to the amount awarded, so it is likely an assigned figure.   Figure 8 shows the nominal amounts awarded (same as in Figure 7) and amounts spent 2009 to 2016. The aggregate amounts spent each year track the amounts awarded closely and never exceed the amount awarded.   The aggregate amounts spent range from 91 to 96 percent of the aggregate amounts awarded over the years shown. The percentage is 91 percent in both 2015 and 2016. Note that the percentage spent would be exactly the same if inflation adjusted (rather than nominal sums) were used.
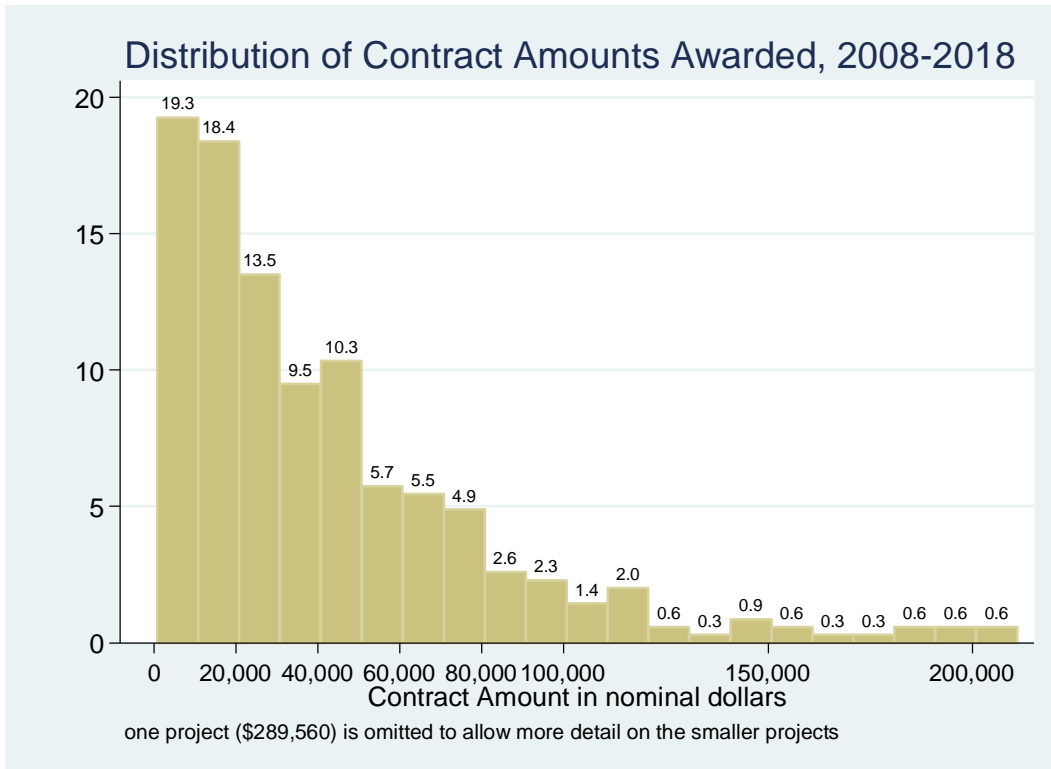
Figure 8

graph_agg_by_year.do

C.3 Size of Projects' Contract Amounts

Figure 9 shows the size distribution of the nominal dollar contract amounts awarded for all projects 2008 to 2018.   One very large outlier contract (in 2009, for $289,560) is omitted to allow for more detail on the more numerous smaller contracts.   Figure 9 shows that most of the projects are awarded relatively small dollar amounts. The smallest contract amount is $811 so the first bar or column starts at that value (call it $800). Each bar represents 10,000 nominal dollars. Thus, 19.3 percent of all projects (almost one in five) received between $800 and $10,800 and that is also the mode (i.e. the most common range for contract amounts).   Another

18.4 percent received between $10,801 and $20,800. Put another way, almost 40 percent of all contracts were given less than $20,800. 13.5 percent of the contracts ranged between $20,801 to $30, 800, 19.8 percent ranged from $30,801 to $50,800, and larger contracts are less and less frequent. Altogether, 70 percent of the contracts provided $50,000 or less.

The size distribution of inflation adjusted real dollar amounts is similar to what is shown in Figure 9, so it is not reported here.
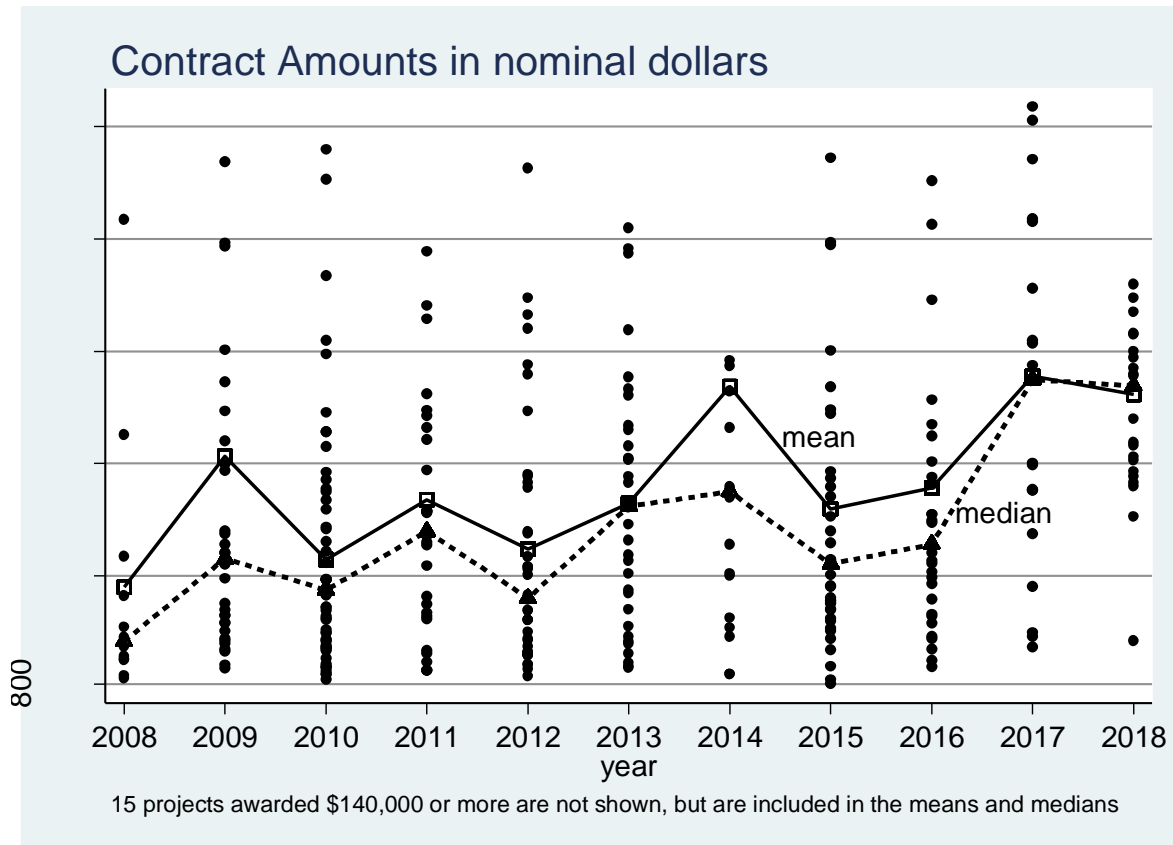
Figure 9

Distribution of Contract Amounts Awarded, 2008-2018

one project ($289,560) is omitted to allow more detail on the smaller projects

graph_scatter_contract_amnt.do

The nominal dollar amounts awarded to each project, 2008 to 2018, are shown in Figure 10. Each dot represents a contract amount and the average (or mean) and median contact amounts are shown for each year. Fifteen projects that were awarded more than $140,000 nominal dollars are omitted from Figure 10 so that more detail can be shown for the far more numerous smaller contracts. Four of these large omitted contracts occur in 2014, 3 occur in 2009 and every year save 2010 and 2013 has at least one. The means and medians shown in Figure 10 are calculated over all projects and not just the ones plotted in the Figure.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from Figure 10.   First, the contract amounts awarded varied from year to year, but they grew over the years of the program, and their size increased considerably in 2017 and 2018. This growth in the average and median amounts awarded is not surprising given that the number of projects funded decreased over time (see Figure 1).

Second, for every year from 2008 to 2016, the average amount awarded is greater than the median. This occurs because the size distribution of the awards is as shown in Figure 9; namely, a large number of relatively small contracts are awarded, along with a small number of much larger contracts. The large contracts raise the average or mean amount while having a much smaller impact on the median. In 2013, the mean award is only slightly higher than the median. This occurs because there were no big awards that year. The largest 2013 contract amount was $102,520; well below the largest awards in all of the other years.

Figure 10

Contract Amounts in nominal dollars

15 projects awarded $140,000 or more are not shown, but are included in the means and medians

graph_scatter_contract_amnt.do

The size distribution of contracts awarded in 2017 and 2018, however, is much different from previous years (with the exception of 2013 noted above). The awards are much larger in 2017 and 2018. For example, in 2016 the median award was $31,981 in nominal dollars. This means that half of the projects were awarded less than $31,981 and the other half were awarded more than $31,981. In 2017 the median jumped to $68,643, more than twice as much, and it remained more than twice as high (at $67,300) in 2018. According to administrators of the program, there was a conscious decision to fund fewer projects and award large amounts in 2017 and 2018 and the results of that are evident in Figure 10. Again, Figure 1 shows that only 21 and 23 projects were funded in 2017 and 2018, respectively, well below the average number since 2009.

More surprising is the fact that the mean and median contract amounts are almost identical in 2017 and 2018. In previous years (save 2013), far more than half of the projects received below

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average amounts while only a few projects received above average amounts. This occurs because, again, there were a large number of relatively small projects and a few large ones which pulled up the mean. In contrast, in 2017 and 2018 (and 2013), the mean and median contract amounts are practically identical. In those years, roughly half of the projects received below average amounts and half received above average amounts in those years. In other words, the size of the awards is distributed symmetrically (and evenly!) above and below the average amounts. This symmetric distribution (or spread) is seen clearly in the dots shown (each representing a project) for 2017 and 2018 (and 2013).

Third, Figure 10 shows that the (symmetric) distribution of contract amounts is very spread out in 2017. I.e. there are many projects with contracts far above the average amount and many with contracts far below the average amount. In 2018 the (symmetric) distribution or spread of contracts is much more concentrated around the average. All of the contract amounts (i.e. both those above and below the average amount) are much closer to the average than they are in 2017, or in any of the other years.

Analysis of the inflation adjusted contract amounts yields the same conclusions as set out above. The only difference is that the means and medians of the inflation adjusted contract amounts have a more gentle upwards slope. But the big increases in the mean amount, and especially the median amount, in 2017 persist.

C.4   Distribution of contract amounts across municipalities or regions of Niagara

The distribution of contract amounts across municipalities and areas of Niagara is similar to the distribution of the numbers of projects shown above.   The top 13 municipalities or combinations of municipalities received roughly 91% of all of the contract funds awarded, 2008-2018. Each of these 13 were also the only ones to receive (individually) more than 1% of the total funding. Each of the other 21 (of 34 – see Table 1) municipalities or combinations of municipalities received less than 1% of the total amounts awarded 2008-2018.

Figure 11 shows the percentage of the total number of dollars awarded, 2008-2018, to the top receiving municipalities or combinations of municipalities.   It is similar to the distribution of the number of projects shown in Figure 2. St. Catharines (on its own) receives, by far, the largest share of the awards at 24.8%. The next tier again consists of Welland and Niagara Falls but Regional projects are a new member of this group, and they are the largest member of this group. Each of the three receive between 9.9 and 11.7 percent of the amounts awarded. The next highest are Port Colborne, Fort Erie, and St. Catharines/Thorold, with steadily declining proportions of the contract amounts. Grimsby is next with 3.5 percent of the funds awarded. West Lincoln and 4 other combinations of municipalities all receive less than 3 percent of the contract amounts.

It is not surprising that regional projects move up from the third tier of numbers of projects to the second tier of amounts awarded. One would expect projects serving the entire Niagara region to require more monies than the average project. Further, most of the Region wide projects

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occurred in the later years (see Figure 3) when the median and average amounts awarded per project are larger.

Figure 2 showed that 'St. Catharines and Thorold' and 'Niagara Falls and St. Catharines' are the most common combinations of municipalities according to numbers of projects. Figure 11 shows that they are also the combinations that receive the largest percentages of funds at 5.3 and 2.9 percent, respectively

Figure 11

Top 13 Municipalities by Contract Amounts, 2008-2018
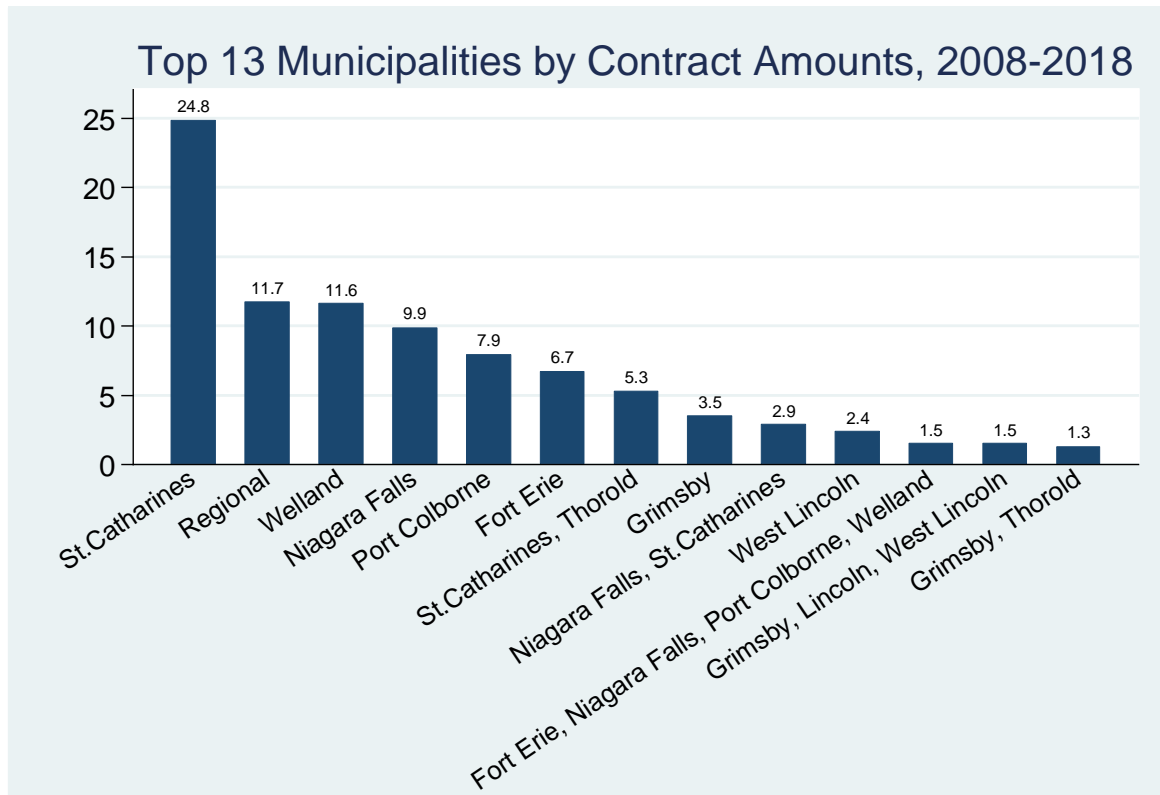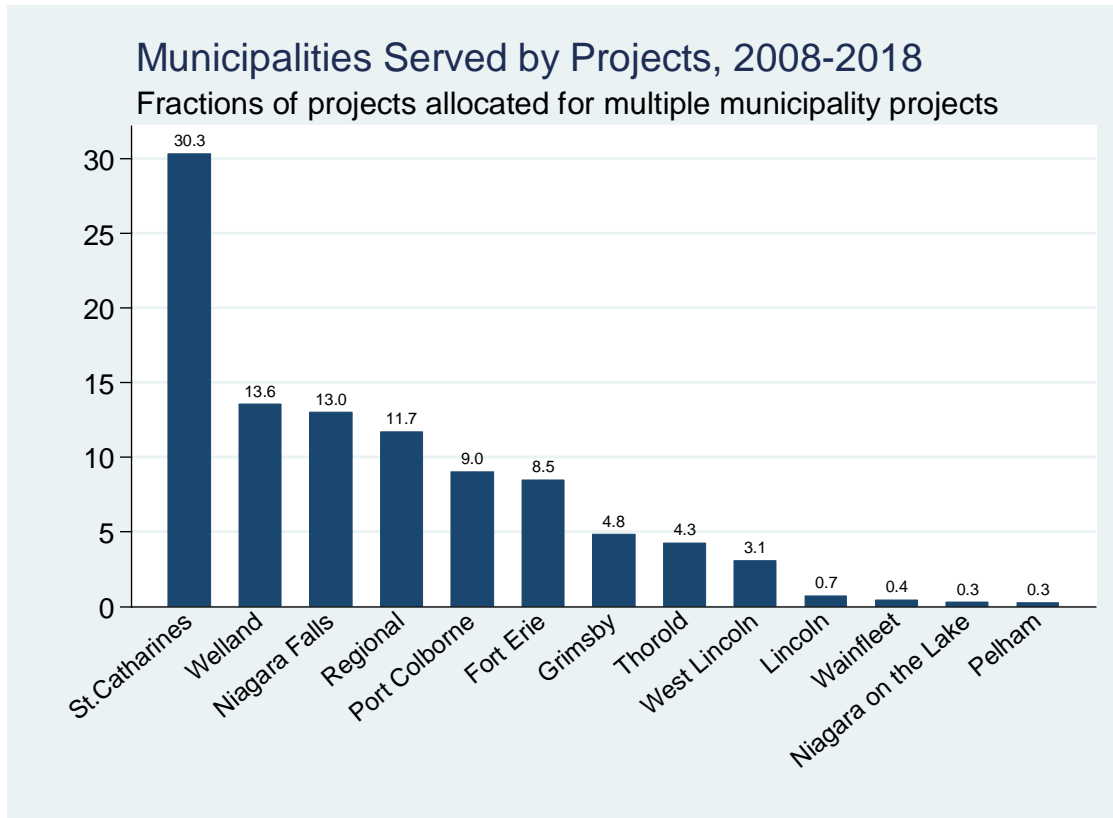
do graph_cities_contract_amount.do

The percentages shown in Figure 11 do not reflect all of the project funds serving those municipalities. As noted above, there are, for example, are another 11 projects (shown in Table 1) that include St. Catharines in their service area. Thus it is important to calculate the total amount of project funds awarded to each municipality. The same equal allocation formula (used for numbers of projects above) is employed to accomplish this. Specifically, assume that if more than one municipality is listed, the contract amount is divided equally between the municipalities named in the project.

Figure 12 shows the distribution of contract amounts across municipalities using the equal share allocation formula. As with the number of projects, St. Catharines receives an increased and even larger share but the basic distribution remains unchanged. Projects in Welland and Niagara Falls form the second tier, but they are joined by the region wide projects in this case. Port Colborne and Fort Erie comprise the next tier at between 8.5 and 9 percent of contract funds.

Grimsby, Thorold and West Lincoln follow in that order with between 3 and 5 percent of the funds and the remaining municipalities all receive small very percentages; below 1 percent.

Figure 12

Municipalities Served by Projects, 2008-2018
Fractions of projects allocated for multiple municipality projects

Municipality	Value
St.Catharines	30.3
Welland	13.6
Niagara Falls	13.0
Regional	11.7
Port Colborne	9.0
Fort Erie	8.5
Grimsby	4.8
Thorold	4.3
West Lincoln	3.1
Lincoln	0.7
Wainfleet	0.4
Niagara on the Lake	0.3
Pelham	0.3

do graph_cities_allocated.do   scroll down to end

It is interesting to examine how the share of funds allocated to each municipality changed over time. Figures 13 and 14 show the percentage of the total contract amounts awarded, by year, for each of the municipalities. The percentages of contract funds awarded are very similar to the percentages of contracts shown above in Figures 5 and 6. Note that the vertical axis scale in Figure 13 is more than twice that in Figure 4.

Briefly, Figures 13 and 14 show the following:

- St. Catharines' projects receive the largest share in most but not all years. There is a spike in 2014, rather than the incline up to 2014 and the steady decline after 2014 shown for projects. St. Catharines' share is around 30 percent for seven of the eleven years.

- Welland's proportion increases sharply over the middle years (2011-2013) but it decreases towards the end of the time period

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- Despite large variations from year to year, Niagara Falls' share is fairly constant over the period, remaining between 10 and 20 percent for most years. 2015 and especially 2014 show smaller percentages while 2017 is above 20 percent

- Port Colborne's and Fort Erie's shares decrease after peaks around 2010-11

- Region wide projects increase sharply, especially in 2017 and 2017, from a low of zero in 2011

- Grimsby receives a higher share of the funds awarded in the last three years

- Lincoln, Wainfleet, and Niagara on the Lake received zero up to 2014 or 2015 and small amounts thereafter.

- Pelham received small amounts (less than 2%) in 2009 and 2017

Figure 13

Percentage of Contract Amounts Awarded, by City, 2008-2018
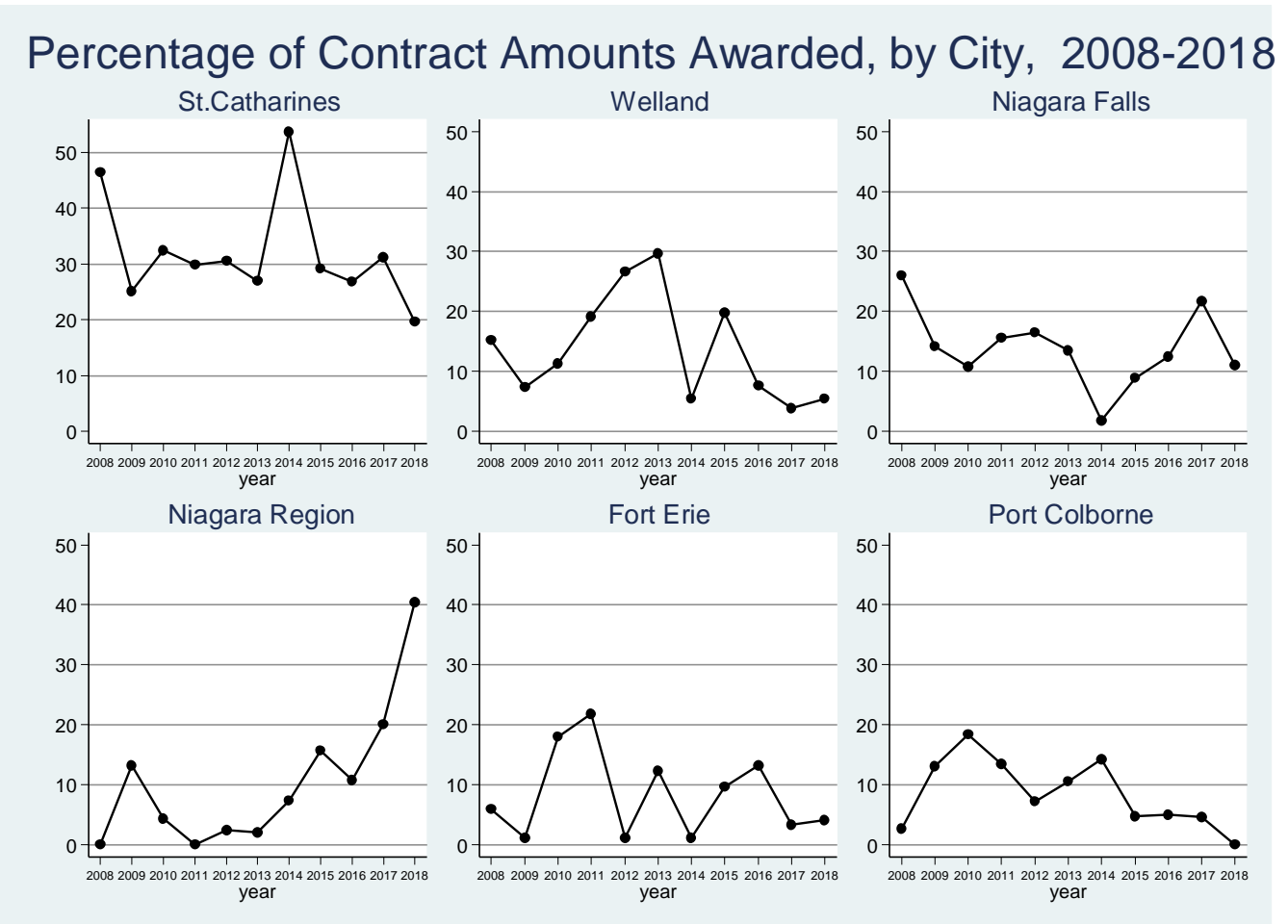
graph_cities_by_year_allocated.do   scroll down

Figure 14

Percentage of Contract Amounts Awarded, by City, 2008-2018
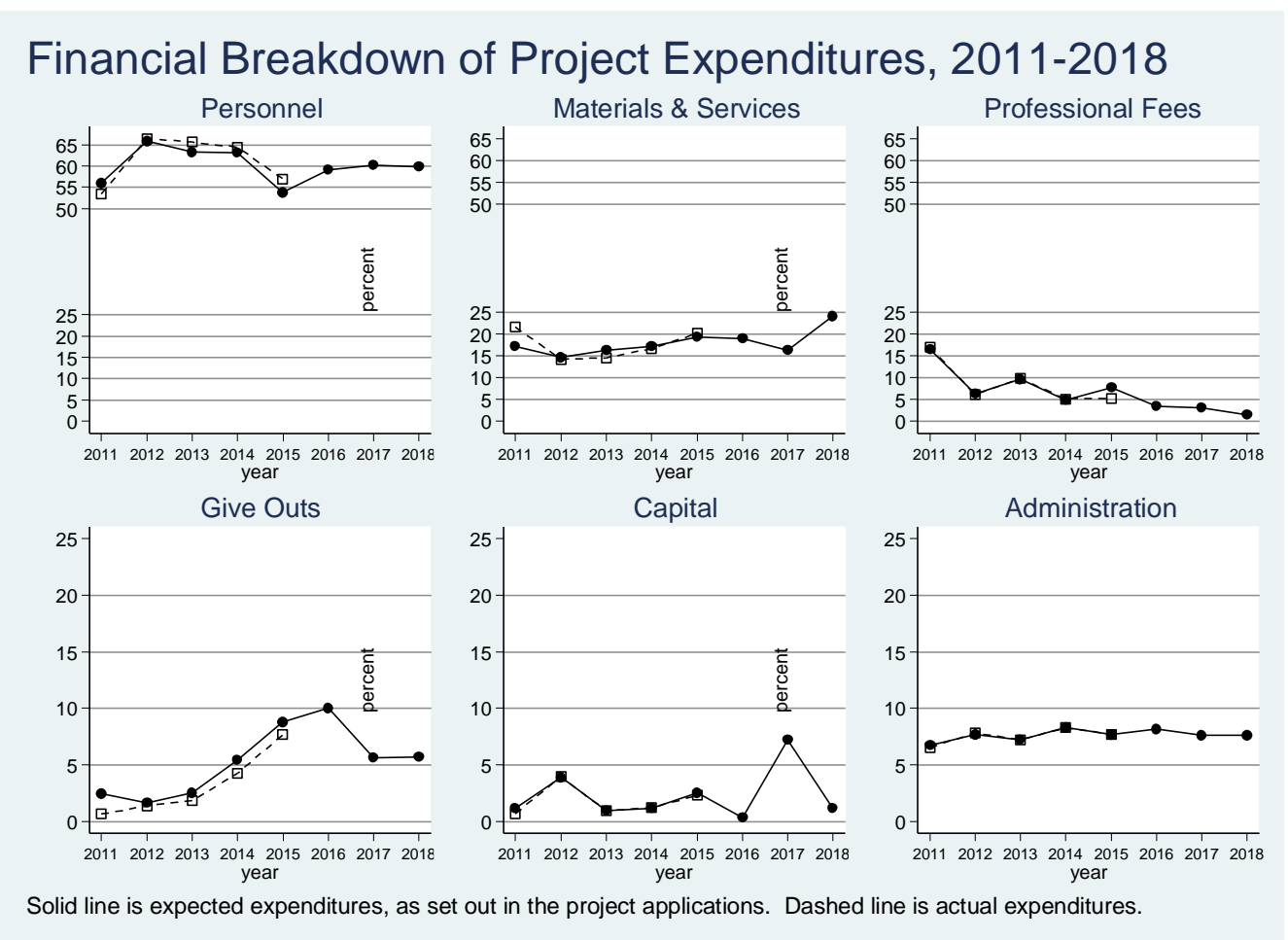
graph_cities_by_year_allocated.do   scroll down

D. Financial Breakdown or Composition of projects' expenditures

Project applications had to provide breakdowns of expected costs according to the following
categories:

- Project Delivery **Personnel**: cost of personnel required for the project, both full or part-
  time. All personnel must be on the agency's payroll. No subcontractor or consultant costs
  are included here
- **Give-outs**: costs of any purchases that are completely transferred to the client, as-is. For
  example, gift cards, vouchers, transportation passes, etc.

- **Capital**: costs of all depreciable items such as vehicles, infrastructure, or renovation costs. May include purchases from sub-contractors or suppliers. Excludes any operating costs associated with capital assets.
- **Materials and Services:** costs of the materials and services required for project delivery; such as supplies, admission to events, transportation costs, food, etc. Also includes all purchases that do not fit into any other category.
- **Professional Fees**: costs of consultants, sub-contractors, or other agencies hired by contract.
- **Administration**: covers the agency's Overhead Costs. May not be greater than 10% of Total Direct Project Delivery Costs.

Figure 15

Financial Breakdown of Project Expenditures, 2011-2018

Solid line is expected expenditures, as set out in the project applications. Dashed line is actual expenditures.

graph_type_financial.do

Figure 15 shows that the share of each expenditure category, 2011 to 2018, calculated by summing over all of the projects in that year. The solid line shows the expected or projected cost shares that were approved in the projects' applications. The dashed line shows the actual expenditure shares.

Data on 2008 were not available. Preliminary analysis of the expenditure data showed that the component shares varied substantially over 2009 and 2010 and then settled down to more stable values after 2010. Thus the analysis is restricted to the most recent years, 2011 to 2018. The expected expenditures are available for all eight years. The actual expenditures for recent years, 2016 to 2018, were not available when the data set was compiled.

The shares of many of the expenditure components are remarkably stable from year to year, after 2010. Figure 15 reveals the following:

- The actual expenditure shares are very close to the expected or projected shares set out in the projects' applications in every year and expenditure category.

- Personnel costs dominate, comprising more than half of all cost in every year and averaging 60 percent over the years shown.

- Materials and services costs average 18 percent of the total costs and their share trends upwards very slightly over the period.

- Professional fees, subcontractors and consultants, on the other hand, account for almost as much as materials and services in 2011 (at 16.5 percent), but their share trends down strongly over the period to less than 2 percent in 2018. Averaged over 2011-18, expected professional fees account for 6.6 percent of expected expenditures

- Give-outs comprise very small proportions of the total expected costs 2011 to 2013, but they increase significantly after that. They peak at 10 percent in 2016 and are between 5 and 6 percent for 2017 and 2018.
  The actual costs of give outs are a bit below the projected amounts in every year that the data are available, but the differences are not large.
  Expected give outs average 5.3 percent of total expected expenditures over eight years shown.

- The share of capital costs is extremely low, remaining well below 5% in all years but one (2017), and averaging just 2.3% over the whole period.

- Administration costs comprise an extremely stable share of costs from year to year and average 7.6% over all eight years.

Note that the average shares (2011 to 2018) cited in the bullets above are the average over all projects in those years and not an average of the annual percentages shown in Figure 15. An average of percentages can differ from the overall average due to composition effects and different numbers of projects in each year.
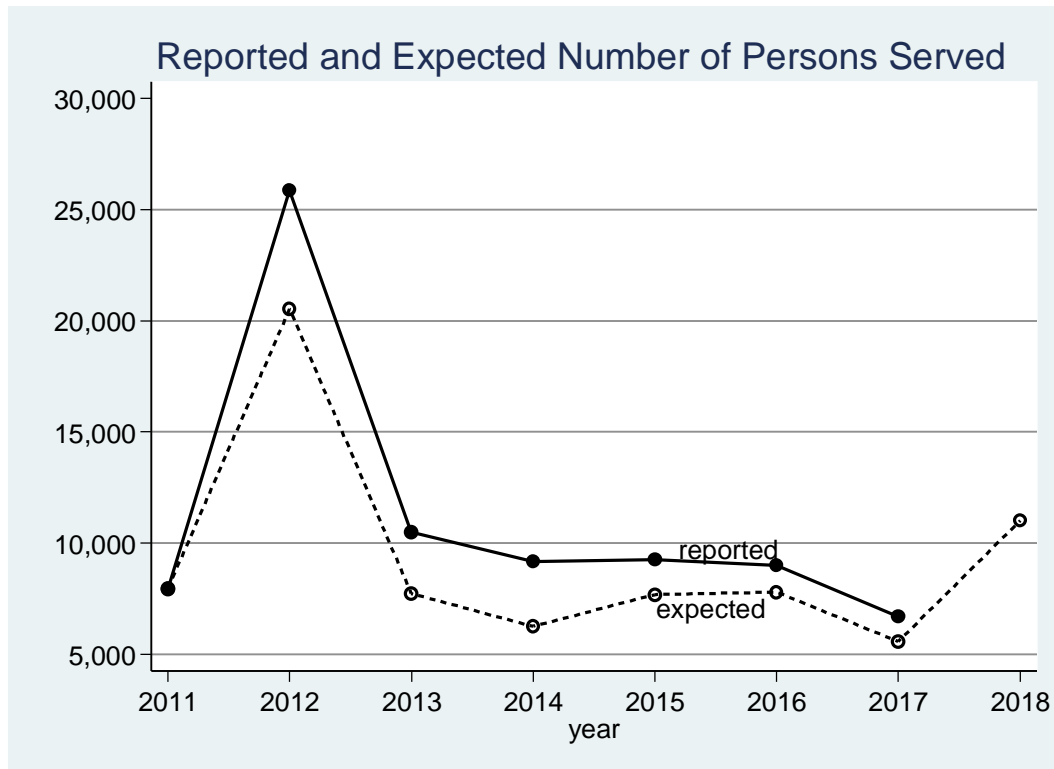
E. Number of Persons Served

The total number of people expected to be served and reported to be served by the NPI projects, by year, 2011 to 2018, is plotted in Figure 16. Only the years 2011 to 2018 are considered because the categories of persons served changed in 2011.

Persons served are the sum of the number of children, youth, adults, and seniors served. The numbers served (both expected and actual) are generally between 5,000 and 10,000 with the exception of 2012. There is one huge outlier project in 2012, with number served (both expected and reported) equal to 13,000, which partly accounts for the huge spike in 2012. The numbers reported served in 2012 would still be above the 2011 totals and the totals in later years if that project is excluded from the 2012 total.

From 2013 to 2017, the reported number of persons served trends down from 10,499 in 2013 to a low of 6,699 in 2017. There is more analysis of the declining numbers of persons served (just a headcount) below. An average of 11,206 people were served per year over the years 2011 to 2017, and 8,930 from 2013 to 2017.

The number of persons reported served by projects is almost equal to the number expected or projected to be served (in the projects' applications) in 2011. But the reported number served exceeds the expectations in every year after.
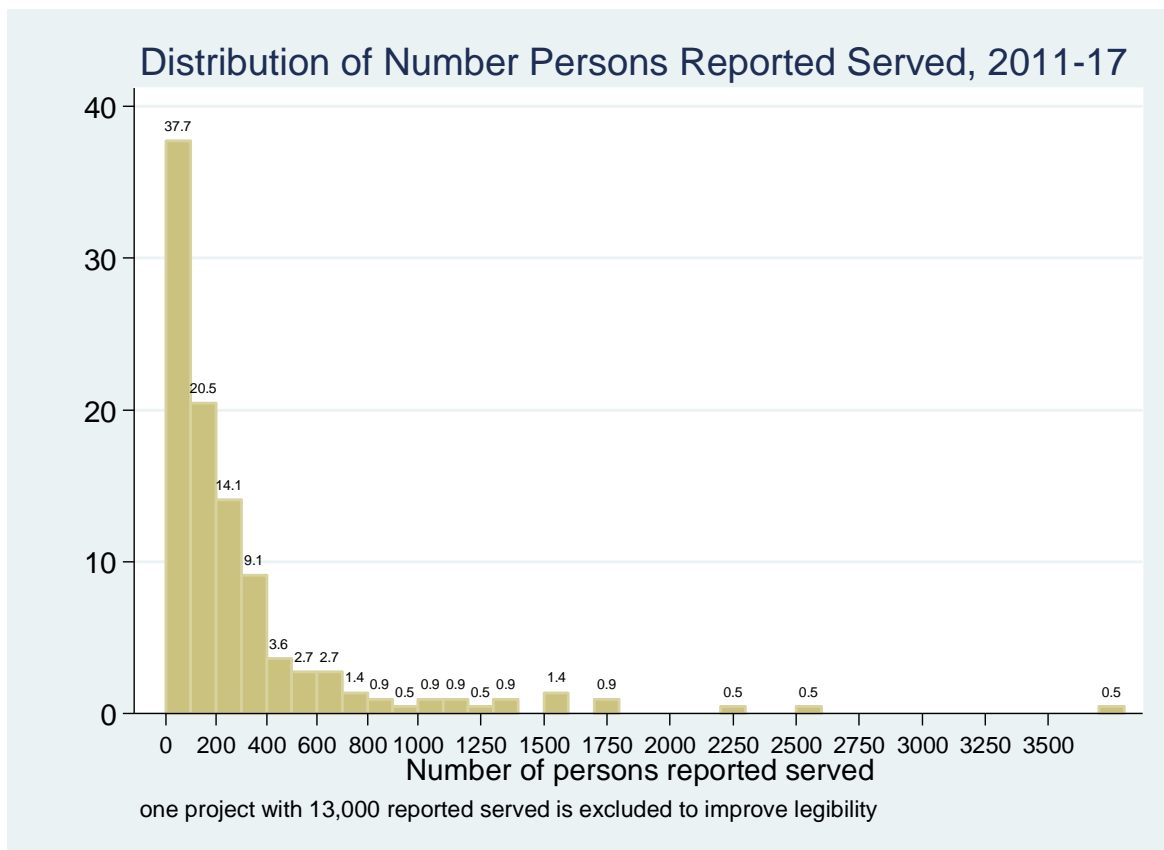
Figure 16

Reported and Expected Number of Persons Served

graph_scatter_persons_served.do

Figure 13 only shows the total number of persons reported to be served in each year by all of the projects. It is also interesting to investigate measures of how many people are served by individual projects.

Figure 17 shows the size distribution of the reported number of persons served, 2011 to 2017. Only two projects served more than 2,600 people and the smallest project served 6 persons. Each bar in Figure 17 represents 100 people (starting from zero) so roughly 38 percent of the 221 projects served 100 or fewer people. Another 20.5 percent served 101 to 200 people and 14.1 percent served 201 to 300 people. Altogether, 81% percent of the projects served fewer than 400 people. There are a small number of much larger projects, with 6.8 percent of projects serving more than 1,000 people.
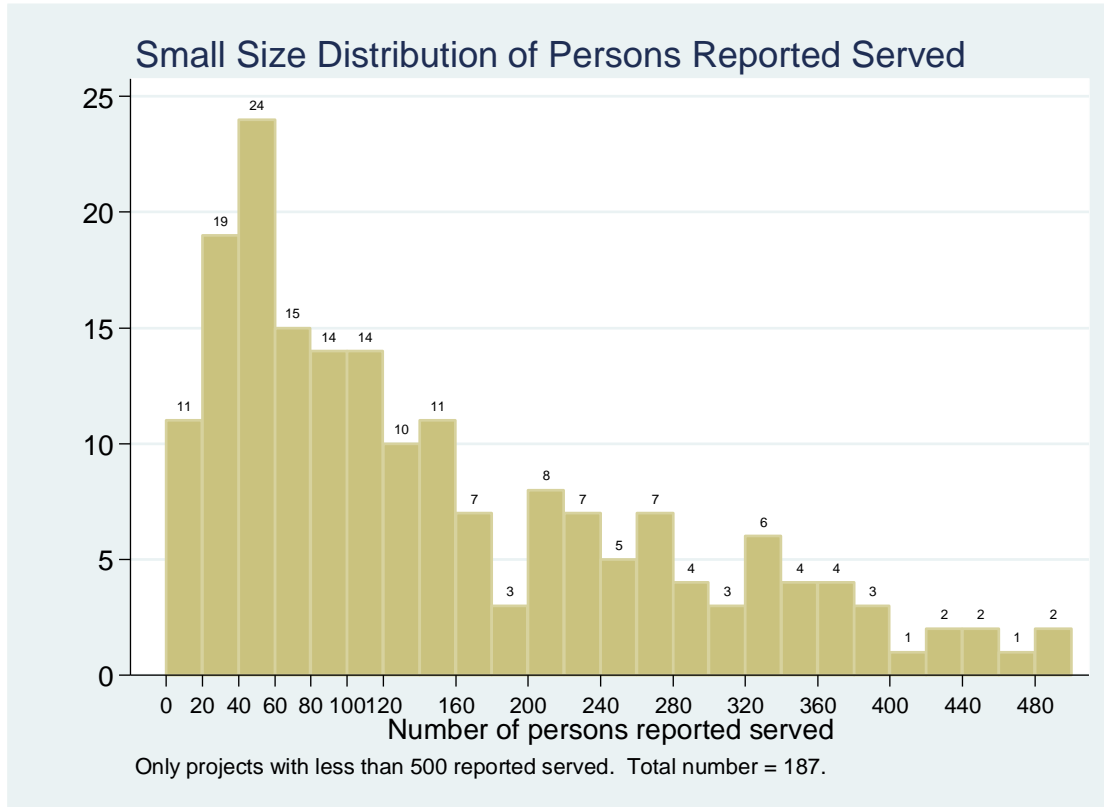
Figure 17

Distribution of Number Persons Reported Served, 2011-17

one project with 13,000 reported served is excluded to improve legibility

graph_scatter_persons_served.do

More details of the size distribution are revealed by re-doing the analysis of Figure 17, but with only projects that served 500 or fewer people. This is shown in Figure 18. Each column represents 20 people so there were 11 projects serving 20 or fewer people. Slightly larger projects were more common. Specifically, 19 projects served 21 to 40 people and 24 projects (the mode or most common category) served 41 to 60 people. The next three groups (61 to 80, 81 to 100, and 101 to 120 people served) all had 14 or 15 projects each and projects serving

24

greater numbers of people were less and less common (although not monotonically) as shown in Figure 18

Figure 18

Small Size Distribution of Persons Reported Served

Only projects with less than 500 reported served. Total number = 187.

graph_scatter_persons_served.do

Figure 19 examines whether the number of persons served by individual projects changed over the later years of the program. Each dot represents the number of people reported served by a project. The average (or mean) and median numbers of people served per project are also shown for each year. The scatter plot (i.e. the dots) do not show the 34 projects with more than 500 persons to improve the detail shown for the more numerous smaller projects. But the means and medians shown on the graph are calculated over all projects.

The scatter plots show that the size distribution shown in the histograms (Figures 17 and 18) also holds for the projects awarded in each year. Smaller projects are the most common, but there are a few much larger projects in each year. The large (> 500 person) projects are spread across all of the years (2011-17) but they are more common earlier in the period. Over the first three years (2011-13) there were 6.3 large projects per year, on average, while the last three years (2015-17) averaged only 3.3 large projects per year.

Figure 19 shows that the mean number of persons served is much larger than the median in every year. This means that more (substantially more in this case) than half of the projects served fewer people than shown by mean in each year. Again, this occurs because most of the projects
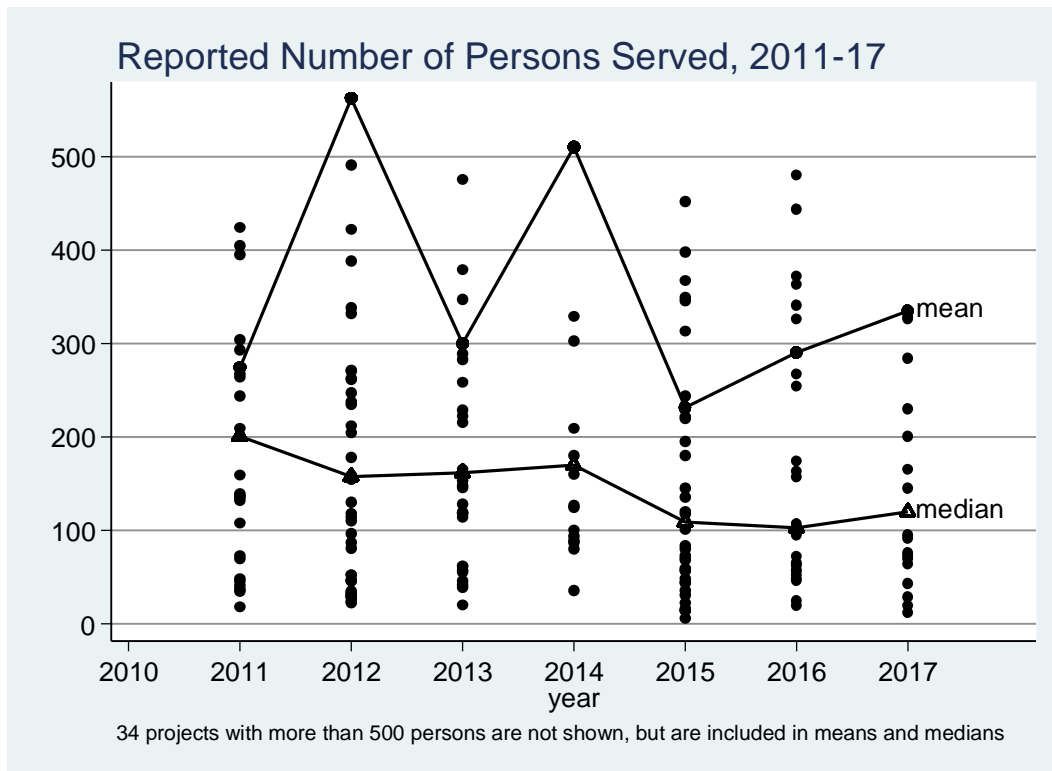
are relatively small. The few large projects in each year raise the mean (or average) size a lot, while only having a small effect on the median size. For example, the one extremely large project in 2012 serving 13,000 people causes the average number served in that year to be the highest of all years (at 562) while the median is barely affected.

Note that both the mean and median project sizes trend down over time. In 2011 half of the projects served fewer than 200 people. By 2015 and 2016 the medians had fallen 109 and 103 people (respectively), so over half of the projects in those years served fewer than 110 people. In 2017 the median size rebounded to 120, but that is still well below the 2011 to 2014 levels.

The combination of the larger contract amounts (even after adjusting for the effects of inflation) and the smaller numbers of people served suggests that the projects provided a more intensive level of service to participants/recipients in more recent years.

Figure 19

Reported Number of Persons Served, 2011-17

34 projects with more than 500 persons are not shown, but are included in means and medians

graph_scatter_persons_served.do

E.1 Composition of persons served

A decomposition of the types of people reported served by the projects (children, youth, adults, and seniors) is shown in Figure 20. The decomposition is available for the years 2011-2017 but the 2012 percentages are skewed by the outlier project serving 13,000 Youth, and a few other very large projects. So only the years 2013 to 2017 are shown to avoid the early years and the

2012 outlier.   The means reported in Figure 20 are the percentage of that type served over the whole 2013 to 2017 period and not the average of the yearly percentages shown (since there are different numbers of projects and people, and different mixes of people, in each year).
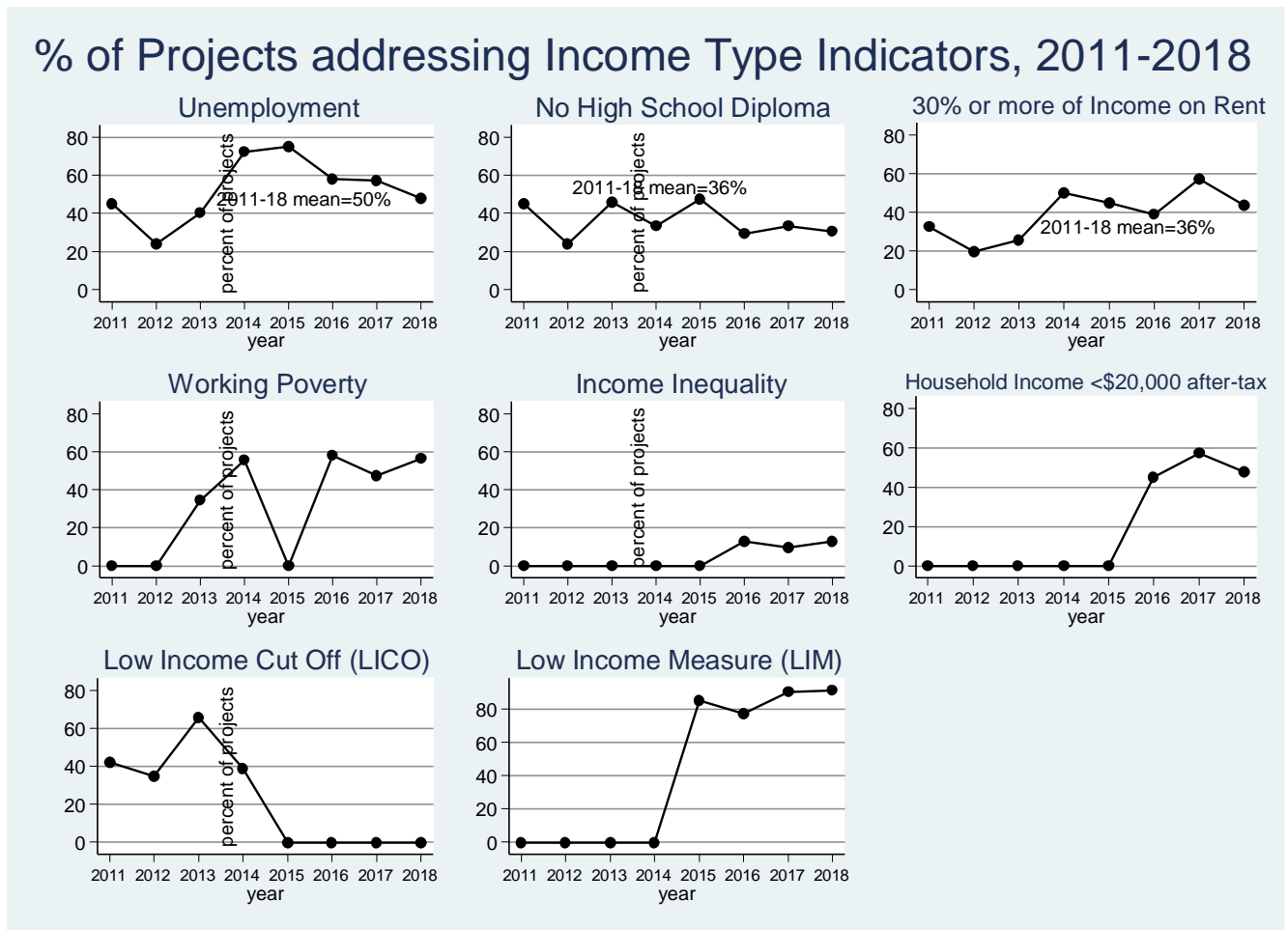
Figure 20

Reported Types of Persons Served, 2013-17
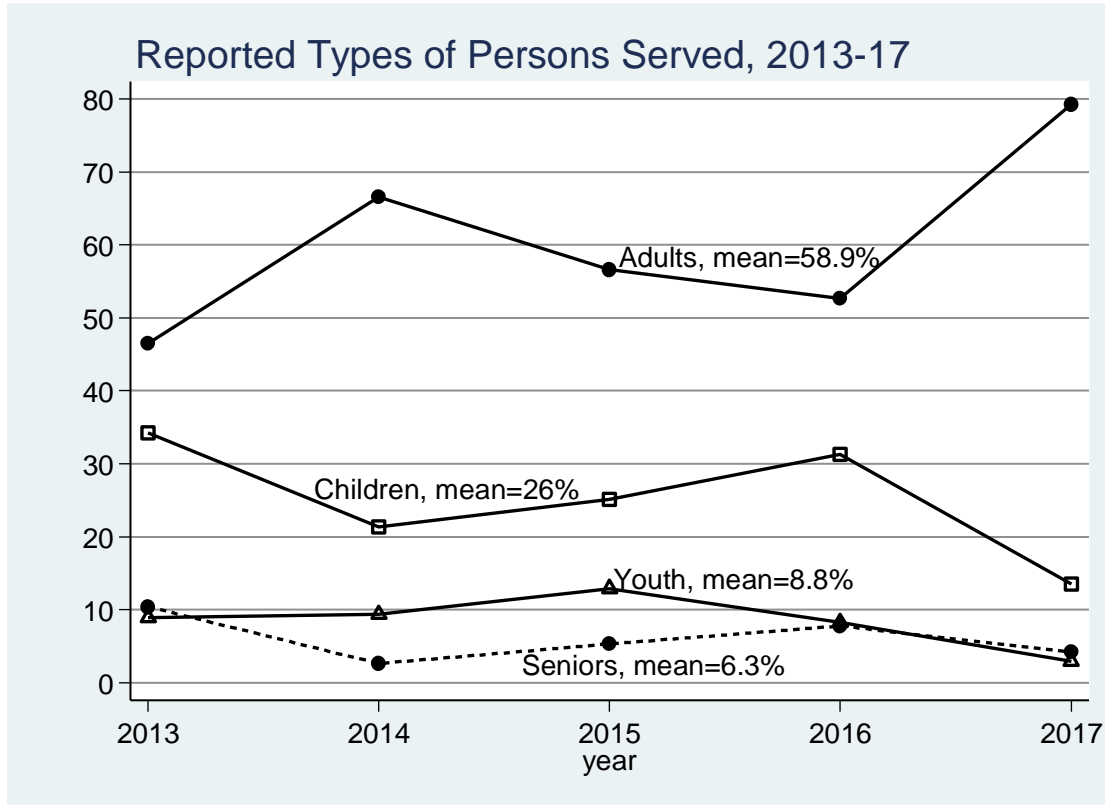
graph_scatter_type_persons_served.do

It is clear that most projects target mostly adults. In all but one year (2013), more than 50% of the persons served are adults and the percentage rises to almost 80% in 2017. Over the five years shown, adults made up almost 60 percent of all persons served. Children are the next largest category, comprising between 20 to 35 percent of all persons served in most years and averaging 26 percent over the period. Youth average 8.8 percent of all the persons served over the years and their share does not vary much from year to year. The least common category is seniors. Seniors only make up 6 percent of persons served over the years shown.

Figure 20 also shows that adult's share trends upwards over the five years shown, while share of children trends downwards.   The shares of youth and seniors served are essentially flat over the period shown although they both decrease in 2017 to accommodate the increased share of adults.

F. Indicators

Figures 21 and 22 show the percentage of projects addressing various indicators or measures of poverty, hardship, or deprivation. The indicators reflect the issues or problems that the project recipients face and that the project will address.   Figure 21 concentrates on measures related to recipients incomes, while Figure 22 considers indicators related to children's' health and care.

Figure 21

% of Projects addressing Income Type Indicators, 2011-2018

do graph_indicators_by_year.do

Figure 21 shows that unemployment, no high school diploma, and spending more than 30% of your income on rent are the most common indicators addressed by the projects. Unemployment was cited in 50 percent of all the projects funded from 2011 to 2018 while spending more than 30% of income on rent and no high school diploma were each cited in 36 percent of 2011-18 projects. Recall that the percentage of projects addressing an indicator over the whole period (2011-2018) does not equal the average of the yearly percentages shown because there are different numbers of projects each year. The percentage of projects citing 30 percent on rent rose over the eight years shown while no high school diploma became less common.

The percentage of projects addressing working poverty (i.e. earnings of at least $3,000 but below the Low Income Measure (LIM)) is more variable, but it has been high is recent years, averaging 55 percent for 2016 to 2018. Related to that, projects focusing on household incomes less than $20,000 (after tax) are also common, being cited in 49 percent of all projects 2016-18.

Poverty measures (LICO for 2011 to 2014 and LIM thereafter) are also cited frequently in projects. LICO or LIM are addressed in over 64 percent of all projects over the whole period and LIM is named in 85.2 percent of the funded projects 2015 to 2018. Income inequality is not addressed in many projects. It is only cited in 12 percent of projects 2016-18.

The frequency of indicators related to child health and care are presented in Figure 22 and it shows that they are far less prevalent than those relating to income. Children's early development (i.e. are children developmentally ready for grade one) is by far the most common indicator in this group, but it declines dramatically, falling from being cited in almost 40 percent of all projects in 2011 to being cited in slightly fewer than 10 percent of projects in 2017 and zero projects in 2018.

Figure 22

% of Projects addressing Child Related Indicators, 2011-2018
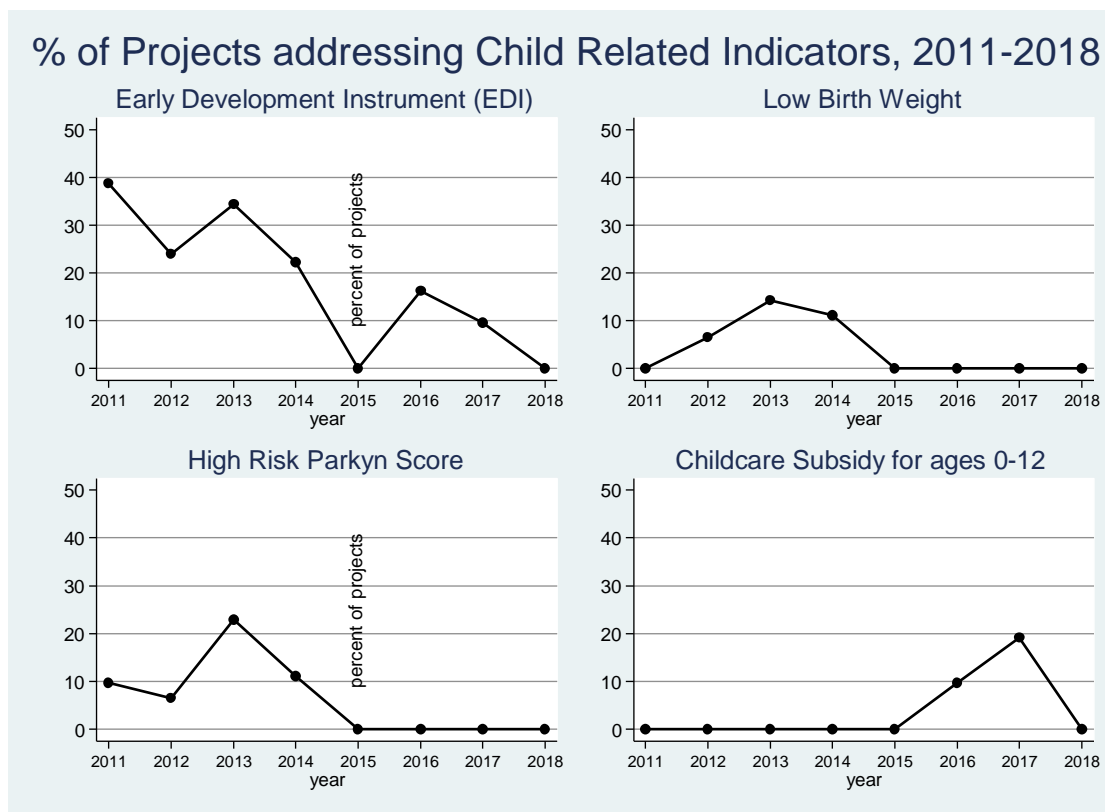
do graph_indicators_by_year.do

Low birth weight and high risk Parkyn score were both dropped in 2015, but neither were commonly addressed in projects. Parkyn scores were cited in slightly more than 12 percent of the projects over the 2011 to 2014 years, while low birth weight was cited fewer than 8 percent

of funded projects over those four years. Child care subsidies was added in 2016 (presumably) but it has only been addressed in 9.3 percent of projects 2016 to 2018 and no projects in 2018.

G. Types of assets targeted by the projects

From 2013 to 2017, applicants were asked about the types of asset that would be increased as a result of their proposed project. Figure 23 shows the percentage of projects that planned to increase each type of asset, by year and the mean percentage of over the whole 2013-17 period.

Figure 23

Percentge of Projects Increasing Assets, 2013-2017
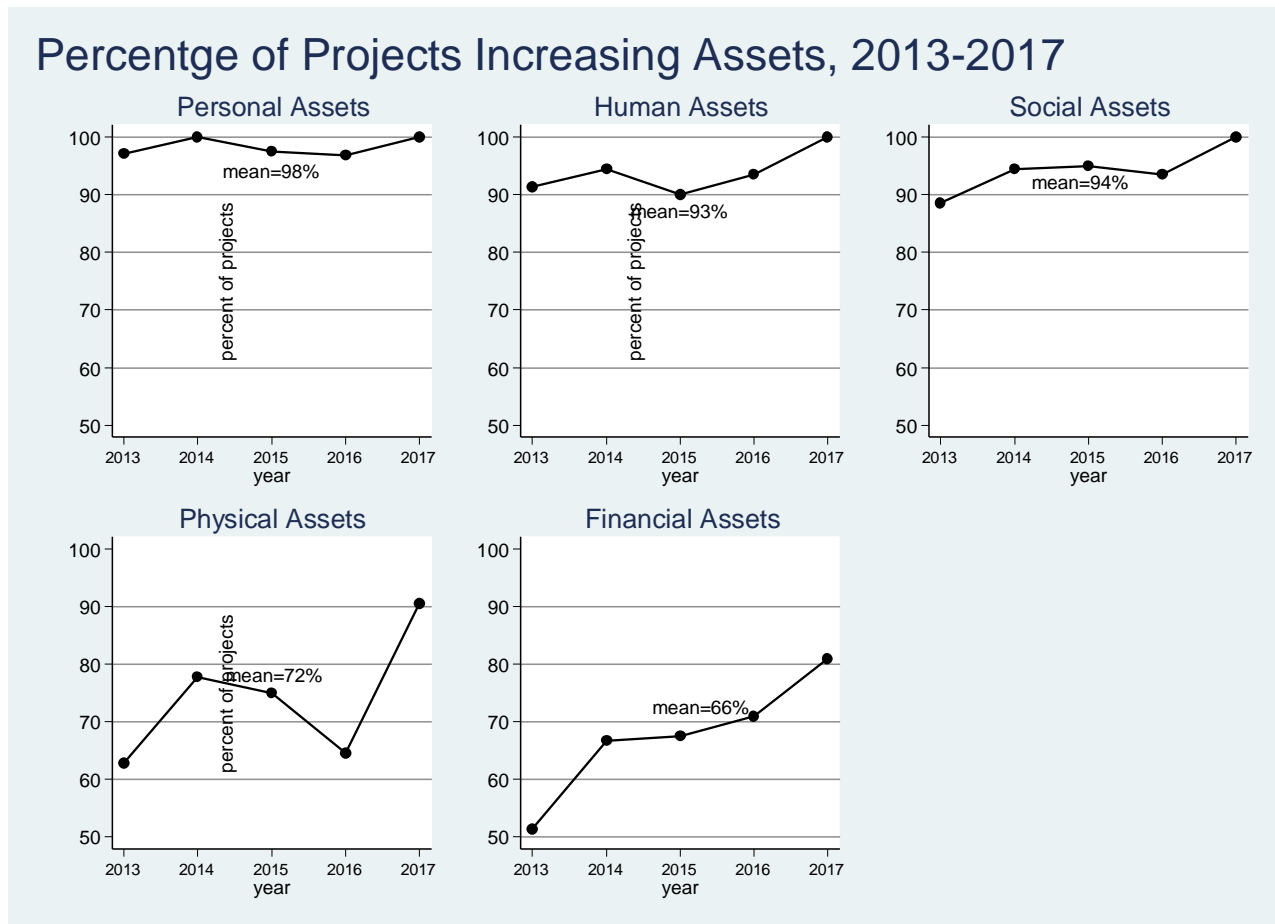
graph_assets_by_year.do

The types of assets were:

- *Personal Assets:* Increase self-awareness; Enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence; Improved hope and motivation

- *Physical Assets:* Emergency Supports (shelter, security from violence, prevention from eviction or utility shut-off, emergency food assistance); Food; Housing; Transportation; Child and Dependent Care

- *Social Assets:* Civic Participation (community engagement through participation in community groups and activities, children and youth participate in activities that support growth and development, seniors participate in services that promote active, independent living); Networks

- *Human Assets:* Health; Life Skills; Financial Literacy; Education; Employment

- *Financial Assets:* Employment and Non-Employment Incomes; Capital like a computer or car; Financial Health (reduced cost and/or debt)

Over 90 percent of the projects planed to increase personal, human, or social assets in almost every year. Averaged over the five years, 72 percent of projects planned to increase physical assets while two thirds planned to increase financial assets. The percentage targeting financial assets increased steadily and sharply from 2013 to 2017, reaching more than 80 percent of projects in 2017. The percentage of projects targeting physical assets also trended upwards over the period, but not monotonically, and it reached just over 90 percent of projects in 2017.
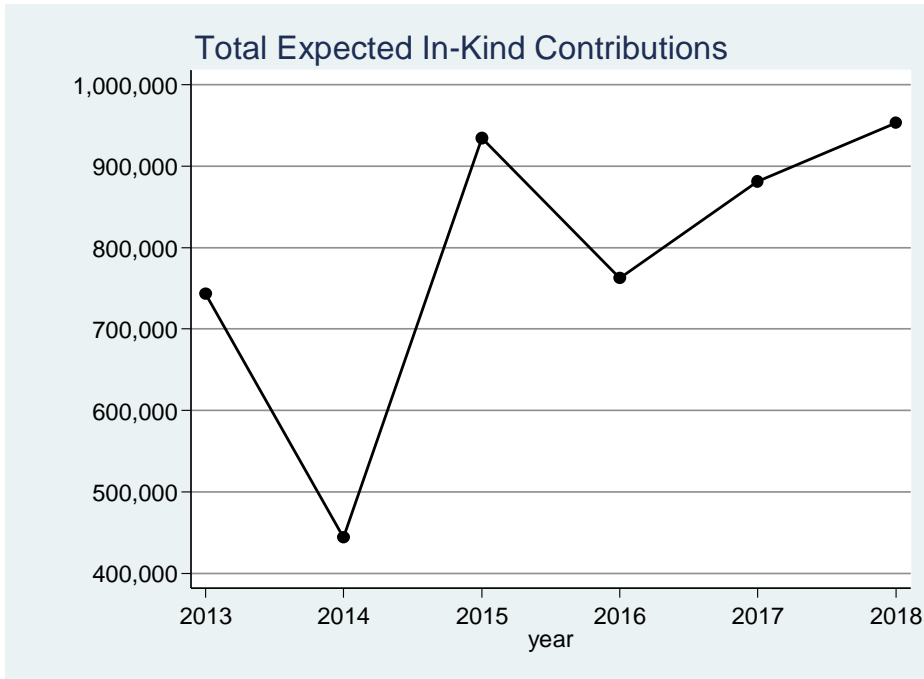
H. In kind Contributions

Applicants were asked about expected in-kind contributions to their proposed project in 2013 and later years. The total amounts, by year, are shown in Figure 24. The total amounts are large and they trend upwards strongly. The expected in-kind contributions are over 50 percent of the total contract amounts awarded in ever year except 2014. Over the 6 years shown, the in-kind contributions average 55 percent of the total amounts awarded. In kind contributions are 60.4 and 63.4 percent of the total contract amounts in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

Figure 25 shows the scatter plot of the in-kind contributions along with the mean and median contributions. In-kind contributions over $75,000 are not shown in the scatter plot to provide more detail on the distributions of the smaller contributions, but the plotted lines show the means and medians over all of the contributions. The 17 projects with expected in-kind contributions greater than $75,000 represent only 10 percent of the total number and they are spread fairly evenly over the 2013 to 2018 years
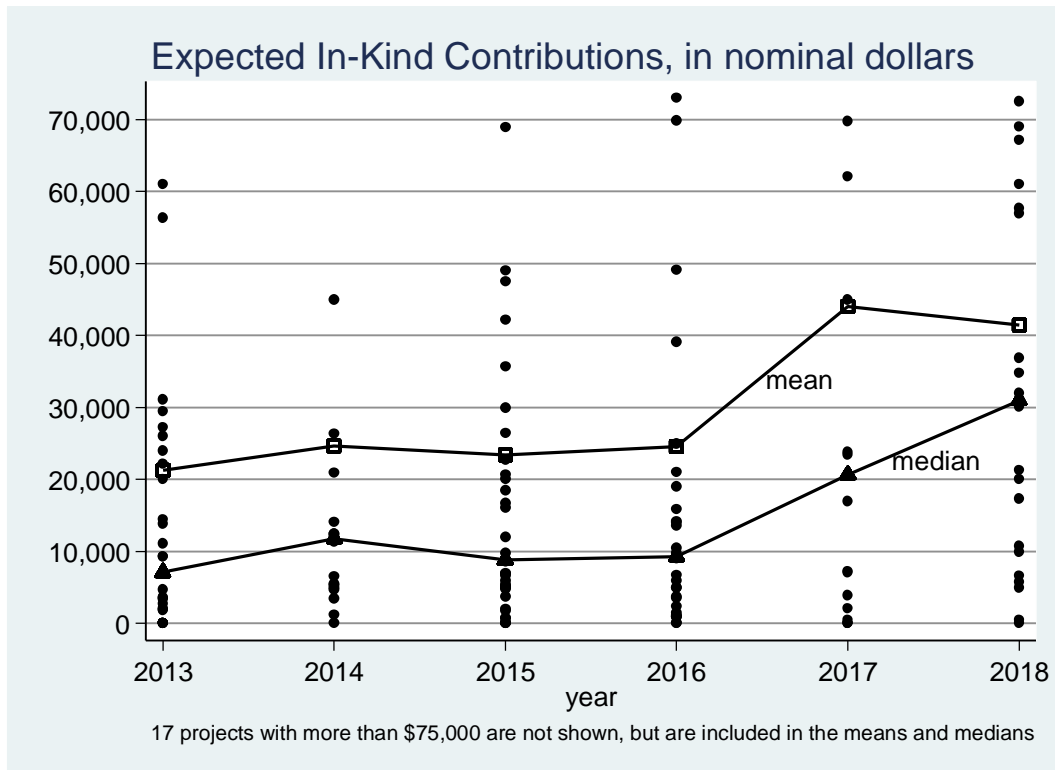
It is clear that most of the in-kind contributions are small, but there are a few large contributions that cause the mean to be much larger than the median. Almost half (48 percent) of projects' in-kind contributions, 2013-18, are less than $10,000. The average and median size of projects' in-kind contributions are basically flat at $21,000 to $25,000 (for means) and $7,000 to $11,000 (for medians) from 2013 to 2016, but they increase sharply after 2016, reaching $41,432 (mean) and $31,000 (median) in 2018. Note that there is at least one project with zero in-kind contributions in every year.

Figure 24

Total Expected In-Kind Contributions

graph_agg_by_year.do

Figure 25

Expected In-Kind Contributions, in nominal dollars

17 projects with more than $75,000 are not shown, but are included in the means and medians

graph_scatter_inkind_contr.do

I. Revenue Generated

Applicants have been asked since 2015 about any revenues that they expect will be generated by their projects.   The totals, by year, are shown in Table 2 .

Table 2

Year	Expected Revenue Generated
2015	$ 24,110
2016	$ 27,708
2017	$ 3,200
2018	$ 163,020

J. Poverty Reduction Strategies proposed/employed by the Projects, aka
Type of Interventions

Adam Fischer and Christopher Walsh examined all of the NPI funded projects, 2011 to 2017, and developed a set of codes (single words or phrases) that characterize the poverty reduction strategies (i.e. the types of interventions) proposed and employed in the funded projects. Adam then tabulated the number of projects that employed each poverty reduction strategy (code). The tabulation provides a measure of how often that code was included in NPI projects. The codes were divided into two general categories: those addressing individuals' needs and those addressing structural issues. The overall code of 'addressing needs' was also included as its own category.

Table 3 shows the list of codes and the percentage of funded projects with that code or intervention strategy in 220 projects, 2011 to 2017. The codes are grouped very roughly into categories and they are included in Table 3 only if they occur in at least 10 percent of the projects. The categories are listed in Table 3 roughly in decreasing order of frequency.

To examine whether the intervention strategies (as classified) changed over the seven year period, Table 3 shows the percentages for projects funded 2011 to 2014 and those funded 2015 to 2017.   A missing value means that the percentage was below 10 percent.   The change in frequency from 2011-14 to 2015-17 is also shown along with the rank of the change (1 is the biggest increase and 50 is the smallest increase which is more easily understood as the biggest decrease. The ranks for the 12 biggest increases (ranks 1 to 12) and the 12 biggest decreases (or smallest increases (ranks 39 to 50)) are also shown.

Figure 26 shows the percentage of projects with some of the more common codes, 2011-14 and 2015-17.

Some basic messages from Table 3 and Figure 26 :

- The 'coaching' category of codes were generally the most common, although the specific code of `coaching' decreased sharply in the more recent period. 'Identity' and 'Motivation and/or Hope' were found in almost half of the more recent projects; a sharp increase from earlier in the decade

- 'Network Building', 'Community Engagement', 'Indirect Employment', and 'Health' were the next most common project codes. Of those, 'Mental Health' and 'Community Engagement' showed the biggest frequency increase in the latter period.

- The various 'Skills' codes listed in Table 3 were all moderately important in both the earlier and latter periods, although the 'Leadership' code occurred much less frequently 2015-17. 'Financial Literacy' became much more prominent in the more recent period.

- 'Food', 'Financial help', and 'Breaking the cycle of poverty' were generally the next most common groups of codes. The first and last were common over the whole period while 'Financial help' was much more common 2015-17.

- 'Transportation' and 'Child care' were much more common in the later period.

- 'Housing', 'Reduced spending', and 'Income' were also much more common in the later period, but by a lesser amount than those noted in the previous bullet.

- Networks/Partnerships is one of the structural (rather than individual based) codes and it is the most common code over both periods. It refers to facilitation networking and partnerships across agencies or community groups rather than individuals.

- The sum of all of the changes in frequencies, 2011-14 to 2015-17, is strongly positive (i.e. well above zero), so projects in the more recent period were more likely to contain the chosen intervention strategies (codes).

- The codes that are classified as structural were generally less common in the later period, while the codes classified as pertaining to individuals were much more common in the later period.

More work on the classification of the projects and how they changed over time will be done later in the project.

Figure 26 Frequency of Types of Interventions, 2011-14, and 2015-17
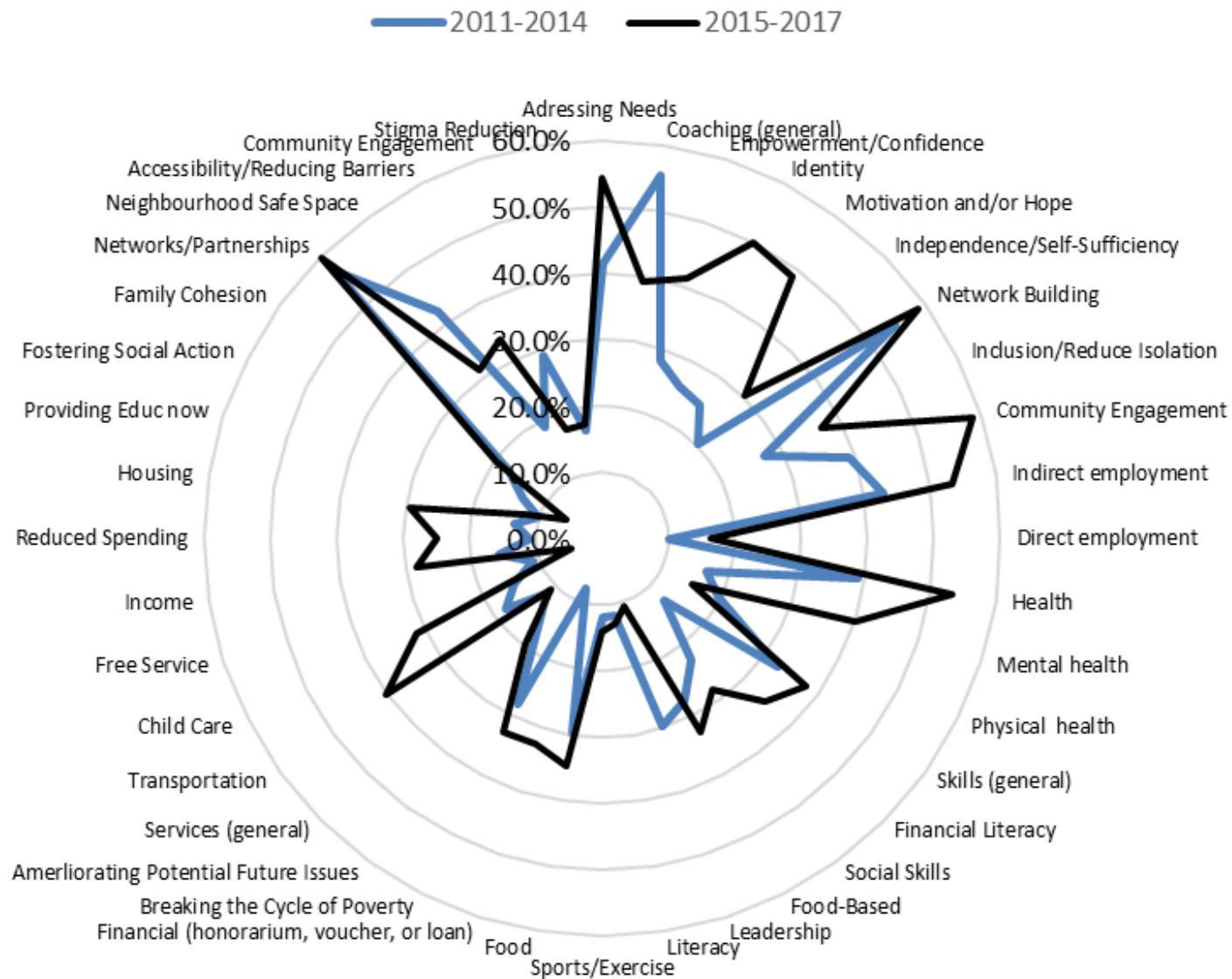
2011-2014   2015-2017

Table 3 Code - (with threshold of greater than 10%)	% of projects 2011-2017	% of projects 2011-2014	% of projects 2015-2017	Change 2011-14 to 2015-17	rank of change	rank of top (1-12) & bottom (39-50) twelve changes
Addressing Needs	46.8%	41.4%	54.3%	12.9	15	
Individual						
Coaching (general)	48.6%	55.5%	39.1%	-16.3	49	49
Empowerment/Confidence	33.6%	28.1%	41.3%	13.2	14	
Identity	35.9%	25.8%	50.0%	24.2	2	2
Motivation and/or Hope	35.0%	25.0%	48.9%	23.9	3	3
Independence/Self-Sufficiency	24.5%	20.3%	30.4%	10.1	20	
Network Building	56.4%	54.7%	58.7%	4.0	30	
Inclusion/Reduce Isolation	31.4%	27.3%	37.0%	9.6	21	
Community Engagement	47.3%	39.1%	58.7%	19.6	7	7
Employment						
Indirect	47.3%	43.0%	53.3%	10.3	19	
Direct	11.4%	10.0%	16.3%	6.3	23	
Health	45.0%	39.1%	53.3%	14.2	11	11
Mental	26.4%	16.4%	40.2%	23.8	4	4
Physical	17.7%	19.5%	15.2%	-4.3	41	41
Drugs & Alcohol			12.0%	12.0		
Skills (general)	35.0%	32.8%	38.0%	5.2	26	
Financial Literacy	22.3%	13.3%	34.8%	21.5	6	6
Social Skills	25.0%	22.7%	28.3%	5.6	24	
Food-Based	29.5%	27.3%	32.6%	5.3	25	
Leadership	21.8%	29.7%	10.9%	-18.8	50	50
Literacy	12.3%	11.7%	13.0%	1.3	36	
Art	10.5%	10.0%	14.1%	4.1	29	
Sports/Exercise	11.4%	12.0%	14.1%	2.1	34	
Other	17.3%	17.2%	17.4%	0.2	38	
Goods (general)						
Food	31.8%	29.7%	34.8%	5.1	27	
Financial (honorarium, voucher or loan)	17.3%	8.0%	32.6%	24.6	1	1

Future Poverty Outcomes						
Leading to Success/Breaking the Cycle of Poverty	30.0%	28.1%	32.6%	4.5	28	
Ameliorating Potential Future Issues	17.7%	16.4%	19.6%	3.2	31	
Services (general)	11.4%	11.7%	10.9%	-0.8	39	39
Transportation	27.3%	18.0%	40.2%	22.2	5	5
Child Care	21.8%	14.8%	31.5%	16.7	8	8
Free Service		10.9%		-10.9	46	
Assisting With Tasks			14.1%	14.1	12	12
Volunteer Opportunities Provided	14.1%	15.6%	12.0%	-3.7	40	40
~~Volunteers Needed~~		~~11.7%~~		-11.7	48	48
Income	20.9%	15.6%	28.3%	12.6	16	
Reduced Spending	16.8%	10.9%	25.0%	14.1	12	12
Housing	20.0%	13.3%	29.3%	16.1	9	9
Homelessness	10.0%	6.0%	17.4%	11.4	18	
Education						
Providing Immediate Education	10.9%	10.2%	12.0%	1.8	35	
Fostering Social Action	10.5%	13.3%	6.0%	-7.3	43	43
Family Cohesion	18.2%	17.2%	19.6%	2.4	33	
Structural						
Networks/Partnerships	58.2%	57.0%	59.8%	2.8	32	
Neighbourhood Staple/Safe Space	37.7%	42.2%	31.5%	-10.7	45	45
Accessibility/Reducing Barriers	25.0%	18.8%	33.7%	14.9	10	10
Community Engagement	24.1%	28.9%	17.4%	-11.5	47	47
Narratives	11.8%	14.8%	7.0%	-7.8	44	44
Stigma Reduction	16.8%	16.4%	17.4%	1.0	37	
Contributing Members of Society/Reaching Potential	14.5%	16.4%	12.0%	-4.4	42	42
Provide Supports	13.6%	10.9%	17.4%	6.5	22	
~~*Outcomes (general)*~~	~~22.3%~~	~~30.5%~~	~~10.9%~~	~~-19.6~~		

Notes on the data

Exclusions from the data set
Two 2009 projects were removed from the analysis because, basically, they never actually became projects. They had zero contract amounts and zero values for all other variables (e.g. amount spent, number of people expected to be served, number actually served). They were not included in the 2009 quantitative report Excel files. These projects were:
- 2009, Niagara College   Bursary Program (via SSP Grocery Cards)
- 2009, Niagara Nutrition Partners (NNP)   Breakfast Program Research

Two other projects were awarded contracts with specific contract amounts so they are included in the numbers of projects and contract amounts data. But little of the projects appear to have been accomplished since they had missing or zero values for many of the other variables. Thus they are excluded from the analysis of numbers of people served and the financial breakdowns. These projects were:
- 2009   Early Years Niagara and Early Childhood Development Centre, Parent Directory and Triple P Parenting Program, Niagara Region
- 2011   YWCA Niagara Region, Women's Leadership Project, St. Catharines

One project,
- 2009   Gateway Residential & Community Support Services, Good Food Box, Welland

was missing the financial breakdown of costs so the project is removed from the composition of costs analysis

2008 is outlier compared to the data for the other years. Only 12 projects were funded that year and the total contract amount was far below the amounts awarded in the other years. Thus the 2008 data are excluded from the analysis if the outlier affects its basic results materially. The data for 2008 are included for completeness if the outliers do not affect the basic conclusions. Similarly, 2008 data are included in the graphs as long as they do not mess-up the scale of the vertical axis. If including 2008 data does not cause the scaling of the vertical axis to become unwieldy, then they are included in the graphs for completeness.

Brock Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation Project: Phase 2C Report

INTRODUCTION

Phase 2C Goals.

This phase of the NPI evaluation project is the only phase that provides a traditional research study on the effects of participation in an NPI-funded program. Difficulties with examining this question, however, are complex because these agencies deliver a wide array of services to service-users. A second complexity is that the population of service-users tends to be comprised of individuals that may be reticent to reveal personal information (e.g.., age, income, education levels) to research institutions. Finally, if this information *were* to be provided, the differences in programs/interventions may not result in any significant change in traditional measures of poverty – namely income.

As changes in income were unlikely to occur over the duration of this research project, a different outcome was chosen to study the impacts of local poverty alleviation programs. Thus, this phase focused on whether service-users would experience higher levels of hope and subjective well-being (e.g., a general indicator of experiencing happiness and life satisfaction) after program participation. Importantly, measures of well-being have been used to evaluate whether poverty-reduction programs in the Global South were, indeed, effective.

What is Subjective Well-Being?

Subjective Well-Being (SWB) has been given many definitions. However, Diener (1984) indicates that there are three important characteristics of SWB: 1) it is based on an individual's experiences and not objective indicators, 2) there are specific indicators of positive affect/emotion – it is not simply that the person does not experience negative affect/emotions, and 3) it relies on an individual given an overarching indicator of life satisfaction. Research conducted by Busseri (2015, 2018) and Metler and Busseri (2015) has shown that SWB is an underlying commonality between indicators of life satisfaction, experiences of positive emotion, and experiences of negative emotions. Though SWB is comprised of multiple factors, many past studies have focused on *life satisfaction* as a main indicator of individuals' well-being.

How is Poverty Related to Life Satisfaction?

Past research has shown relationships between poverty or low income, and life satisfaction (e.g., Christoph, 2010; Cramm, Møller, & Neiboer, 2010; Kingdon & Knight, 2005). However, income/poverty may not be the strongest indicator or predictor of life satisfaction. In 2018, Barrington-Leigh and Wollenberg surveyed 9,293 American adults aged 18 years and older on whether a variety of factors (e.g., income, household size, physical and mental health) had any relationship with life satisfaction. The strongest predictors of higher levels of life satisfaction were good physical and mental health. Weaker predictors of life satisfaction included higher income, health insurance, access to food, employment, and trustworthy neighbours. Barrington-Leigh and Wollenberg (2018) found no effect of household size, whether individuals received help from family/friends, transportation, volunteering, or individuals' perceptions of the influence of their local government. These findings mirror those of Schimmel (2009) where results indicated that, to some extent at least, happiness increases alongside increases in income. However, at a certain point this relationship plateaus (and in some cases happiness starts to decrease as income gets higher).

In 2004 Rojas sought to examine whether individuals' perception of their level of poverty was a factor in the relationship between income/poverty and well-being. Generally, respondents with higher levels of income and SES had higher levels of subjective well-being (though low-income participants still had fairly high levels of well-being). Further, objective measures of poverty were only weakly related to well-being. What was more important to levels of subjective well-being were individuals' perceptions of their status in life and whether their needs were being met.

In a similar vein, Camfield and Skevington (2008) found that poverty - measured by household income - also is related to lower life satisfaction; however, this relationship was buffered by external factors, specifically, neighbourhood social capital. They found that low-income communities with high levels of social capital (e.g., having community groups with similar values that "facilitate collection action" [Requena, 2003, p.331]) had better quality of life compared to low-income communities with lower social capital.

Thus, though income levels are related to life satisfaction, it may not be the single strongest indicator of life satisfaction. As many factors outside of income are related to changes in life satisfaction, they should be taken into consideration when developing poverty reduction/alleviation programs. For example, focusing only on increases in individuals' income may not be the only important factor in increasing life satisfaction. The next section focuses on the effect that poverty reduction programs from different countries have had on participants' life satisfaction and well-being.

What Effect Might Poverty Reduction Programs Have on Life Satisfaction?

Many poverty reduction programs have focused on altering income levels of individuals within these programs. Increases in income could be achieved through a variety of strategies. Jalal, Frongillo, and Warren (2015) examined the effects of a poverty reduction program on women's levels of distress and well-being in Bangladesh. This program's goal was to help women find jobs to earn a steady income, increase civic engagement, provide access to food and healthcare, and increases their levels of confidence. Between 2002 and 2006, this poverty alleviation program was directly related to increases in well-being over time. This program was also *indirectly related* to increases in well-being over time because the program helped to lower stressors – particularly food insecurity, which then increased well-being.

Research also has examined the effects of cash transfer programs on program participants' well-being. Kilburn, Handa, Angeles, Myula, and Tsoka (2006) found that program participants in Malawi experienced higher levels of self-reported quality of life and more positive outlooks on their future (e.g., people thought things would improve over time) almost 2 years after starting the program. Research conducted in Colombia has shown that, after 3 years of participation in a cash transfer program, household heads had increases across multiple indicators including health, life satisfaction, and happiness (Galama, Morgan, & Saavedra, 2017). Though these cash-transfer programs aid with increases in objective poverty (e.g., income) and show increases in well-being, other types of poverty alleviation programs also have been shown to be related to increases in well-being.

A second area of examination has been on the impacts of poverty alleviation programs that focus on getting individuals engaged in their community. Past research has shown that individuals who participate in community-based service programs have increases in life satisfaction over time (e.g., for older adults, Shapiro & Taylor, 2002). Further, older adults at risk of institutionalization that participate in community-based social services show better outcomes such as decreases in loneliness and vitality and increases in autonomy (van Bilsen, Hamers, Groot, & Spreeuwenberg, 2008; note that these same studies found that participants in these programs experienced higher levels of community accessibility difficulties).

In fact, simple engagement in social activities has been found to be associated with higher well-being (e.g., English, 2013). In a study by Yang and Pang (2018), they found gendered effect such that for older adults men in Shanghai, low SES indicators (e.g., lower education levels, certain occupations, economic status, and low access to health care) predicted lower health which subsequently predicted lower well-being. This relationship held regardless of how involved men were in social activities. However, for women, the levels of social activity involvement mattered. Specifically, the relationship between low SES, health, and well-being existed *only* for women with low levels of participation in social activities; it did not hold for women with high levels of participation in social activities.

These findings show that multiple approaches to poverty alleviation may be beneficial for increasing program participants' well-being. In 2009, Rojas came to this same conclusion when examining whether different types of poverty reduction programs (i.e., not only those that focus on income increases) contribute to increases in well-being. Using survey data from the 2004 and 2006 waves of the University of Costa Rica's annual survey, Rojas examined how individuals that are either *poor* or *not poor* differ with regard to subjective well-being and satisfaction across seven life domains (health, family, friends, economic satisfaction, satisfaction with time for self, job, and their community).

Results indicated that a large percentage of poor (76.0%) and non-poor (82.1%) individuals reported moderate or high levels of subjective well-being. Individuals that reported low levels of well-being *and* were classified as poor had lower economic satisfaction than

individuals with low levels of well-being and were *not* poor. Individuals that were poor but still reported high subjective well-being had higher satisfaction scores on economic state, job, health, self, family, and life satisfaction than individuals that were poor and reported *low* or *moderate* subjective well-being. Given these results, Rojas concluded that poverty-abatement programs should not take only income into account when helping those in poverty increase SWB. Rather, they need to focus on multiple life domains (e.g., leisure and social activities; education – which is tied to family, self, and job satisfaction; and neighbourhood qualities – community satisfaction; developing consumer skills).

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The overarching purpose of this 3-year project was to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI), a poverty reduction strategy that provides funding of $1.5M annually towards place-based neighbourhood projects and provide information for continued investment towards breaking the cycle of poverty. Four questions guide this evaluation process:

- How does the structure of NPI respond to the issues of poverty in Niagara?
- What components of NPI are impacting poverty and what is the nature of the impact?
- What types of NPI funded projects have made an impact on poverty and how?
- What other poverty reduction approaches may be needed?

The research purposes for Phase 2C of the project evaluation were as follows:

- Examine how indicators of poverty (e.g., income) are related to other well-being indicators in general
- Determine whether service-users experience higher levels of hope and life satisfaction/subjective well-being after program participation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Though multiple individual research questions were assessed in this phase, the main goal of this evaluation phase was to investigate the following question:

1. What is the impact of participation in NPI-funded programs on service users in terms of their perceptions of their *current and future* material well-being, sense of communal belonging, and emotional well-being?

This question was investigated by way of a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test research design in which we made use of a non-equivalent control group, namely a random sample of low-income Niagara residents. The outcome variable in this study was life satisfaction as measured with the Comprehensive Quality of Life Scale. We focused on various life domains from this scale: 1) overall life satisfaction, 2) material well-being, 3) life achievements, 4) personal relationships, and 5) community. For each domain, we measured service users' perceptions of (A) their current levels of satisfaction and (B) their hopefulness concerning improvement in the coming year. NPI funds a range of programs with differing goals and objectives. We feel service users' perceptions of their current satisfaction and hopefulness in the three specified domains constitute an outcome applicable to the diverse range of NPI-funded programs.

METHODS

Data collection

NPI program participants were selected by way of a two-stage cluster sample. In the first stage, we used simple random sampling to select 15 programs funded by NPI as of June 2019. In the second stage, we surveyed the entire population of service users within each of the 15 programs selected in the first stage of sampling. A pre-test was administered to service users within their first two weeks of participation in the program; a total of 394 participants completed the pre-test survey. In addition to measuring the outcome variables of current satisfaction and hopefulness in various life domains, this pre-test also measured a range of demographic variables including household income, employment status, number of persons living in the household, educational attainment, gender and ethno-racial background. After ten to twelve months (the NPI funding cycle), a post-test measurement of the outcome variable was administered to service users who have maintained continuous participation in programs. The total sample size for the post-test was 94 participants.

A random sample of 783 Niagara residents constituted a control group. A contracted survey research firm drew the sample and collected data by way of telephone interviews. Participants were selected on the basis of low-income status, operationalized using the low-income cut-off (LICO) measure, which required screening by household income and family size. The data collection instrument measured the outcome variables (current satisfaction and hopefulness in various life domains) as well as the same demographic variables measured in the pre-test administered to service users. The Niagara population sample was surveyed at one point in time.

As noted previously, satisfaction was measured across multiple domains. To provide context for the following results, we have outlined the specific life satisfaction questions that were assessed below:

1) How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?
2) How hopeful are you that your life as a whole will improve within the next year?
3) How satisfied are you with your material standard of living?
4) How hopeful are you that your material standard of living will improve within the next year?
5) How satisfied are you with what you are achieving in life?
6) How hopeful are you that you will be able to achieve more in life within the next year?
7) How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?
8) How hopeful are you that your personal relationship will improve within the next year?
9) How satisfied are you with feeling part of your community?
10) How hopeful are you that your sense of belonging to your community will improve within the next year?

KEY FINDINGS

One goal of this phase was to examine how indicators of poverty are related to measures of life satisfaction. Thus, this first section of results provides insights on relationships between these factors for the random sample of Niagara residents (i.e., the non-equivalent control group).

Niagara Residents/Non-Equivalent Control Group Results

When we examined demographic differences on life satisfaction measures, results indicated the following:

- Those who had lived in Canada longer had higher life satisfaction than those who had lived in Canada for a shorter period of time;
- As age increases, life satisfaction also increases;
- Higher levels of education were related to lower levels of life satisfaction; and
- There were no gender differences on life satisfaction.

Analyses taking into account overall life satisfaction (i.e., a combination of all 10 life satisfaction questions) and income indicated that higher levels of household income were related to higher life satisfaction. These results are consistent with prior research indicating relationships between higher income and higher levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Barrington-Leigh & Wollenberg, 2018; Christoph, 2010; Cramm et al., 2010; Kingdon & Knight, 2005; Rojas, 2004).

Figure 1. Relationship between income and life satisfaction
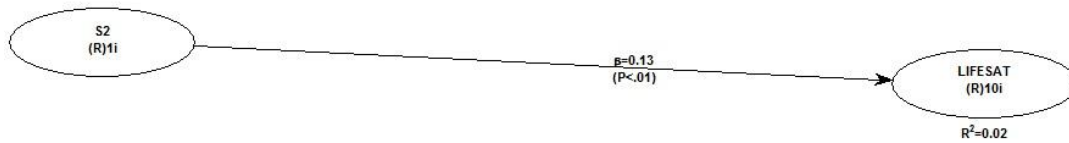
When we consider relationships between household characteristics and life satisfaction, we see that households with more people living at the address *and* households with higher numbers of adults aged 18 and older reported higher levels of life satisfaction. This finding contrasts prior work conducted by Barrington-Leigh and Wollenberg (2018) which found no relationship between household size and life satisfaction.

Figure 2. Relationship between household characteristics and life satisfaction
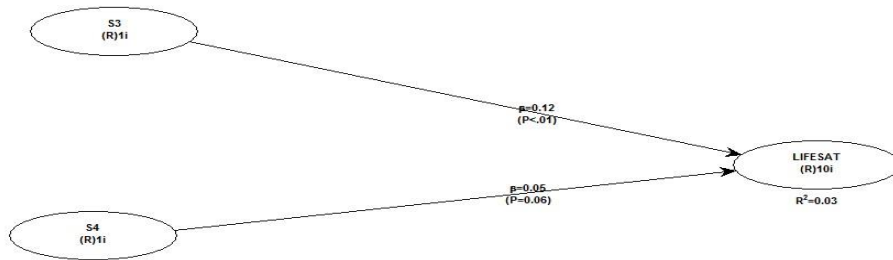
Turning to commuting difficulties, individuals that frequently experienced higher levels of difficulty commuting to their place of work reported lower life satisfaction. In contrast, individuals that experienced more difficulties commuting to other places in Niagara region reported high levels of life satisfaction.

Figure 3. Relationship between commuting difficulties and life satisfaction
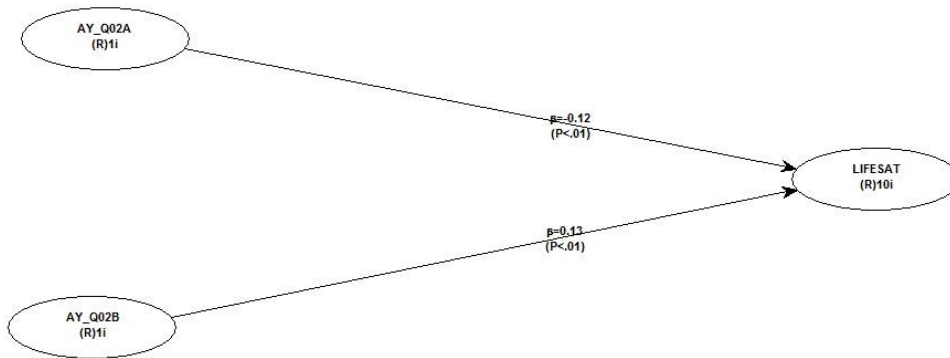
Individuals that reported frequent difficulties with affording nutritious meals for everyone in the household reported low levels of life satisfaction. The relationship between these variables was strong which indicates it may be a fairly serious problem for those experiencing difficulty affording nutritious meals. These results are consistent with past research which indicates that food security is significantly related to life satisfaction (e.g., Barrington-Leigh & Wollenberg, 2018; Jalal et al., 2015).

Figure 4. Relationship between affording nutritious meals and life satisfaction

We also can consider the relationships between daily challenges that people experience and life satisfaction. Figure 5 outlines the relationship between life satisfaction and difficulties that participants had experienced over the past 6 months. These challenges include:

1) difficulty participating in organized recreational activities because of the cost,
2) difficulty participating in fun, informal activities with families/friends because of costs,
3) difficulty affording childcare for their dependents,
4) difficulty affording regular dental visits, and
5) difficulty affording health problem treatments not covered by OHIP.

Individuals experiencing frequent challenges related to items 2-5 reported low levels of life satisfaction. Individuals with difficulties participating in organized recreational activities reported high life satisfaction. Other than the finding related to organized activity participation, these results fall in line with those from a study by Yang and Pang (2018) which found that social vulnerability factors (including lower levels of education, SES, and limited access to healthcare) were related to lower life satisfaction.

Figure 5. Relationship between difficulties affording activities and health services, and life satisfaction
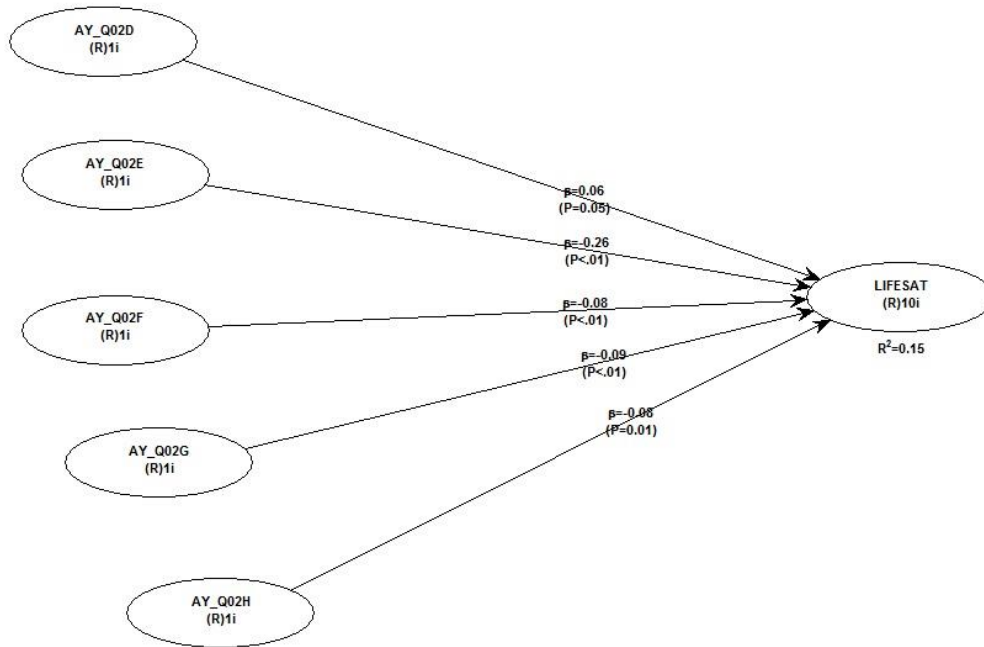
Turning to housing and legal service access, individuals that reported frequent difficulties affording housing for either themselves and/or their dependents reported low life satisfaction. Individuals that frequently experienced difficulties accessing legal services (e.g., for landlord/tenant issues, victim compensation, appeals, consumer protection, workplace rights, etc.) also reported low life satisfaction.

Figure 6. Relationship between difficulties accessing housing and legal services, and life satisfaction
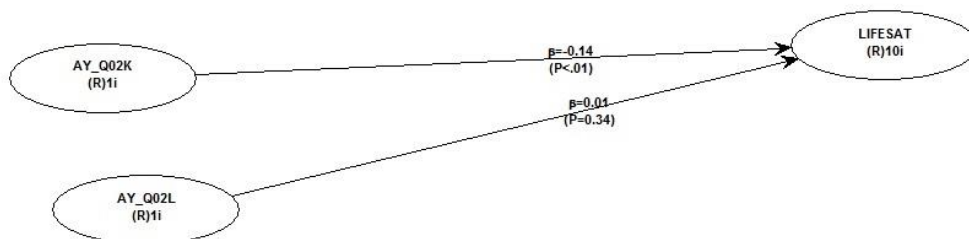
With regard to technology, individuals that frequently experienced difficulties accessing internet and/or communication devices (e.g., computers or smartphones) had low life

satisfaction. There was no relationship between knowing how to use the internet/computers/smartphones and life satisfaction.

Figure 7. Relationship between technological difficulties and life satisfaction
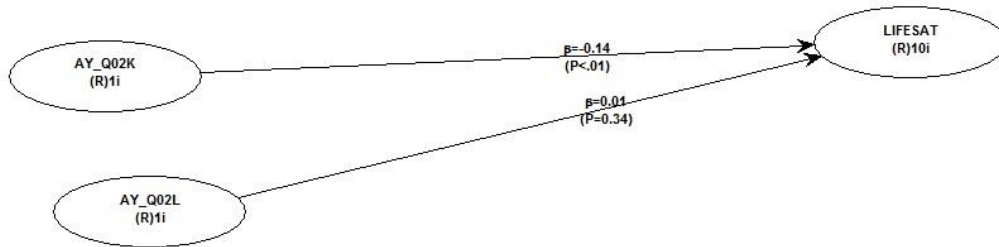
When examining household finances, individuals who had the ability to plan ahead for retirement had higher life satisfaction than those without the ability to plan ahead and save for retirement. There was no relationship between life satisfaction and whether individuals had a household budget.

Figure 8. Relationship between finance planning and life satisfaction
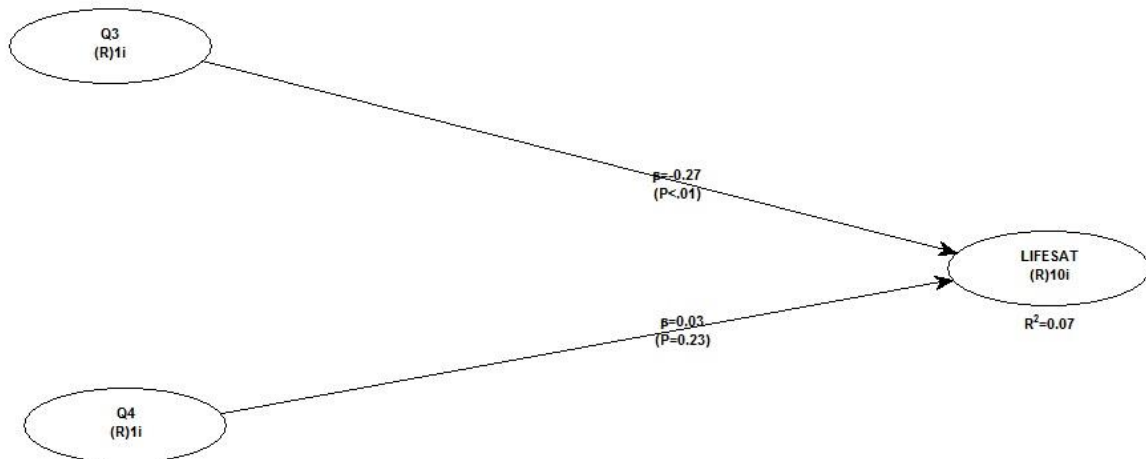
Participants also were asked whether they thought their life satisfaction had increased over the past 3 years. Results indicated that individuals felt their life satisfaction had gotten worse over the past three years.

Figure 9. Historical life satisfaction and life satisfaction
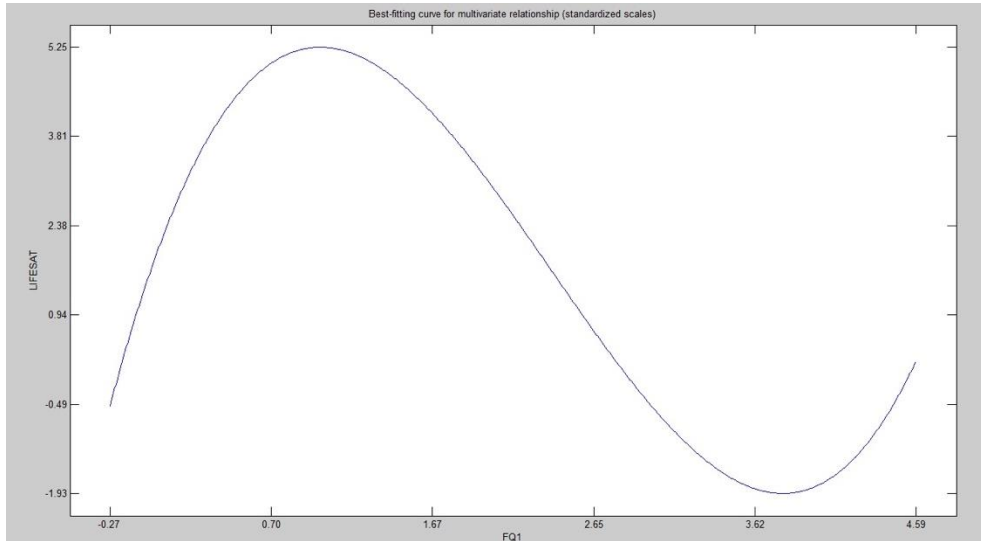
In terms of satisfaction with living in Niagara, individuals were more likely to recommend Niagara as a place to life to friends or colleagues *if* they reported higher levels of life satisfaction. This was not the case for participants with low levels of life satisfaction.

Figure 9. Recommending Niagara as a place to life and life satisfaction
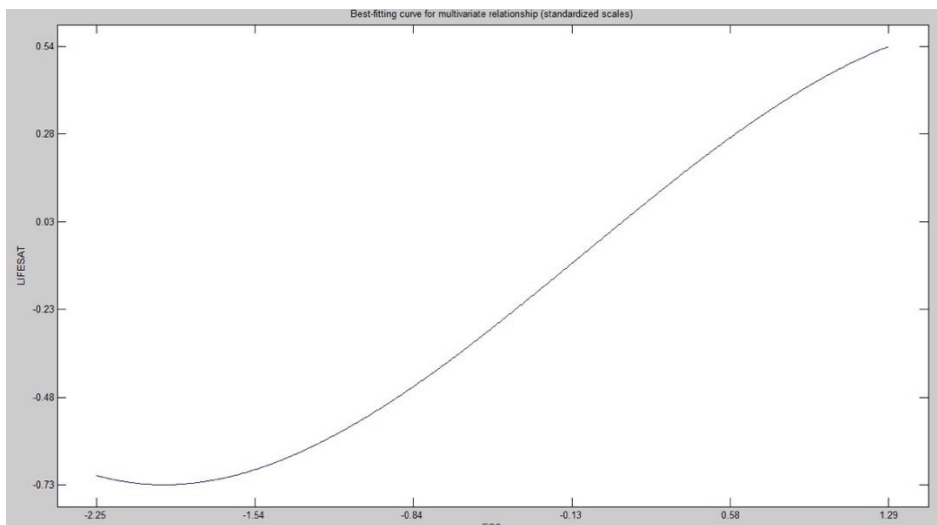
Results for participants' opinions on whether Niagara is on the right track differed depending on levels of life satisfaction. Participants with high life satisfaction tended to think that Niagara is on the right track. However, participants with low life satisfaction tended to think that Niagara is *not* on the right track.

Figure 10. Opinion on whether Niagara is on the right track and life satisfaction
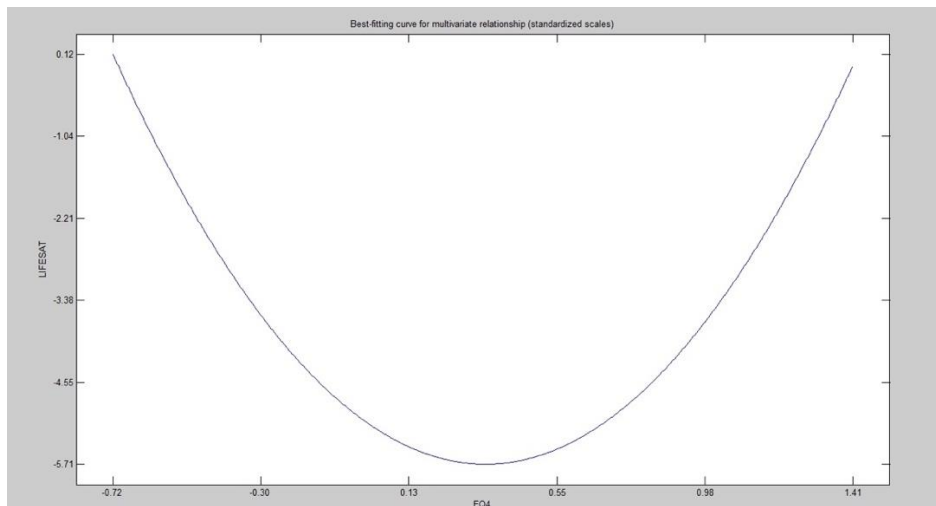
LIFE SATISFACTION AND NPI PROGRAM PARTICIPATION OUTCOMES

This section outlines results based on three separate analyses. The first analysis examines differences between the telephone survey and the first wave of data collection for program participants (the pre-test group). The second analysis examines differences between the telephone survey and second wave of data collection for program participants (the post-test group). The third analysis examines differences in life satisfaction for waves 1 and 2 of data collection for program participants (i.e., pre- and post-program participation).

Telephone Survey and Program Participant Results

Here we outline comparisons between the non-equivalent control group (the telephone survey group), and pre-test and post-test surveys. Table 1 outlines the descriptive information for each of the key life satisfaction variables by survey group.

Table 1. Minimum, maximum, and average scores for survey groups

Variable	Telephone Survey			Pre-test Survey			Post-test Survey		
	Min	Max	Avg	Min	Max	Avg	Min	Max	Avg
How many people live at your current address?	1	10	2.6	1	31	3.6	1	25	3.8
Age	19	110	49.4	17	86	41.7	17	84	41.8
Citizenship	73.2% born in Canada			94.9% born in Canada			90.8% born in Canada		
Gender	52.0% female			65.7% female			63.2% female		
How satisfied are you with…									
Your life as a whole?	0	10	5.8	0	10	5.8	0	10	6.1
Your material standard of living?	0	10	5.5	0	10	5.9	1	10	6.0
What you are achieving in life?	0	10	5.6	0	10	6.2	0	10	6.2
Your personal relationships?	0	10	6.5	0	10	6.2	0	10	6.5
Feeling part of your community?	0	10	5.5	0	10	6.1	1	10	6.4
How hopeful are you that…within the next year?									
Your life as a whole will improve	0	10	5.7	0	10	6.7	0	10	6.9
Your material standard of living will improve	0	10	5.1	0	10	6.2	0	10	6.4
You will be able to achieve more in life	0	10	5.6	0	10	6.5	0	10	6.5
Your personal relationships will improve	0	10	6.4	0	10	6.7	0	10	6.8
Your sense of belonging to your community will improve	0	10	5.5	0	10	6.3	0	10	6.8

Comparisons: Control Group Survey and Pre-test Survey

Comparisons between the telephone survey group and the pre-test survey group indicated a number of significant differences both with regard to demographics and life satisfaction and hopefulness items. Demographic differences indicated that the pre-test group had more people living at their current address than the control group (*3.6 versus 2.6 people respectively*). The pre-test group also was younger than the control group (*41.7 years old versus 49.4 years old respectively*).

Group comparisons on the life satisfaction and hopefulness items indicate a variety of areas where the telephone and pre-test survey groups differed. Figure 1 shows that the pre-test group was more satisfied with feeling part of their community, more satisfied with what they are achieving in life, and more satisfied with their material standard of living than the telephone survey group. These groups did not differ in their satisfaction with personal relationships or their life as a whole.

Figure 1. Pre-test and Telephone survey group mean scores, Life satisfaction items
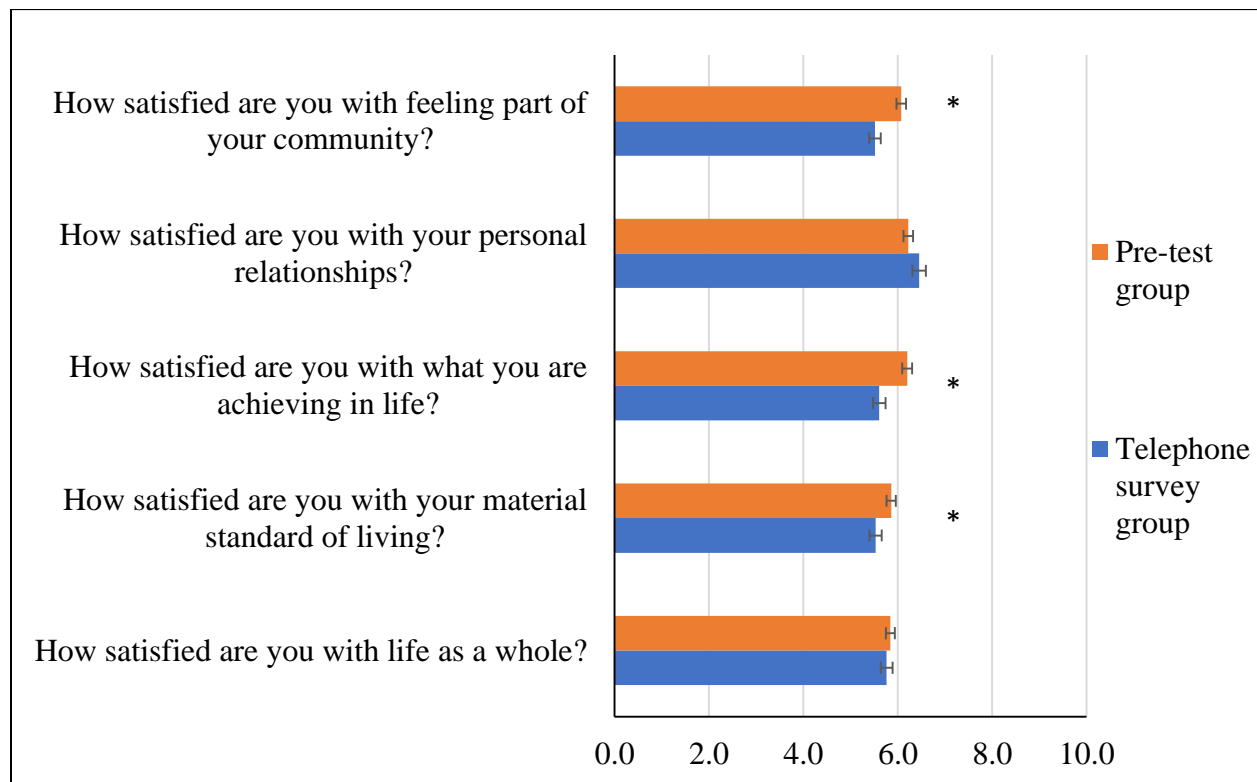
Note. Asterisks indicate significance level of p < .05

Figure 2 shows that the pre-test group was more hopeful about their life improving, more hopeful about their material standard of living improving, more hopeful that they would achieve more in life, and more hopeful that their sense of community belonging would improve over the next year compared to the telephone survey group. These groups did not differ on how hopeful they were that their personal relationships would improve over the next year.

Figure 2. Pre-test and Telephone survey group mean scores, Hopefulness items
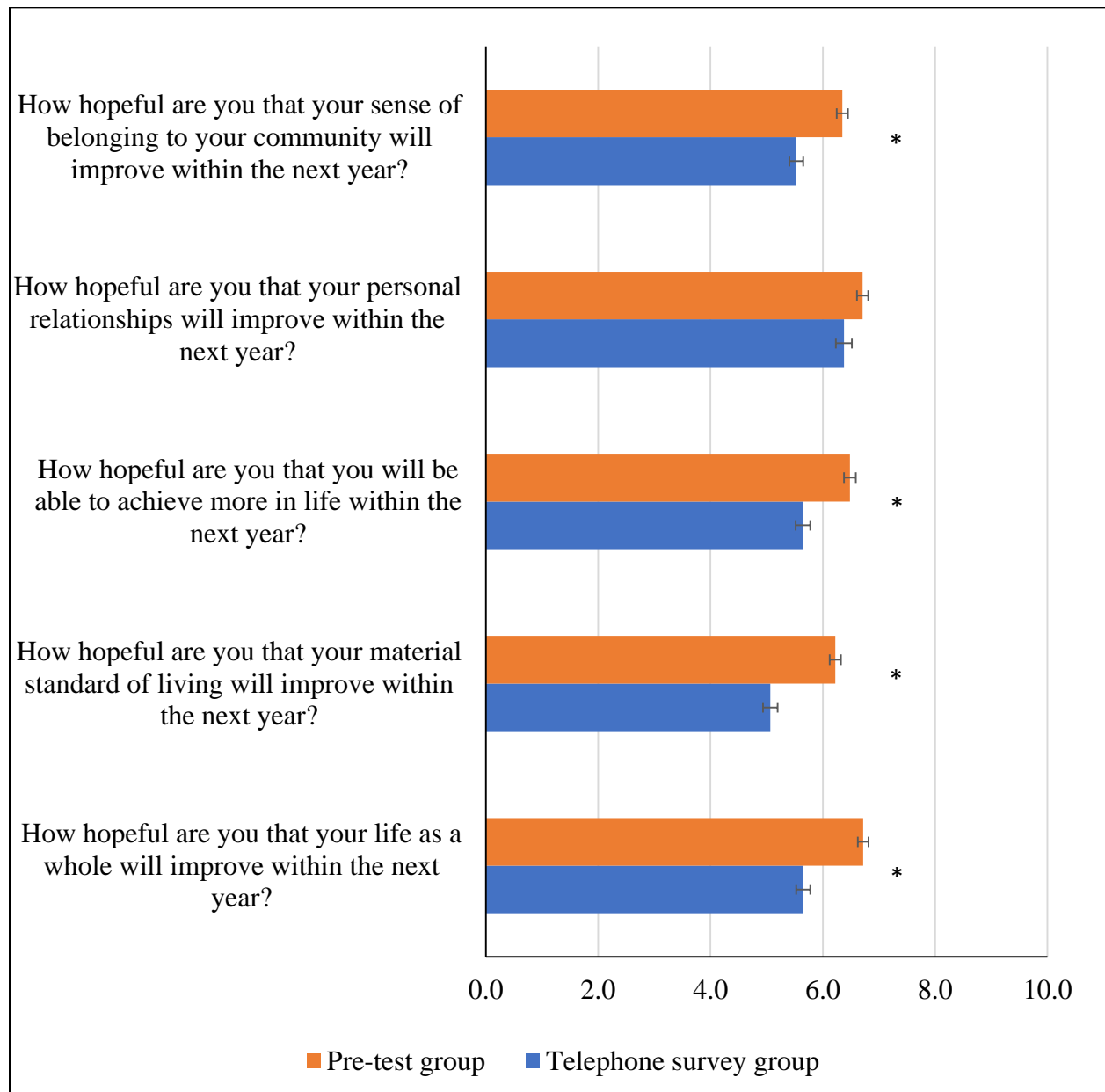
Note. Asterisks indicate significance level of p < .05

Comparisons: Telephone Survey and Post-test Survey

  Comparisons between the telephone survey group and the post-test survey group also indicated significant differences on a number of items. Figures 3 and 4 outline the average scores for these two groups on the life satisfaction and hopefulness measures, and where these groups differ or are similar.

  Figure 3 indicates that the post-test group was more satisfied with what they are achieving in life and more satisfied with feeling part of their community than the telephone group. These results are similar to the comparisons between the pre-test and telephone survey with the exception that there was no difference between the post-test and telephone groups on satisfaction with their material standard of living. These groups also did not differ on their satisfaction with personal relationships or their overall satisfaction with life.

Figure 3. Post-test and Telephone survey group mean scores, Life satisfaction items
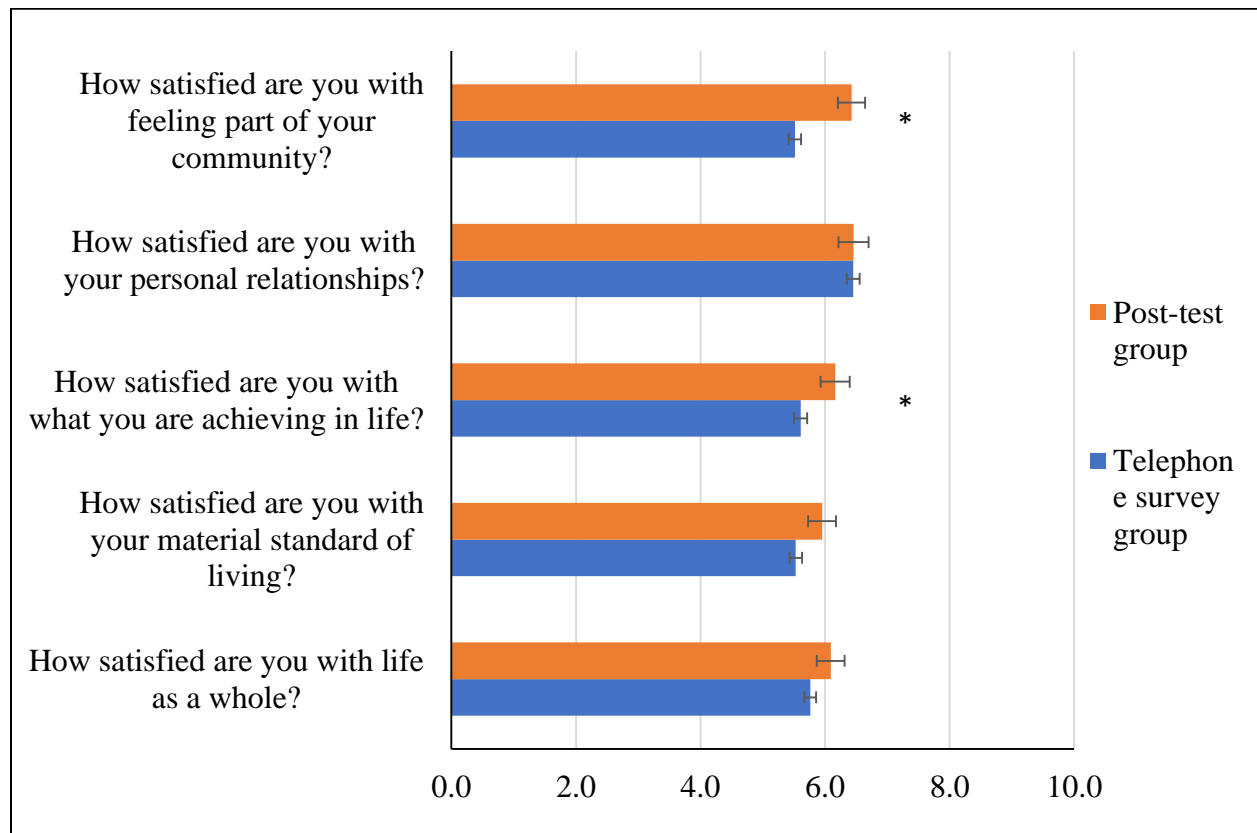
Note. Asterisks indicate significance level of p < .05

Figure 4 shows that the post-test group was more hopeful that their life would improve, that their standard of living would improve, that they would achieve more in life, and that their sense of community belonging would improve over the next year than the telephone survey group. The two groups did not differ on hopefulness of their personal relationships improving over the next year. These results mirror those comparisons between the pre-test group and telephone survey.

Figure 4. Post-test and Telephone survey group mean scores, Hopefulness items
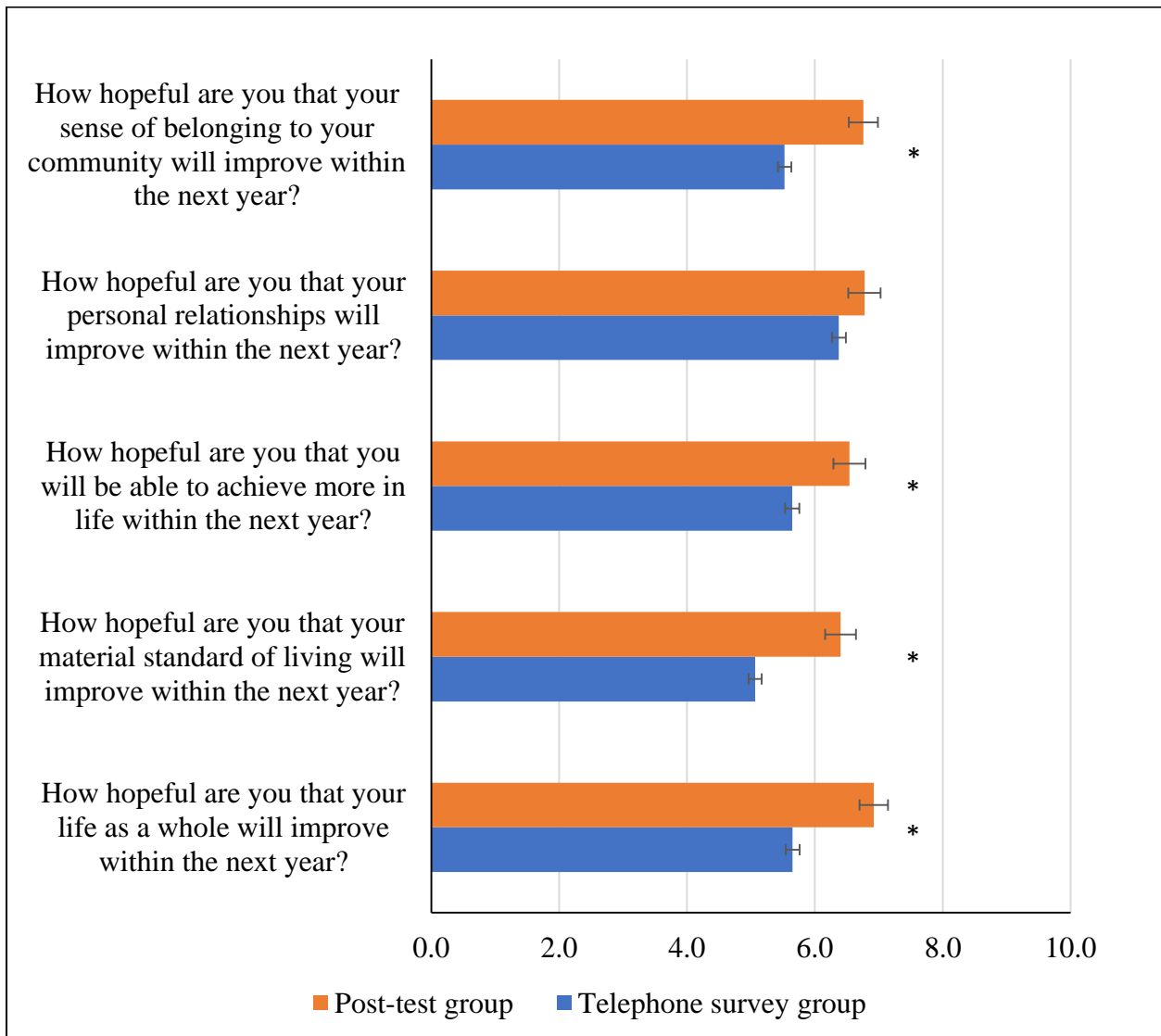
Note. Asterisks indicate significance level of p < .05

Comparisons: Pre-test Survey and Post-test Survey

   The pre-test group comprised a total of 394 participants. Post-test participants included a total of 87 participants. Analyses indicate that individuals who completed both waves of data did not differ from individuals who completed only Wave 1 responses on any variables including: age, time lived in Niagara, country of origin, gender, marital status, or life satisfaction measures. The total number of participants with data for both waves 1 and 2 *and* that had responses to the life satisfaction questions resulted in a final sample of 84 participants.

   Comparisons between the pre-and post-test survey results indicated that there were significant differences between pre- and post-test scores for the general life satisfaction variables. Overall, these results showed that participants' satisfaction with life as a whole increased after program participation. In addition, program participants were more hopeful that their life would improve within the next year after finishing the program in which they participated. For participants that completed both surveys, 53.6% reported an increase in their overall life satisfaction, 22.6% reported no change, and 23.9% reported a decrease in life satisfaction. In terms of hopefulness that their life would improve, 48.9% reported an increase in hopefulness, 26.2% reported no change, and 25.1% reported a decrease in hopefulness.

Figure 5. Pre- and post-test measures with significant within-person increases over time
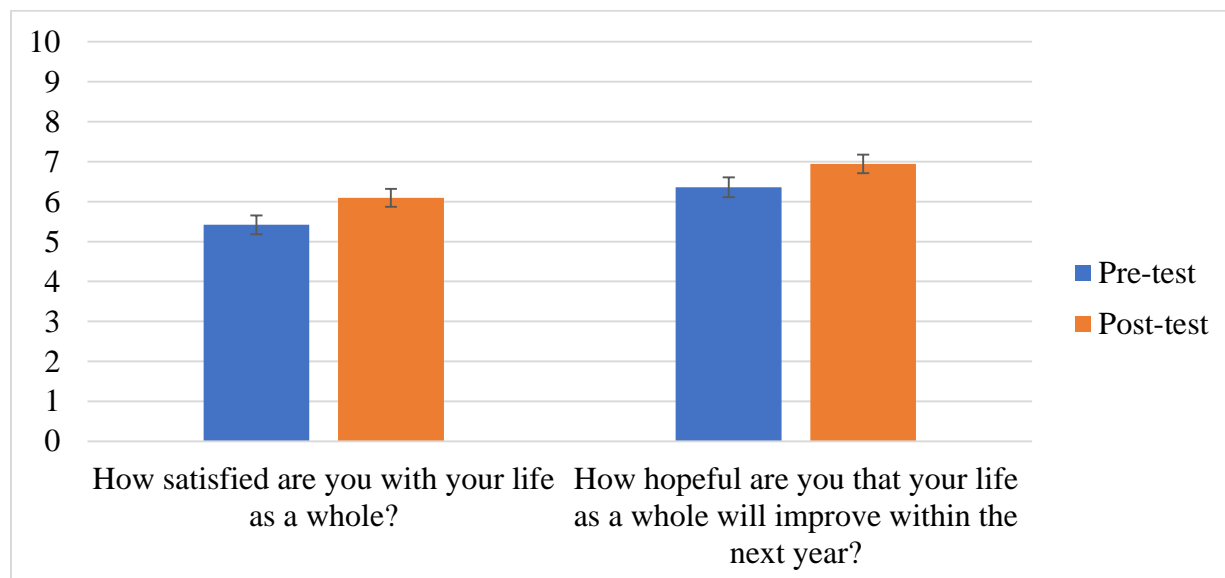
Summary and Conclusions

The findings of Phase 2C showed a number of important results that shed some light on characteristics of local poverty and associations to life satisfaction, in addition to outcomes for participants in NPI-funded programs. First, results from a sample of low-income Niagara residents showed a variety of factors that are related to life satisfaction. When simply examining demographic differences on life satisfaction, we found that individuals that had *lived in Canada longer* and individuals that were *older* had higher levels of life satisfaction than individuals that had been living in Canada for less time, or that were younger. Those with *higher levels of education* reported lower levels of life satisfaction than those with lower levels of education.

For this same participant group, one main finding was that individuals with higher income also reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those with lower income which is consistent with previous research. Other factors relating to higher levels of life satisfaction for this sample of individuals included:

- fewer difficulties commuting to work
- more difficulties getting elsewhere in Niagara
- fewer difficulties affording nutritious meals for the household
- the ability to participate in organized recreational activities
- the ability to participate in fun, informal activities with families/friends
- the ability to afford childcare
- the ability to afford regular dental visits
- the ability to afford health treatments not covered under OHIP
- the ability to afford housing for themselves and/or their dependents
- the ability to afford legal services
- the ability to access internet and/or communication devices
- the ability to plan ahead for retirement

Together, these show that a large number of factors are related to higher levels of life satisfaction, specifically for individuals living in Niagara that fall under the Low-Income Cut-off measure (LICO).

Results specifically examining the effects of program participation on participant life satisfaction showed two significant results:

- increases in participants' satisfaction with life as a whole
- increases in participants' hopefulness that their life as a whole would improve over the next year

It is important to note some factors that may have contributed to fewer significant results than expected. First, the average scores for these measures cannot be considered "lower scores" on satisfaction or hopefulness. In fact, pre-test and post-test scores were fairly high for participants that completed both sets of surveys. Table 2 outlines average scores for the 10 life satisfaction items for individuals that completed both surveys and clearly shows that scores for these items were fairly high in general.

Table 2. Life satisfaction average scores, pre-test and post-test participants

Life satisfaction items	Average Scores		% with High Life Satisfaction (score greater than or equal to 6)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?	5.42	6.10	53.57%	70.11%
How hopeful are you that your life will improve within the next year?	6.36	6.94	64.54%	80.68%
How satisfied are you with your material standard of living?	6.01	5.98	52.04%	67.82%
How hopeful are you that your material standard of living will improve within the next year?	6.54	6.42	53.83%	70.11%
How satisfied are you with what you are achieving in life?	5.93	6.23	58.42%	68.60%
How hopeful are you that you will be able to achieve more in life will improve within the next year?	6.16	6.57	59.69%	71.76%
How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?	6.18	6.49	59.44%	74.71%
How hopeful are you that your personal relationships will improve within the next year?	6.55	6.76	64.80%	71.76%
How satisfied are you with feeling part of your community?	5.96	6.43	53.83%	68.97%

How hopeful are you that your sense of belonging to your community will improve within the next year?	6.39	6.87	55.61%	77.01%

In addition to the fact that many scores on these life satisfaction items did not differ between pre- and post-test scores, it is important to note that the post-test data were collected while the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing. Thus, while there were not many indicators that *increased* after program participation, it is valuable to note that these scores also did not *decrease* given the context that individuals currently are living in.

Taken together, these results show that many factors contribute general to individuals' levels of life satisfaction. In addition, although only a small percentage of the pre-test survey group also completed the post-test survey, it appears individuals who participated in NPI-funded programs reported increases in perceived quality of life and hopefulness that their quality of life would improve over the next year following program completion. While we are unable to conclude that participation in the NPI-funded programs caused these increases in satisfaction and hopefulness, it is encouraging to find such improvements despite the multiple challenges low-income individuals face in their day-to-day lives.

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Phase 2D Report for the Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation (2018-2020)

Niagara Region and Ontario Trillium Foundation

July 6, 2020

Phase 2D Report for the Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation (2018-2020)
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document reports findings from a qualitative research study of Niagara Region social service programs previously funded by the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI), a poverty reduction venture that provides funding of $1.5M annually towards place-based neighbourhood projects and provides information for continued investment towards breaking the cycle of poverty. This study was part of a larger, multi-phase evaluation of NPI funded by the Local Poverty Reduction Fund of the Province of Ontario. The objectives of the present study were fourfold: To learn about Service Users' specific needs, the benefits Service Users accrued from their participation in programs, how agencies might better meet Service Users' needs, and the challenges that agencies face post NPI-funding.

The research, carried out between 2018 and 2020, triangulated data from in-depth individual interviews and focus groups with Program Leads, Staff, and Service Users at eight non-profit programs located throughout the region. Analysis of the individual interview and focus group data revealed six broad themes: (1) perceptions of needs and challenges of Service Users; (2) perceptions of success to support literacy; (3) community, belonging and social capital; (4) challenges with service delivery; (5) experiences with the NPI application process; (6) sustainability post-NPI funding.

Service Users reported on various obstacles due to low-income living that included: family-related challenges (abuse, neglect, divorce, single parent household, children with disabilities, incarcerated family members); mental illness; societal stigmatization; literacy challenges (verbal, oral, writing, and reading comprehension, financial literacy); school-related challenges; work-related and accessibility challenges. Life-long mental health challenges debilitated relationships, often leading to the manifestation of societal disconnection, and an inability to cope in both school life and adult life. Most Service Users expressed significant issues related to low literacy skills which affected daily functioning and, for example, difficulty with communication, success in school or applying for post-secondary programs, job attainment (filling out applications, ability to succeed in job interviews) and/or employment retention.

Service Users, Leads, and Staff reported on their perceptions of success to support literacy, offered by the agency programs funded by NPI. Service Users shared detailed stories related directly to literacy acquisition and their accomplishment attributed directly to the programs researched. They reported on successful literacy knowledge which resulted in advocacy, apprentice programs, employment, daily functioning, well-being, and some relief from societal stigmatization. Agency Leads and Staff corroborated program successes related to a focus on supporting Service Users with literacy acquisition, skills, and knowledge. One agency site was specialized in their literacy programming for children as well as partnering with families, and other organizations to support reading, writing, and oral communication specifically for children with literacy needs. Leads and Staff in the programs researched highlighted the vital necessity of literacy skills as they applied not only to word and print, but also to numeracy and financial knowledge/literacy. Arts-based literacy also garnered significant success in at least one agency site, which aided mental well-being and daily function.

In addition to offering Service Users support with various forms of literacy, the eight support programs studied helped participants to cultivate valuable forms of social capital: social ties and networks of support that provide resources, information, connections, mutual aid, and opportunities of various kinds, including civic engagement and employment opportunities. The social capital generated by way of these programs provided Service Users with a sense of community, belonging, acceptance and ongoing opportunities to connect with new people and explore new opportunities, all of which were previously lacking in the lives of many. This, in turn, countered the isolation, marginalization, and stigmatization Service Users endured in other settings and,

for many, instilled a sense of optimism and hope. Program Leads and Staff appeared to prioritize creating program cultures conducive to the development of social capital and mutual support.

Agencies studied were stretched to deliver their services and relied on human and financial resources to remain functional. Notably, this was recognized by the Service Users who expressed the need for more Staff so that Service Leads were not overextended. With programs precariously positioned, Service Leads experienced difficulty continuing the work of the program without the security of NPI funding, especially given that alternate funding sources were limited. The Staff and volunteers were typically dedicated, but Service Leads reported that finding enough volunteers to fill all the roles is difficult. Agencies were challenged by competing internal needs for financial buoyancy and having the funds to cover basic operating costs, while also having the means to apply for additional funding. Impacting Service Users was the need for more dedicated program space and funds for their transportation to the programs and childcare. Siloing, or working independently of other providers, was reported among agencies that were offering similar services, resulting in a lack of cooperation and collaboration among programs which posed a moral and humanistic challenge. This humanistic challenge was particularly experienced by the Service Users from an agency supporting persons with disabilities as they identified a lack of understanding and respect from the greater community including the school system. Service Leads within agencies also noted a gap in support for their own professional and personal needs as leaders in the social services sector. Amid ongoing funding and staffing challenges, programs had to find ways to meet increasing Service User demands. This was expressed by the Service Users who called for additional kinds of programming and for programming to run more frequently. Facing such ongoing formidable challenges, programs continuously looked to larger organizations such as NPI for direction and support.

The Leads and Staff of the agencies studied expressed skepticism regarding the sustainability of their programs post-NPI funding. There was a slight sense of frustration around many restrictions incurred when attempting to apply for additional funding such as the incompatible goals or mandates of the grant organization and the complexity and onerous nature of the application process. Leads and their Staff appealed to private donors for funding to sustain their work after the NPI funds had run out but this funding was perennially insufficient and limited. This contributed to desperate actions such as Leads using funds to make up for deficits in operating costs and shifting funds into different streams. Findings highlight the irony that, to become resourced, an agency needed to be resourced. Leads noted that they needed to market their agency and attract public attention to get consideration; thus, existing resources begat continued sustainability.

Based upon the findings from the qualitative research, the three Primary Investigators of this study propose a series of recommendations and considerations for future NPI funding. The recommendations, as outlined further in this report, are as follows: (1) regionally, ensure there is a designated repository or individual who acts as a grant application support person for Service Leads to consult and inquire for potential additional sources of funding for human resources (i.e. local private donors, cooperative education programs at the post-secondary level, and provincial or federal funds for non-profit groups); (2) ensure that future NPI funding considers transportation via Niagara Region Transit as a provision by default for remote programs, in order to support Service Users in remote locations who face challenges accessing programs; (3) all future NPI funding should consider literacy and multi-modal literacies (including arts-based literacy, media, numeracy and life skill literacies) as criteria for funding; (4) future NPI funding should consider how agencies with successful programming might reapply to continue their existing successful programs, coupled with considering the criteria from year to year; (5) not-for-profit services must congregate and collaborate to support their common goals in order to respond to the needs of our communities in both global and regional contexts; (6) funding bodies must recognize and support initiatives that promote various forms of social capital (i.e. reinforce communal ties, establish and promote social trust, cultivate equitable, welcoming, and accessible community spaces, and provide employment and civic engagement opportunities).

BACKGROUND

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative Project Evaluation: Phase 2D

The Regional Municipality of Niagara retained Brock University as an independent, third-party evaluator of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. As previously mentioned in the Executive Summary section of this report, the present study was part of a larger, multi-phase evaluation of the NPI, led by a transdisciplinary research team of Brock University faculty members. Phase 2D, a qualitative project evaluation with a focus on literacy projects/programming, specifically investigated eight non-profit NPI-funded programs in the Niagara Region, all of which are under the auspices of ensuring continued investment towards breaking the cycle of poverty and ameliorating the effects of poverty for marginalized members of the Niagara Region. Moreover, it is significant to note that among the numerous phases in the NPI Evaluation, Phase 2D is the only focused, project-level evaluation. The Phase 2D research questions, which guided this study, are listed as follows: (1) What are the needs of Niagara Region residents who make use of local non-profit literacy programs *and* what benefits do Service Users derive from participation in these programs?; (2) To what extent was NPI support beneficial to programs and how did Program Leads and Staff experience their collaborative relationship with NPI? From the standpoint of Program Leads and Staff, how might NPI be more sensitive to the needs and challenges of non-profit programs in the region?; (3) What challenges do programs face in terms of ongoing sustainability post-NPI funding?; (4) How do these challenges affect service delivery and what forms of support are required for non-profit support programs to better meet Service User needs? In this manner, this study deploys the use and analysis of the narrative-based experiences of Program Leads, Staff, and Service Users, notably the poignant narrative retellings of Service Users' experiences from their NPI-funded programs. Thus, the Phase 2D Report for the Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation (2018-2020) illustrates that we must look beyond the visible indicators of poverty in our communities and instead unearth and closely examine the deficit ideologies and poverty-based stereotyping (Gorski, 2012), systems of oppression, marginalization, racism, discrimination, hegemony, inequity (Milner, 2013), and social conditions that have become engrained in our everyday living. In conjunction with the review of the existing literature, Phase 2D reports on the visions, objectives, and identified areas for improvement, in terms of how to successfully cultivate diverse forms of social capital and how to best address literacy needs in the community, as cited by Program Leads, Staff, and Service Users from the eight agencies researched in this report.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-profit organizations play critical roles in communities. In the neoliberal era, they also face formidable challenges, most pointedly those related to funding and sustainability. To contextualize the present study, we provide a review of the existing literature which we organize according to five main themes: (1) the needs and challenges of Service Users; (2) the role of non-profit support programs in supporting literacy, fostering community and cultivating social capital; (3) challenges with service delivery; (4) challenges with funding applications processes; and (5) struggles to stay sustainable, particularly amid funding shortfalls.

Needs and Challenges of Service Users of Non-Profit Support Programs

Several Canadian studies illuminate the needs and challenges of people who make use of the services, programs, and resources provided by non-profit agencies. The literature spotlights several prominent needs in particular, including opportunities for employment, guaranteed basic incomes, affordable and accessible transportation, and accepting, judgement-free spaces for leisure. However, citing the influence of

neoliberalism[1], critics argue that solutions most frequently proposed to address these needs fail to fundamentally address flawed systems and structures that unevenly distribute resources (Buck-McFadyen, 2015; Eby et al., 2012; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2010). Applying a critical discourse analysis to *Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2014–2019* [OPRS], Benbow et al. (2016) argue that this policy is underpinned with neoliberal logics that focus on an individual's productivity and participation in the labour market. The neoliberal ideals of individualism and individual responsibility play a role in the problematic gender-neutral language used throughout the OPRS, which obfuscates the complex ways in which gender influences individual experiences with poverty (Benbow et al., 2016). For instance, in its "Vulnerable Groups" section, the OPRS uses the term "lone parents" as opposed to "single mothers" and consequently disregards the reality that "single women caring for children are among those most likely to experience poverty in Canada" (Benbow et al., 2016, p. 103). Within the same section of the policy, "Aboriginal peoples" is used and similarly undermines how gender influences experiences of poverty. Indigenous women living in proximity to poverty are more likely than their male counterparts to experience harms stemming from their poverty, such as social exclusion, violence, sexual assault, and, in some instances, femicide (Benbow et al., 2016; Dean, 2015).

Opportunities for employment and guaranteed basic incomes have been identified as needs for populations most likely to utilize the supports offered by non-profit agencies. By way of in-depth interviews with women between the ages of 30 and 50, Buck-McFadyen (2015) examined how these individuals experienced food insecurity while living with children in rural towns. Though all participants were well-educated, their education alone was not enough to guarantee employment in rural areas marked by a dearth of employment opportunities (Buck-McFadyen, 2015). Neoliberalism has problematically influenced and limited how these employment and income challenges have come to be recognized. Governmental understandings of support in Ontario, for instance, have become increasingly rooted in a neoliberal ethos that perpetuates the belief that educating and training those living with or experiencing poverty is paramount to ameliorating poverty (Benbow et al., 2016). The food insecure participants in Buck-McFadyen's (2015) research revealed that poverty and education are by no means mutually exclusive. These educated women were able to make ends meet with resourceful food preparation and preservation strategies, going without prescription drugs, and missing bill payments. The ways in which women exercised resilience and resourcefulness did not come without a toll, however, as they often felt worried, embarrassed, shameful, and depressed. Some experienced strain in their intimate relationships and were unable to sleep, while others engaged in self-harm. Moreover, while social supports were available and beneficial to some participants, rigid rules, such as childcare age restrictions and long processing waiting periods for drug benefits, often made these programs inaccessible (Buck-McFadyen, 2015). This finding is further elucidated by Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk (2010), who stress that the availability and accessibility of community and government supports does not dissolve overarching challenges that some social services address superficially at best. While their participants lived in close proximity to good food programs and retails, Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk (2010) found "no evidence that geographic accessibility mitigates the effects of financial constraints on household food security status" (p. 1145). Accordingly, there is a need for some government supports and social services to extend their individualistic focus to consider more fundamental factors that contribute to poverty, such as inequitable social structures and resource distribution (Benbow et al., 2016; Buck-McFadyen, 2015). Through their analysis of the OPRS, Benbow et al. (2016) found that there was little discussion of poverty reduction measures unrelated to employment, such as "guaranteed basic income… where governments would ensure that all citizens have access to a livable income" (p. 104). In sum, employment opportunities and guaranteed basic incomes are critical needs of Service Users. These needs and related challenges, however, are often perceived in limited ways that

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[1] In his introduction to *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* David Harvey (2005) encapsulates neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Social Scientist, Wendy Larner (2000), also argues that neoliberalism should be understood as comprising the domains of policy, ideology, and government, whereby neoliberalism is "both a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance" (p. 6).

translate to educational and training opportunities without an increase in jobs, income, and other necessary resources, such as childcare and medications.

Affordable and accessible transportation is another common need of Service Users. With specific reference to the Durham Region of Ontario, Farber et al. (2018) found that a lack of accessible transportation limited Syrian and non-Syrian refugees' engagement in social activities that, in turn, negatively impacted their well-being. Through focus groups with recent Syrian and non-Syrian refugees, Farber et al. (2018) found that while inaccessible transportation did not limit individuals' participation in essential activities, such as English language classes or childcare, most respondents indicated that the lack of public transportation surrounding them limited their opportunities for socializing, leading to loneliness, social isolation, and poor physical and emotional health. This finding extends beyond economic need and reveals how one's quality of life and well-being can be negatively impacted by a lack of social participation and community connection (Farber et al., 2018; Taga, 2014; Trussell & Mair, 2010). Similar results were found by Eby et al. (2012), who conducted focus groups with low-income families living in Hamilton, Ontario in order to understand residents' and community workers' quality of life. Eby et al.'s (2012) findings suggest that transportation plays an important role to the quality of life of Hamilton's residents, which provides them access to necessary services dispersed across the city. However, their participants stated that transportation "is often costly and time consuming due to the lack of direct routes" (Eby et al., 2012, p. 307). Furthermore, Trussell and Mair (2010) suggest that cost-related challenges that come with expensive public transportation become especially significant for populations relying on Ontario's social supports, such as the Ontario Disability Support Program and the Ontario Works Program, as their total incomes are often not enough to meet such basic needs. Consequently, low-income populations "have few resources for 'extras' such as recreation and leisure activities" (Trussell & Mair, 2010, p. 516). In summation, inaccessible and expensive transportation often leads Service Users to draw on public transit only for "essential" and "necessary" activities (i.e. work and skill development classes), which can negatively impact their well-being and overall quality of life (Eby et al., 2012; Farber et al., 2018; Trussell & Mair, 2010). Similar to Service Users' employment challenges, rurality is also linked to inaccessible public transit, as rural areas are less likely to have frequent, timely, and convenient forms of public transportation (Buck-McFadyen, 2015; Eby et al., 2012). Without the option of public transit, some Service Users may have to purchase, rent, or borrow cars, which can cause compounded levels of stress and financial burden (Buck-McFadyen, 2015).

Finally, the literature identifies a widespread communal need for leisure spaces that are accepting, inclusive, and judgement-free. The need for such inclusive and accepting leisure spaces is especially beneficial for vulnerable populations, such as those living in poverty and that are at risk of homelessness, and whose quality of life is consequently impacted and limited by significant economic restrictions and social stigmatization (Trussell & Mair, 2010). Trussell and Mair (2010) studied Service Users experiencing poverty, or living across a "homeless continuum" (p. 519), who used programs provided by different non-profit agencies in the Region of Waterloo. Trussell and Mair (2010) found that judgement-free non-profit organizations assisted Service Users in feeling welcomed and connected. In this manner, judgement-free non-profits not only offer needed supports, but also help cultivate new connections for Service Users (Adams, 2018; Trussell & Mair, 2010).

Role of Non-Profit Support Programs in Supporting Literacy, Fostering Community, and Cultivating Social Capital

Numerous scholars have highlighted the important role non-profit community organizations play in promoting broadly-conceptualized notions of literacy (e.g. educational, social, health, and computer and telecommunication literacies) and building social capital. Many of these researchers have elucidated the connection between literacy and social capital, and the importance of these intertwined forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to the well-being of individuals and the sociological health of communities. Kinkead-Clark

(2017) suggests that conceptualizing literacy is an ongoing and flexible process, as new understandings about literacy have broadened the concept by moving it beyond traditional spaces with which it is typically associated such as academic institutions and other educational settings. Traditionally recognized as "paper and pencil" skills involving language, reading and writing, contemporary contexts of extensive digital, technological, and communication-based innovation have prompted novel ways of recognizing literacy and literacy acquisition (Kinkead-Clark, 2017; Nouri, 2019). Accordingly, it is necessary to extend these traditional conceptualizations to move beyond language alone, as "it is impossible to define literacy without considering new technologies and the implications they have on literacy practices" (Kinkead-Clark, 2017, p. 60). By broadening our understanding of literacy to include and recognize world related, multimodal literacies – or the ways in which people experience various texts, such as images, words, and digital media, and use these encounters to create new meanings, knowledges, social connections, expressions, and interests – we can begin to recognize the diverse purposes, developments, socio-cultural aspects, and everyday uses of assorted and overlapping literacies (Flewitt, 2008, as cited in Kinkead-Clark, 2017).

Kinkead-Clark (2017) stresses that this recent recognition of multimodal literacies "does not dismiss the value of literacy as defined in its more traditional sense" (p. 60). Just as family and socio-cultural factors are understood to influence literacy, the accessibility and way one relates to multimodal literacies are similarly fostered or limited by one's family, culture, and socio-economic status. As a method of building social capital, multimodal literacies can have a positive impact on socio-economic well-being and identity development, and expand the benefits of literacy development beyond economic well-being to personal, social, and emotional well-being (Balatti et al., 2007; Balatti & Falk, 2002; Taga, 2014).

Similar to literacy, various understandings of social capital can be seen in the literature. Some research, such as that of Balatti et al. (2007), identifies social capital as a private good in that some social capital outcomes are directly experienced by the individual (e.g. new skills, attitudes, and self-beliefs). Other conceptualizations posit social capital as a set of networks offering various resources, opportunities, and a sense of mutual obligation that benefit individuals within these networks, in addition to enhancing the collective intelligence, levels of social trust, and the capacity for collective action and problem solving within learners' communities (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Sharkey et al, 2017; Taga, 2014). This is elucidated by Putnam (2000), who states that social capital "refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). Yosso (2005) adds that, ideally, such networks "provide both instrumental and emotional support" (p. 79). Embedded within social capital are information, connections, resources (or links to resources), and various forms of support that better position individuals to overcome challenges, cultivate skills, and realize personal fulfilment.

Putnam (2000) identified two types of social capital: *bonding* and *bridging*. Bonding social capital refers to social ties that are fostered within communities and generates a "strong in-group loyalty" (p. 23), which can correlate with out-group aversion. Bonding social capital can be seen in minority ethnic or racialized communities marked by strong social ties often reinforced by shared experiences of oppression and marginalization. While bonding social capital in such contexts can be empowering, in that it provides individuals with a sense of identity and belonging, it can limit people's opportunities insofar as they remain deeply embedded within their immediate social milieu and disconnected from the wider society. Bridging social capital, by contrast, is that created *between* different enclaves, organizations and communities, thereby making individuals privy to perspectives, resources, connections, and opportunities beyond their immediate social circles. More specifically, bridging social capital provides people with a broader range of resources and connections to help overcome obstacles, enhances their opportunities for wider societal engagement and, ultimately, improves their life chances. Bridging social capital breaks down the 'us-them' bifurcation often inherent to bonding capital and promotes inter-communal social trust. Drawing on Putnam (2000), Adams (2018) spotlights the significance of social capital in multimodal literacies in his study of the ways in which non-profit organizations help their clients build bonding and bridging social capital. With bonding social

capital, Service Users connect with groups similar to who they are and can develop strong social connections and a resulting sense of social cohesion. Alternatively, bridging social capital provides Service Users with more diverse connections that can yield broader resources (Adams, 2018).

Non-profit social service agencies can help individuals to cultivate bonding and bridging forms of social capital, with each type of social capital offering unique outcomes with distinct benefits. As Putnam (2000) observed, while bonding social capital helps people to get by, bridging social capital is key to "getting ahead" (p. 23). In other words, bonding social capital enables a Service User to "get by," or receive support or needed resources to survive and overcome challenges, while bridging social capital, by way of more diverse set of connections and resources, can allow a client to "get ahead" through opportunities that can lead to upward social mobility. Most important, Adams (2018) states that organizations should not consider social capital as an objective or outcome but, rather, a resource that can help produce new connections and mobility opportunities for Service Users. Researchers, he suggested, "should focus on using social capital as a framework to describe the relationship between organization practices, social networks, and social mobility" (Adams, 2018, p. 21).

A siloed focus on a project's objectives undermines an organization's ability to connect Service Users to different resources and services, which produce helpful connections that may go unnoticed (Adams, 2018). Further, outcome-driven approaches often divorce client needs from project aims and goals, which are preferred to be quick and measurable, and consequently situate clients as mere economic enablers (The Centre for Literacy, 2010). These approaches overlook the ways in which literacy and educational programs can create a "ripple effect" broader than economic outcomes alone, and produce benefits that extend beyond the individual to positively impact their surrounding networks and communities (Balatti & Falk, 2002; The Centre for Literacy, 2010). Therefore, while considering the development and success of multimodalities and world related literacies through non-profit organizations, the significance of social capital becomes especially useful in recognizing the wider benefits of learning and skill acquisition. Taga (2014) illuminates the significance of social capital while considering poverty alleviation strategies. Taga (2014) argues that literacy programs alone "fai[l] to produce desirable results" because they do not consider the reality that poverty is not merely a scarcity of resources, but also a "scarcity of access to the available resources," such as networks and community connections (p. 346-347). By recognizing the significance of social capital in multimodal literacy development, we can begin to take the appropriate steps to support literacy development and more practically recognize the benefits that flow from this learning (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Taga, 2014).

In a study of Australia's adult and community education sector and its multiple impacts on socio-economic and social well-being, Balatti and Falk (2002) found that, "through the use of the notion of social capital, the benefits of learning are more adequately identified and more comprehensively understood" (p. 292). Accordingly, a social capital perspective can foster recognition of community learning programs' multiple impacts that extend beyond the nature of these programs and their stated learning goals. For instance, a program developed to teach elderly populations new skills and knowledge (e.g. creative writing, cooking, and safe driving practices) created significant benefits that extended beyond the participants themselves and the initial aims of the program, resulting in improved health (i.e. better diet, increased sense of connection and agency, less isolation) and personal safety practices (i.e. improved driving), for example (Balatti & Falk, 2002). Thus, Balatti and Falk's (2002) research critically underscores how literacy is correlated with social capital and, as such, holds the capacity to "highlight those aspects of social structure, such as qualities of networks, that lead to economic or social gain for groups or individuals" (p. 283).

In a longitudinal quantitative study of the relationship between the prevalence of community non-profit organizations and crime rates in 264 U.S. cities, Sharkey et al. (2017) provide further evidence of the importance of social capital to the lives of individuals and the health (and safety) of communities. Sharkey et al. (2017) present evidence demonstrating a significant inverse relationship between the number of community organizations in a given jurisdiction and violent and property crime rates. More specifically, in a timeframe

spanning between the 1990s to the 2010s, a proliferation of local organizations "designed to strengthen… neighborhoods, provide support and safe spaces for young people, and confront violence" (Sharkey et al., 2017, p. 1233) was a major contributing factor to a sharp decrease in crime, including violent crime. The researchers attribute this finding to the vital role that local, non-profit organizations play in fostering "ties between residents" and strengthening "local networks, levels of social cohesion and trust, and levels of *informal* social control" (Sharkey et al., 2017, p. 1234, *emphasis added*). Hence, as a means of addressing crime, and most pointedly violent crime, Sharkey et al. (2017) argue that the cultivation of social capital by way of local non-profit agencies, even those not directly concerned with crime reduction, can be viewed as an alternative to external measures such as the intensification of policing and surveillance. In short, by way of social capital theory, the impact of non-profit support programs can be more thoroughly recognized, as we can see how building skills, knowledge, and connections can produce benefits that indirectly flow to learners' wider communities.

Research suggests that an individual's participation in successful literacy education can foster one's ability to create and maintain new connections within the family, academia, workplace, and the wider community (The Centre for Literacy, 2010); inspire Program Users to feel empowered with agency and control over their learning and lives (Balatti et al., 2007); and produce wider benefits that "go well beyond cost savings to reduced demand on health care services, law enforcement, and social welfare services" (Balatti & Falk, 2002, p. 292; see also Sharkey et al., 2017). Literacy as social capital can be used to bond with others and participate in new social experiences which can help foster new forms of social capital (Adams, 2018; Kinkead-Clark, 2017). Trussell and Mair's (2010) research on poverty, homelessness, and leisure reveals how non-profit spaces of leisure can facilitate and support literacy through language classes, women's support groups, connection and outreach, and activities such as crafts, scrapbooking, and gardening. While the organizations studied were not specifically identified as literacy programs, Trussell and Mair's (2010) research reveals the ways in which non-profit organizations can successfully support their clients, which can lead to the indirect cultivation of various literacies on the part of Service Users. Their findings illustrate how non-profits working with vulnerable populations can support and develop relationships of trust with their clients through acceptance rather than exposure, which had left their participants feeling stigmatized, embarrassed, and cautious through previous experiences with social support programs and "[l]iving under a [m]icroscope" (Trussell & Mair, 2010, p. 515) of Canada's changing welfare state. Staff acceptance fostered trust and rapport with their clients, which led to clients' furthered participation in other programs offered by the organization. This need for accepting and judgement-free Staff and organizational spaces is underscored by the reality that, for many of the participants, "this was their primary source of companionship and social interaction" (Trussell & Mair, 2010, p. 523). Therefore, it is vital that non-profits work to foster an accepting and inclusive atmosphere that allows Program Users to feel welcomed and comfortable. This would encourage Service Users to participate in programs in a more engaged and consistent way, hence increasing opportunities to develop multimodal literacies and valuable forms of social capital.

Challenges with Non-Profit Service Delivery

Research demonstrates that workers in the non-profit sector face several challenges due to a changing political climate and increases in privatization and managerialism. These shifts have reorganized program costs and funding opportunities, and limit the autonomy of the non-profit labour force. Acker (2010) outlines how growing managed care contexts in mental health services often result in expectations of measurable outcomes, ongoing documentation, computer skills, and cost-efficient, short-term treatments that pose new and demanding requirements for workers. By way of a survey conducted in New York State, Acker (2010) found that the strict responsibilities within a managed care workplace resulted in increased levels of accountability and reduced levels of autonomy in addition to increasing service workers' likelihood to experience burnout, emotional exhaustion, and flu-like symptoms, especially when a worker held low self-perceived competence towards managed care requirements. Moreover, the business-oriented ethos of managed care was often perceived by

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social workers as incompatible with traditional ideals surrounding community mental health care, consequently leading to lower levels of self-perceived competence and further frustration, stress, and burnout (Acker, 2010).

Dominelli (2010) argued that globalization has led to increases in privatization and new managerialism, which has impacted the delivery of social services, its labour processes, and the relationships between social workers and their organization's Service Users. With these increases, non-profits that have not previously held a profit-motive are pressured to introduce business and market practices, and become more entrepreneurial through the use social enterprise models to generate additional revenue (Baines et al., 2014; Dominelli, 2010). This business-orientation may have a negative impact on an organization's service delivery that can lead to disempowered workers, distanced Service Provider-User relationships, and shifts in services from universal to residual "that target the neediest of the needy" (Dominelli, 2010, p. 602).

A growing neoliberal ethos that promotes ideals of responsibilization and individualism has influenced how non-profit agencies and their Service Users are publicly recognized (Baines et al., 2014). Varadi et al. (2020) state that by "[s]hifting responsibility from governments to individuals, neoliberalism has largely eroded once existing social safety nets as the onus of social and personal well-being is placed on individual citizens… rather than achieved or maintained with the support of public services" (p. 3-4). Consequently, there has been an undervaluation of non-profit work that manifests through inadequate and unstable government funding as governments attempt to dismantle "dependency traps" while encouraging self-reliance and self-help (Baines et al., 2014). The lack of security and predictability across non-profit services not only has a negative impact on the non-profit labour force, but also the structures, services, and Service Users of non-profit organizations. For instance, this precarity can result in significant service delivery gaps as agencies are forced to lay off employees after losing funding and struggle to strengthen and maintain their valuable community connections (Baines et al., 2014). With shifting political climates, the funding non-profit agencies receive has changed from core/base funding to project-based contract funding (Baines et al., 2014). This new contract funding leads to competition across non-profit organizations, resulting in logics of getting the "best value for the dollar" and a "race to the bottom" dynamic, where organizations may work to serve more people in a limited time frame to give themselves an edge, but lessen the quality of their services as a result (Baines et al., 2014, p. 79). Bureaucratic measures of performance and efficiency further shape service delivery, as Service Providers are increasingly expected to "maximize" their resources and serve more with less (Dominelli, 2010). Consequently, "social workers have become familiar with terms like 'value for money', 'business plans,' targets', 'outputs' and 'performance management'" (Dominelli, 2010, p. 604).

Privatization, managerialism, and new bureaucratic pressures were found to hinder service delivery and create new barriers that impact the accessibility and effectiveness of non-profit services. Khanlou et al. (2015) elucidate several structural barriers faced by immigrant mothers of children with disabilities, such as language barriers and communication difficulties, excessive paperwork, dispersed and limited services, and cultural differences. This analysis emphasizes how service delivery is problematically restricted when logics to maximize limited resources to serve the "neediest" are employed by agencies within the non-profit sector. Beneficial (if not necessary) roles, such as full-time workers who can provide professional assistance to Service Users who have to use new technologies or fill out long and complicated forms, are removed from services that face limitations due to inadequate funding and top-down decision-making processes (Baines et al., 2014; Dominelli, 2010; Khanlou et al., 2015). Moreover, simplistic logics that frame Service Users as passive "consumers" who can objectively utilize services at any chosen time fail to recognize that services are always co-produced by Service Providers and Service Users (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013), as Service Providers and their larger agencies "can only 'promise' a certain process or experience – the actuality is dependent upon such co-production" (Osborne et al., 2015, p. 432).

Project-based funding also creates spending restrictions and enables funders to exercise a considerable amount of control over how agencies serve and connect to their Service Users and communities (Baines et al.,

2014). Baines et al. (2014) argue that this model of funding has created an "advocacy chill" in the non-profit sector, as funders reject organizations' efforts to be socially active and serve as advocates for Service Users, leading to silo-like, one dimensional services that operate and deliver using a business-model framework. Aligning with managed care organizations and their strict requirements, project-based contract funding requires more top-down reporting measures that involve highly structured accountability systems. These reporting activities take time and energy away from the direct provision of services to communities, create stress and extra work burden – which is often viewed as "a labour of love" – and leave Service Providers with little autonomy to adjust their programs to better serve their clients (Acker, 2010; Baines et al., 2014; Mosley & Smith, 2018). With a reliance on unstable and short-term contract-based funding, Baines et al. (2014) state that less than half (48%) of Ontario's non-profit labour force work full-time, which reveals the insecurity, vulnerability, and temporariness that characterizes this work and indisputably influences the quality of service delivery. Indeed, frequent staff turnover can negatively impact the services provided by an agency and its capacity to develop and maintain long-term, trusting relationships with Service Users and related networks (Smith & Phillips, 2016).

Challenges with Funding Application Processes

Non-profit Staff and Program Leads must often apply for funding through government and foundation grants. Research reveals that non-profit workers face several challenges with these application processes. Through grant applications, non-profit workers are continually expected to demonstrate their organizations' effectiveness and impact through performance measurements and outcome assessments (Carman, 2009; Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011; Mosley & Smith, 2018). These measurements often involve the establishment of project objectives and measurable indicators that enable the collection, analysis, and reporting of project-specific data (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011). Such measurements influence how policy makers, funders, and Service Providers think about programs and the potential changes they make in Service Users' lives (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011) and leave non-profit organizations "more accountable than ever" (Carman, 2009, p. 374). Research reveals that growing expectations of accountability have materialized across the non-profit sphere through descriptive evaluation and performance measurements and, in some cases, external monitoring (Carman, 2009). These measurements are usually expected where grants are allocated in order for funders to understand a program's yearly plans, aims and goals, performance indicators and, ultimately, "gauge their effectiveness" (Carman, 2009, p. 375).

Using survey and interview data with non-profit executives and funders in New York State, Carman (2009) found that different funding agencies (i.e. federal government, state/local government, United Way, and smaller foundations) do not request the same type of measurements, nor do these requests meet the same intensity. Findings revealed that non-profits who receive "considerable funding" from larger funding agencies, such as the United Way and federal government, engage in the most detailed evaluation and performance measurements and receive external monitoring, while organizations who receive funding from smaller sources (e.g. foundations, state/local governments) do not receive similar descriptive reporting and monitoring expectations (Carman, 2009). These findings can be used to understand the challenges that non-profits may face when applying for grant funding. Grant applications are where possibilities for accountability, measurement, and performance expectations are established, as non-profits outline their preliminary month-by-month plan of program activities, performance targets and measurements, and program goals. Drawing upon Carman's (2009) findings, we can determine that grant applications for "considerable funding" are as rigorous and time consuming as the accountability expectations and tasks required of non-profits who receive these grants. This becomes a significant challenge for non-profits in the application process, as Carman (2009) found that "almost all funders agreed that most nonprofit organizations did not have the resources to do rigorous evaluation" (p. 385). With this, the expectations and thoroughness of grant applications can disadvantage certain non-profits who have limited Staff and internal or assigned funding to invest in meticulous application processes (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011). By way of her research findings, Carman (2009) further highlighted that "all of the

foundations and some of the government funders commented that most nonprofits have a hard enough time documenting who it is they serve and what services people get" (p. 385). This finding parallels that of Carnochan et al. (2014), who examined four U.S. non-profit organizations in order to understand their experiences and challenges with performance measurements. Carnochan et al. (2014) found that standardized client outcomes are difficult to define, as the complexity of human change is not uniform. Research conducted by Lynch-Cerullo and Cooney (2011) further reveals that measurement challenges may be experienced by non-profits who struggle to measure specific knowledge-, behaviour-, status-, and affective-outcomes where evidence-based practiced is not yet established.

Research by Carnochan et al. (2014) further revealed how non-profits may struggle to navigate standardized measurements, as the validity of these data are dependent on the accuracy of the information disclosed by the Service User, which further depends on the relationship and trust between the Service User and Staff. Importantly, Carnochan et al. (2014) found a discrepancy between non-profit outcomes and funders' perceived priorities: "There was a common tendency among program managers and line staff to believe that funders care more about specific organizational outputs (e.g., number and type of clients served) than client outcomes" (p. 1021). Extending these performance measurement challenges to potential grant application challenges, we can recognize how non-profits may experience specific struggles with expectations of standardization and validity, as well as tensions between non-profit workers' and funders' understandings of outcomes and outputs (Carnochan et al., 2014).

Challenges with grant applications may stem from funder-specific terminology along with vague expectations. Questions and assumptions surrounding *impact*, for example, may leave some applicants feeling unguided about funder expectations: "The vagueness of the term is perhaps part of its charm – it allows for funders to call on organizations to 'do better' without giving clear guidance on what that really means" (Mosley & Smith, 2018, p. 118). The concepts used in applications can thus undermine differing or limited technical, cultural, and political knowledges held by applicants (Thomson, 2010). As a result of funder-specific language and expectations, Service Staff may be required to attend funder-specific training sessions that teach "nonprofits about a range of concepts relating to evaluation and performance measurement… the differences between outputs and outcomes; how to develop reasonable and realistic targets; and how to compare baseline data to follow-up data over time" (Carman, 2009, p. 384). Despite these challenges and potential opportunities to address them, research by Carman (2009) exposed the reality that a non-profit's reputation plays a large role with funding opportunities. As stated by a foundation officer: "We say to groups all of the time, everybody knows everybody. Everybody is talking. Everybody is sharing good news, and people are sharing bad news, so you don't want to mess up" (Carman, 2009, p. 386). Accordingly, a non-profit organization's reputation is another consideration to examine when studying grant application challenges.

Non-Profit Organizations and Ongoing Sustainability

Besel et al. (2011) highlight that, "[i]n light of the substantial cutbacks in both federal and state funds… best practice strategies on sustaining nonprofit organizations are timely and necessary to avoid cutbacks in community-based services" (p. 54). As highlighted above, neoliberal influences have resulted in substantial cutbacks in government funding, eroding once existing social safety nets and welfare provisions (Dominelli, 2010; Varadi et al., 2020). The business logics and practices that non-profits are pressured to adopt are counterproductive to their survival, as these logics suggest that agencies can rely on "a business equation where production and consumption are treated separately – [thus] the costs of the former can be reduced without affecting the latter" (Osborne et al., 2015, p. 426). In non-profit services, however, reducing the costs of production have a direct influence over the quality of their consumption (e.g. limiting costs by employing fewer or less trained Staff) that can affect an organization's overall sustainability (Osborne et al., 2015). In light of this reality, scholars have proposed various strategies to sustain the financial viability of non-profit agencies.

In a review of literature on non-profit organizations and financial sustainability, Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) found five key "challenges related to establishing financial sustainability and, in turn, supporting programmatic or organizational success" (p. 7). First, non-profits face the risk of relying on external sources of funding, such as donations, contracts, fee for service, and grants (e.g. from governments, foundations, and philanthropic organizations). This reliance may result in restricted uses of public funding, large amounts of time and energy dedicated to complying with funding requirements, and increasing patterns of hiring temporary Staff which, as highlighted above, can impact the delivery and quality of services (Osborne et al., 2015; Sontag-Padilla et al., 2012). To address this challenge, Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) suggest that non-profits develop a coherent fundraising plan which "provides an opportunity to examine what is working well and where there are opportunities for improvement, encourages nonprofits to set specific goals, and motivates nonprofits to make a commitment to focus on the big picture" (p. 8-9). Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) further suggest that non-profits incorporate creative and innovative fundraising strategies and foster strong, continuing relationships with donors and investors.

Second, Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) outline how non-profits often struggle (or overlook the benefit) to market themselves with a clear and consistent mission due to mission drift prompted by a "reliance on competing expectations [from] multiple external funding sources, as well as the motivation to address diverse social challenges within a community" (p. 10). To address mission drift, the authors suggest that non-profits create their own "brand" by establishing and clearly defining their organization's mission, which can help non-profits avoid destabilizing program activities, funder/donor relationships, and funding. Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) also suggest that non-profits develop a distinctive marketing plan that is "old-fashioned" rather than social media based, as "research suggests that technology is no substitute for face-to-face communication through meetings and conversations, and organizations must partner information technology use with these old-fashioned communication techniques" (p. 12-13). Third, the authors highlight how dramatic funding cuts in the non-profit sector have resulted in increased collaborations between non-profits and "higher authorities," such as governmental agencies and professional or legislative bodies, which may result in lessened or restricted organizational autonomy and weakened social missions. This identified challenge overlaps with those outlined above (see Acker, 2010; Baines et al., 2014; Mosley & Smith, 2018) and Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) suggest that non-profits make more "high-impact collaborations" that align with their organization's mission and use these strategic collaborations to build resources and financial sustainability.

Fourth, and again overlapping with challenges with service delivery outlined above, Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) describe non-profits' challenges with demonstrating value and comprehensive accountability to funders. To address this vague and largely subjective funder-specific challenge, the authors draw on Bell et al. (2010) to suggest seven criteria that can be used to minimize subjectivity across impact evaluations: "(1) alignment with core mission, (2) excellence in execution, (3) scale or volume, (4) depth, (5) filling an important gap, (6) community building, and (7) leverage" (p. 15). Along with demonstrating accountability and transparency to funders, these reports can also be used to accessibly communicate findings to the general public (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2012). Finally, the authors highlight how "[n]onprofits often reside within the communities that they serve, creating a unique challenge of promoting ownership and collaboration among community members while maintaining programmatic and mission integrity" (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2012, p. 17). To address this challenge, the authors suggest that non-profits develop a consistent and committed advisory board that can provide informed insight, guidance, and counsel. Moreover, board members can participate in fundraising drives to secure private sector funding, which can lessen an organization's dependency on single sources of funding (Besel et al., 2011). Non-profits are also suggested to similarly develop and maintain a team of engaged volunteers by providing them with comprehensive training, recognition, and tasks that match their existing knowledges and abilities (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2012).

Barata and Murphy (2011) outline four strategies employed by two Toronto charity foundations to secure policy gains along with collective success and support. First, these foundations succeeded in *convening*,

where they brought together "advocates, people with lived experience, and government decision-makers in efforts to find a common cause across constituencies… [which] opened the space to share knowledge and work towards new kinds of practice" (p. 24). Second, the organizations diversified their funding strategies through multifarious funding approaches (Barata & Murphy, 2011). This included assigning grants for research and policy analysis to build their information base, commissioning public surveys to address community needs, and offering funding for meetings, travel, community work, and other smaller-scale initiatives to raise public engagement (Barata & Murphy, 2011). The third strategy entailed eliciting lived experiences. Both foundations regularly incorporated the perspectives of low-income and homeless people, which helped to inform policies and underscore the importance of amplifying the voices of low-income people in discussions on poverty (Barata & Murphy, 2011). The final strategy emphasized the importance of nurturing relationships. By forwarding a diverse panel of experts, the two foundations were able to introduce experts to various topics, low-income groups to government officials, and grassroots organizations to other advocates. The collaboration of people from different social and professional realms helped to inform and develop stronger policy practices and initiatives (Barata & Murphy, 2011).

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The overarching purpose of the 3-year project was to:
> Evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI), a poverty reduction strategy that provides funding of $1.5M annually towards place-based neighbourhood projects and provide information for continued investment towards breaking the cycle of poverty. Four questions guide this evaluation process: How does the structure of NPI respond to the issues of poverty in Niagara? What components of NPI are impacting poverty and what is the nature of the impact? What types of NPI funded projects have made an impact on poverty and how? What other poverty reduction approaches may be needed?

The research purpose delineated for Phase 2D of the project evaluation was to conduct:
> In-depth, one-on-one interviews with NPI-funded Project Leads and focus groups with project participants, to learn about their specific needs, the extent to which those needs are being met by NPI funded projects, and how NPI funded projects might better meet their needs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided Phase 2D of the project evaluation:
1. What are the needs of Niagara Region residents who make use of local non-profit literacy programs *and* what benefits do Service Users derive from participation in these programs?
2. To what extent was NPI support beneficial to programs and how did Program Leads and Staff experience their collaborative relationship with NPI? From the standpoint of Program Leads and Staff, how might NPI be more sensitive to the needs and challenges of non-profit programs in the region?
3. What challenges do programs face in terms of ongoing sustainability post-NPI funding?
4. How do these challenges affect service delivery and what forms of support are required for non-profit support programs to better meet Service User needs?

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research used a qualitative study approach, with a focus on experiential narratives. Use of narrative telling (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) by participants, and in particular Service Users, provided close-to-the-

ground experiences that allowed for complexities of particular places, people, and situations in the context of low-income communities and programs that operated within those communities. Narrative inquiry is a contributing method that represents stories of systemic barriers for those living in low-income as lived and told through those participants (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative retellings give first-hand voice to the life stories of Service Users prior to attending programs, and during their participation in the programs. In addition, since the research used various agency sites, a case-study lens took a qualitative close-to-the ground approach with flexibility to address perspectives and viewpoints (Merriam, 1998). In this way, the research is complementary in method.

Sampling Procedure

For the years of funding for the NPI Projects that were part of the complete data set, the researchers reviewed the titles of the projects previously funded. Projects that were inclusive of literacies (in the broad, multimodal sense) were highlighted. These projects were hosted by 21 different agencies/services in the Niagara Region. Given the historical funding time frame and the number of years that had lapsed, some of these agencies/services were not tenable to include in the sample. Table 1. is a summary of the eight agencies that were included in this research and the participating Service Users, Staff and Leads from these agencies. Pseudonyms have been used for all agencies and participants.

Code	Agencies	Service Users (*n*)	Staff (*n*)	Leads (*n*)
1	Program A	1	0	1
2	Program B	11	4	1
3	Program C	3	3	1
4	Program D	8	2	1
5	Program E	49	1	1
6	Program F	0	1	1
7	Program G	0	0	1
8	Program H	0	0	1
	Totals	72	11	8

Table 1. Summary of Agencies, Service Users, Staff and Leads

Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of three months (May, June, July, 2019) by three researchers, two research assistants and the project coordinator. There were X of one-on-one interviews of the Leads and X focus groups (X – X number of participants) of the Service Users and Staff. Interview prompts for the Leads included questions about how the program relates to literacy support, impact of the program, effectiveness in addressing the needs of Service Users, obstacles in reaching program goals, and funding needs. Focus Group prompts for the Staff were related to how they carried out the activities and literacy goals of the program, what the Services Users experienced in the program, and what are the strengths and needs of the program. Focus Group prompts for the Service Users included questions related to the supports that they received in the program, how they interacted/collaborated with others in the program, and how the program might serve them better.

Data Analysis

All of the audio recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed by two of the research assistants. Then the files were uploaded into NVivo (2019) for the first round of analyses. Key phrases and concepts were identified and validated by all the researchers and research assistants. The final set of 22 nodes included:

Agency; Background; Benefits of Program; External Input Re. Programming; Funding Challenges; Homelessness; Lack of Support; Literacy; Marginalization; Mental Health; Needs (Met); Needs (Unmet); Project; Responsibilities; Role; Rural Based Challenges; Service User Challenges; Stigma; Strengths Of Users; Suggested Improvement; Support; Agency Marketing. These nodes included several sub-nodes which were then summarized and corresponding participant quotes were sorted into these nodes. The nodes were collapsed by the researchers into six thematic clusters and further interpreted as findings.

The main limitation of this study is one typical of qualitative inquiry generally: the use of a non-random sampling strategy means that participants were self-selecting and may be different in some way from individuals who chose not to participate or who lacked the opportunity to do so. In addition, we were not able to obtain participants from all three participant categories for all programs. Hence, for some of the programs studied, the voices of particular categories of participants are not represented. We did, however, manage to obtain data from a Lead Administrator for all eight programs.

FINDINGS

The following section is a presentation of the findings based on the six thematic clusters: (1) Perceptions of needs and challenges of Service Users; (2) Perceptions of success to support literacy; (3) Community, belonging and social capital; (4) Challenges with service delivery; (5) Experiences with the NPI application process; (6) Sustainability post-NPI funding.

(1) Perceptions of Needs and Challenges of Service Users

Service Users identified various obstacles due to low-income living, prior to their accessing aid and support from agencies. Service Users' perceptions of needs and challenges included, but were not limited to: family-related challenges; inclusion, mental health, and stigmatization; literacy (verbal, oral, writing, and reading) and school-related challenges; work-related and accessibility challenges.

Family Related Challenges

Participants expressed various family challenges which readily conveyed how they or their family members came to be serviced by respective agencies. While many of the family challenges relayed issues of poverty and its relation to such experiences such as abuse, divorce, and literacy/knowledge skills, what was highlighted in many of the accounts was participants' treatment and perception as 'othered' from society in general, before they had found and discovered the agency community to which they felt valued. Such funded community agencies included Program D which runs a visual art drop in centre for adults, housed in a stand-alone garage beside the community centre. Another significant agency program was Program B, where children with learning disabilities are provided the opportunity to gain confidence and acceptance not always afforded to them in other publicly funded spaces where they are often confronted with systemic barriers.

Steven, a Service User at Program D, where the funded program focussed on visual arts and community, describes his divorce which ultimately led to his move to Ontario and therapeutic reliance on visual arts at the drop-in centre at Program D, in order to cope, while trying to find a job.

Steven: *Umm, I've never been to an art drop-in centre before. But I was definitely on the participant side, signing up for all the workshops, and what not. I got a part-time job there, just like helping out there and what not. And after a few weeks, I told myself, "Is this what I want to do with my life? I would like to run a place like this some time."...Yeah. And [I] moved back to Ontario. My sister was here, still. And I got back into golf and*

then looking for employment. I was desperate. I was on OW I was just basically like, "Give me a job. Anywhere. I'll take it."

Olivia, also a Service User at Program D, shared her experience of abuse, her son, her mental health, and how her love of the arts growing up in school became a lifeline for coping during her adult life challenges:

Olivia: *I guess I always was best at art…and English in school 'cause it was (sighs)…it stopped me from killing myself 'cause I was being abused [at home] in a lot of different ways…I had a son, he's thirteen right now, but he was like two and half. And it was nothing about me being a mother 'cause I knew I would be a mother…it was my health. And so, I chose to give him to another family. But it all worked out, it was an open adoption. But during that time it was really dark, you know? The art—I was able to express that with the art and poetry.*

At Program B, Hannah describes her family situation as a single parent living in poverty, and her perception of how she is treated as a woman raising children in her community. In particular, Hannah relays how she is faced with bias from bank tellers, gas attendants, and so on, as it relates directly to her status as a woman, single mother, and knowledge skills:

Hannah: *Oh, I know how the same people—the bank teller, the gas attendant—I know the same people treat me as, I mean, I was never really married but in a situation where you have like a father and a mother in the home. It's way different than when you're on your own. Especially as just a woman, like I got to say that because suddenly on my own as a woman, I can no longer understand things that are financial, or mechanical, or anything else.*

Also, at Program B, Sydney retells a poignant recurring narrative of her autistic son, and how he is repetitively stigmatized, and her family's experience in dealing with health professionals in her community, which further alienates her son:

Sydney: *I've had doctors yell right out and yell in front of [everyone in] a waiting room with [my son] sitting right beside me, and say something very loud, so everyone around could hear. So, literally pointing a big arrow at [my son's] head. So, I just stopped bringing him to the doctor's appointments with me. He would say, "I'm sitting in the car," 'cause he was just horrified that he was so embarrassed.*

Inclusion, Mental Health, Stigmatization

A further challenge that Service Users identified in their daily lives related to issues of inclusion, mental health, and societal stigmatization. Participants depicted how their long-standing mental health challenges (often stemming from poverty and its effects on well-being, familial situations, and societal disconnection) debilitated, for many years, their ability to be active contributing citizens in a world where they expressed a sense of futility. Many relied on drugs to cope, while others turned to isolation and homelessness, which manifested mental health issues due to life-long trauma and stigmatization. At Program D, Service Users shared narrative snippets of life-long strife.

Judy: *So, we live with this PTSD. I've got four brothers and a ninety-three-year-old father locked up. They can't get out. They don't want to go. Some miracles got to happen.*

Olivia: *[T]here was a lot of years where I just didn't do anything 'cause I couldn't see anything. Everything was kind of black. A lot of depression, and just losing my memory, and crap…And by the time I got to high school with the stigma, bullying, and stuff…you couldn't talk about it back then, so I was just very suicidal through high school. So, art helped me to put at least something on the—and writing, and stuff. And then, you know. Well, most of my life was pretty shot. Like I mean, I was a nanny for a few years, and then I had a couple*

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breakdowns, and I was very dissociative….I like to use my art as, like, if I'm expressing a feeling—say a girl with an X over her mouth— like I know a lot of people that can identify their feelings. If they can look at the pictures and say, "That's the way I feel 'cause I can't say it, right?" Whatever comes out? Like, you know, I'm really interested in art therapy and stuff.

Josh: *I've been on all the medications, and I've stopped them, and I've started them. And unfortunately, pills don't change the world that you're living in—or the situation…Like I'm sure some of us know, gone through programs, or some groups, or whatever like this. But so, I mean, the way the system is dealing with mental health is that you have to walk around with a list of pleasurable activities, that some of them you can't even afford. It brings light to the fact that you're alone and broke….And I've been seeing their psychiatrist for years. And I've been telling him. He says, "Well yeah, you do too much drugs." So, I stopped even using the drugs and not because I wanted to but because they said, you know, "If you want to get a better mental health diagnosis, stop using drugs for six months." So, I haven't used drugs for even eight months. And now I have my intake, and the lady says we're going to have an evaluation on the twenty-second of next month, and hopefully it'll provide a more valuable insight towards—well, it doesn't even matter. I don't need a label. So, the region pays for OW and I've been on it for almost nine years.*

These recurring stories of the effects of poverty on the human condition and lack of societal inclusion, palpably illustrate a deep sense of disconnection to everyday living. Some described visual arts as a way to cope, even survive in community, which will be highlighted further in this report. Others felt disassociated with society based on patterns of neglect from family and systems; one participant, Josh, illustrated how he survived day by day with what societal supports were available and how he moved through the system. These narrative snippets represent similar lived experiences of several participants interviewed.

Participants from Program B expressed critical issues of marginalization and stigma. At Program B, parents of (children/youth) Service Users were interviewed and they recounted narratives of how their children are stigmatized in society because of their learning disabilities or diagnoses. These critical narratives help to contextualize the barriers many individuals face, and how systemic barriers often strip the dignity and basic living needs from families and children, when unconscious bias and systemic discrimination are at play.

Hannah: *Well, you know, there's stigma attached to having a child with a disability—like straight up. It doesn't matter what car you drive or whatever. I mean I have been a married mom of abled children. Then I've been a single mom of children, and there's a stigma there. People treat me differently. A single mom of a child with a disability? Whoa! I just came down a great number of notches there. And I'm the same person. I'm the same everything but the way I'm treated is very different. Anyway, that stigma is there. And whether, you know, it's based on your income or not. You're lumped in there and you're parenting skills are scrutinized, your everything is discredited or dismissed. You know, who are you? If you have a kid that likes to act like a dinosaur, like whatever. Yeah, the stigma is there. It's a huge barrier.*

Sydney from Program B depicts one such experience, which took place in a school classroom where her elementary school son was a student:

Sydney: *So, umm, I came in one day to bring something to the school 'cause I volunteered regularly and they had him sitting in the corner. When I walked in I go, "Why are you sitting in the corner instead of in class with the rest of your class? Not eating your lunch?" And he goes, "Oh, well they wanted me to watch…"—like they had a Christmas tree up with gifts underneath—"Oh, they gave me the job of watching the gifts" or something. Like, she just wanted him removed from the situation. Even the principal just shook his head 'cause I used to volunteer alongside the principal at bingo. So that's when I said, "You know what? I don't think this is working." And it took about two years to bring him back again, to have some confidence level and, you know, not get rid of the insecurities.*

Such disheartening stories of classroom injustices were echoed by other parents of children, depicting the continued stigmatization of students with disabilities in systems, which should otherwise be safe spaces to learn. Jenny shares a story of her daughter's removal, which does little to ameliorate the compounding stigma that already exists for students with disabilities, from a school Co-op program based on learning discrimination and lack of parent support for a proper diagnosis:

Jenny: *Well, for instance like I've got a kid, which I feel has critical mental health as well as Autism, and to the point where it's impacted the family. Not been in school since December, they got kicked out of school but I've got the school board not wanting to take this kid back and they were in a Co-op. The school did not advocate that there was special needs, so they got kicked out of the Co-op because they couldn't provide supervision and they couldn't babysit—that was "the word"—they hoped that she would have been more independent by now. This is a kid that's got a one percentile IQ of 65 and umm, they present very well…you know, we talk about doctors. It takes years to get a diagnosis. There's very few doctors that will do a diagnosis and make this a child with needs…and there's your struggles.*

Literacy and School Programming

Each Service User participant group illuminated literacy challenges as they related to life function in and out of formal school settings, as well as school-related challenges experienced by their children, many of whom had learning disabilities. Experiences of challenging literacy acquisition were shared as they related to: verbal and oral communication; writing and reading comprehension and communication; school programming and inclusion.

i. Verbal/Oral Communication. At Program B, Lydia retells an experience stemming from her son's autism and central auditory processing disorder, which required his teachers to wear a microphone for her son's oral communication. Lydia's narrative is layered with behavioral assumptions made within schools when students have other underlying learning abilities:

Lydia: *My Autistic son has central auditory processing disorder. So, he's supposed to have like a—the teacher wears a mic. So, I ended up fighting with the school board… and the teachers sometimes will just feel, like, they talk loud enough. So then we'd have to keep going in and fighting with them 'cause he can't hear over the background noise...I think that the school system failed our children because they had behavioural issues before they were diagnosed…they missed out on the reading and the writing because he was always out of the classroom 'cause he was always misbehaving 'cause he couldn't understand everything…. till they finally got [him] diagnosed. Then [students] never get those building blocks to move up from.*

ii. Writing/Reading Communication. Many participants from Program B identified the crux of literacy acquisition as writing and reading, to progress through life in order to function successfully. Hannah, Sydney, and Jill share their frustrations with how their children have been learning to read and write in the school system. Hannah reflects on the importance of literacy acquisition; Sydney reflects on issues of health and disability as it relates to her son's inability to read or write; Jill considers other forms of communication and teaching with the use of technology, even when students are very young. Hannah's story is particularly poignant of how she reflected on the obligations of the school system to teach literacy, in regard to her Grade 8 son's literacy learning:

Hannah: *Literacy was a big focus for me. My frustration with school was there was no expectation (chuckles)…there wasn't even an attempt. There was no will. There was no structured programming. I still take him to Reading Gym every week. Again, I have benefits that can cover some of the costs of that but they don't cover the driving there. And if I'm not doing it every week at eighty dollars a pop… it doesn't happen*

at school. What does literacy mean? I don't know. What does it mean to the province? That's a different thing than what it might mean to me. And it's a very different thing—literacy for my older kids and what literacy will be for [my child]. So, what reading level is he at? Like, whoa! I don't even know if it measures. It's like at the bottom. Umm, you know, and the LLI he is lettered "this" or lettered "that" or whatever. So, he hasn't reached the point where his reading surpasses his cognition, you know? So, we're still trying to get to our ultimate goal would be a grade five level for literacy. That might be a bit lofty…So, you know that's a tricky thing to narrow down what literacy is but as a focus, but as a lifelong disability if you're illiterate—like that's an issue. That's a huge thing and I worry all the time about… a little bit less now actually… but I used to be really worried about the fact that he has this opportunity to learn it, and the window is closing, and now we're approaching grade eight and the school doesn't even want to try? Like? (Chuckles) We've never even like begun on any kind of a course where we had goals, long-term goals, for reaching certain levels in literacy. They just simply won't do it. They won't—like seriously. We had a human rights lawyer in last year and I was getting help from him. Like what language can I use to try to make them do this? So, like I don't know what the answer is to that but we're evolving what literacy will mean for [child]...It will mean being able to navigate with street signs and be able to maybe get through a recipe…mmm maybe (chuckles). I don't know.

Hannah's story is overwhelmingly profound, with her worry for her son's future as it applies to functioning in a world without being able to read or write, enough to solicit the aid of a human rights lawyer. She continues and shares her disappointment, in herself, and her guilt regarding her son's lack of attaining literacy acquisition, describing it as a life-long disability:

So, at this point, like, I feel I regret a lot of it. I blame myself for a lot of it but I feel like there was an ordinate amount of time wasted on really…ineffectual academic [programming]—they really didn't have a lot of academic programs. But [just] time spent at school without any benefit and that time took away from social opportunities that my other kids had at school and he'll never recover that. And he will never have that, you know? And so, now as he's reaching his teenage years. He's like thirteen this year. What did we achieve by the end of this, right? Do we want to put him in remedial reading and spend four hours a day? To what end? Like I know that I'm on my own with this. I know that I'm not going to make it happen at school even though he's there this number of hours a day. It's for sure an important thing and if he doesn't have a certain level of proficiency, I do see it as a life-long disability. What do you do? I don't know.

Sydney relays her perspective of literacy acquisition as it pertains to her son, who had the misfortune of a stroke, and had to re-learn how to read and write. She does not see a link between high- or low-income students and literacy acquisition; rather, she sees the systemic barrier as a matter of accessibility [in schools]:

Sydney: *I think it's a barrier if they don't have [literacy] because my son forgot how to read and write when he had his stroke. So, when I taught him how to read and write again, then it was opening a huge amount of accessibility to whatever he wants to do. If he wants to be an engineer, if he wants to be a doctor, if he wants to be a lawyer, whatever he wants. Whatever, it doesn't matter. You know, it just opens up. I think it's an accessibility issue. Doesn't have anything to do with, in regard to income, because it doesn't matter how poor or how rich you are—you basically get the same education, don't you? In the school environment, it doesn't matter if you're low-income or high-income.*

Jill shared her viewpoint on teacher expectations and goals for students in schools, as she described her son's context in JK/SK and his challenge with verbal communication/speech. She provides ideas for non-communicative students, including technology devices which she suggests schools should use and adapt:

Jill: *My son is only JK/SK but [the teacher] said they don't have expectations. Technically, they don't have to write the alphabet that little anymore. They don't have any expectations. She still does have expectations but yeah, like even if they send a book home or something. There's so many different ways to communicate too now.*

There's communicative devices…So, if a child can't necessarily read, you know, why not start them young with the communication device? Teach them, like you know? Adapt that into school…You know, some kids get laptops. There should be more ways that everyone can… Like they expect everyone to learn this way and that way, right? You're finding, "Oh, you have to wait until they get to this grade to get this test. Oh, you have to wait for this test. Oh, it's going to take four years to get a speech therapist again." It's like he needs the help now for speech therapy. Not five years from now.

        iii. School Programming and Inclusion. Participants at Program A and Program B shared experiences of inclusion challenges, mostly as it had to do with their children's learning disabilities, within school systems, childcare, and the health system, and how systemic barriers within these systems affect literacy acquisition.

        Lindsay, a participant at Program A shares her frustration with lack of funding for childcare rather than learning summer school "camp" programs, in the guise of summer school programming, where her own son would not feel safe to participate. She shares her story of living on low-income while trying to accommodate her son's needs in the summer months. Her son's experience of exclusion from mainstream programming and emotional well-being in the school environment, because of his disability, coupled with Lindsay's low-income salary, force her to quit her job to take care of him during the summer months:

Lindsay: *I would say more funding for childcare. Not necessarily for camps and stuff, but for actual babysitters. Cuz not every kid wants to go to camp. Like my son, he hates camps. He hates school, so why does he want to go to something that's like a school? He still has to sit there, he still has to be quiet until he's told he can talk, he still has to raise his hand. That's not what the summer is about! Summer is about sleeping in until whenever, getting up, playing your game or riding your bike or taking a pee without having to tell anybody, you know what I mean? Like, not every kid wants to do something like that, and not every kid is into that kind of activity. You know, like scheduled activities. Like, my son likes to randomly do things and that's just the way we've always been. So, you know, he just doesn't want to. He doesn't want to go back to school and do the daycare there. He's nine! So [funding] would be helpful, especially with minimum wage going up to 14 dollars an hour. Like, I was lucky where I had a young girl that was watching him for a little bit until she went to high school, like, just after school, and I was able to pay her only, like, five bucks an hour. But that's chinsy as hell if there's a babysitter actually trying to save some money. And I get it, you know, most people can pay them ten bucks an hour, but I just can't do that. I just can't. So it's hard to even get babysitters that will even be willing to work because I can't pay them enough. I couldn't afford to work plus pay a babysitter, so I had to quit.*

        Jenny, a participant Service User from Program B shares a compelling account of her four adopted children, all with learning challenges. Her narrative, directly related to issues of poverty and literacy acquisition, shares some agonizing details of what it means for her children to feel excluded in their school environment, bullying in school, and disregard for attending to the (dis)abilities of learners:

Jenny: *It's Central Auditory Processing Disorder. Then I've got my other one, [states child's name], and my daughter. We talk about literacy? She can't even write. She's grade six. When she brings up journaling I go, "what the heck am I paying six dollars for?" Because it's just drawn in, right? And the communication back and forth is so awful. With the CAPD for the auditory system, we had to fight. I actually paid six thousand dollars myself because we weren't getting them. And my kids' grades were just going down, down, down, down, down. And this is a kid going into high school not getting any help. So it is a struggle…And then about poverty—I had to give up work to look after four children. Three have got severe disabilities. We adopted them, we've grown with these disabilities, we didn't know what was presented—we'll put it that way. And it progressed, so we lost a huge income and we had to be on benefits for meals, because [salary] wasn't fully covered there for the CAPD. Then once we went into the school, [the school] gave her a great big box… that she had to lug around from class to class. She was being mocked at school, like "What? You're taking your boom box with you?" It was huge! And going up steps to the next level. So now I've got [another child's name]*

also, you know, with severe intellectual delays. Visually impaired and all this, and then the CAPD on top, we've just been told we don't know whether it's worth an investment because of her intellectual disability to provide that child with what we think may help her gain some education and learning because that is part of the struggle. She's not processing because of the noise, the background, and everything else. But because of her intellectual disability, is it worth it? And we really do not have another six thousand dollars to go and pay for another system.

Jenny's narrative delves deeper into systemic barriers, such as inclusion challenges in schools, as it relates particularly to her daughter:

So, inclusion in schools. I'll give you a couple of examples. My daughter, for the last two years, has not been allowed to do the end-of-school trips because they can't manage her needs—her additional needs. So, you know, you've got a kid that is somewhat aware but can't go on these trips. She has a medical condition on top of her other things where she can't regulate her body temperature, so she has to wear a cooling vest and all this. Well, last year's trip was eleven hours in Toronto at a baseball game. So, she wouldn't have managed that. But I offered. I said, "Well, can we go probably with grade three/four to the butterfly [museum]?" "No, 'cause she's not in that age group." They didn't even try and accommodate her. So, this year's the same. They can't accommodate her.

Jenny continues:

So, like, it's that inclusion with school and I think. I know with my son as well, he really struggles when there's a relief teacher that comes in. He can't manage any change whatsoever. So, what they do with him is kick him out. Have him walk in the hallway with an EA or I'll get a call, "Can you come pick him up?" And we just had a meeting at school last week with the principal and I said, "I can't keep picking him up. I have a life as well. And then I've got the other one, of course, that's with me 24/7 since December. Like I can't." So, we've now agreed that we've got to learn…not just him, but the teachers have got to manage him. Give him a heads up. " [Child's name] you won't have your teacher today." That's all it takes. Give him a heads up before he walks in there and sees a stranger looking at him. And then, my poor kid has got another medical issue where he has to go pee every hour and a half. He has a problem with his bladder, right? So, when it's a new teacher, that's not relayed to the teacher. The teacher refuses him to go to the bathroom and that's when he has his meltdowns and then it's like a horrible vicious cycle. But the inclusion, whether it's, you know, the schools not accommodating for trips, and everything like that. It's constant battle. Constant battle.

Sierra from Program B, discloses an abhorrent detail of an exclusion incident that occurred in her son's school, which ultimately led her to seek agency/counselling service, for her son:

Sierra: *I just wanted to say that when I had my son in a Catholic school, umm, they were locking him in a closet by himself.*

iv. Work-Related Accessibility Needs/Challenges. Additional needs and challenges that Service Users articulated in all participant groups were related to work and accessibility, even as it related to the service they were receiving from agencies. Many factors that led to these challenges were linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, adult disability, skill set and administrative knowledge, and lack of resources for some participants, in particular in one of the service agencies (Program D), where funding was stripped from a main source of well-being.

Participants from Program A, Program B, and Program E, all referenced challenges as they were connected to finding and retaining employment. Hannah shared how her social anxiety affected her fast-paced work at McDonalds, despite her completion of a certificate degree from Niagara College; Lindsay shared her

frustration with filling out an application, which led to her deciding to either give up the will to follow through on obtaining employment, or seek assistance from her service agency; Josh, Julie, and Alice all three shared their dismay when accessibility to a service was closed down.

Hannah: *My name's Hannah. I get emotional, um, cuz I suffer social anxiety. I applied for a job at [this agency] after applying at McDonalds and being told it was too fast paced, even though that company would advertise that "we help people with disabilities, we help the elderly. We hire these people." They wouldn't hire me... I have an Accountancy Assistance Certificate from Niagara College with a grade eight education. But I didn't get my high school[degree] until I was in my fifties. And it took me a year and a half, and it was a year and a half of every day crying and running out of the classroom. It was--it was horrendous. But I passed. Like, I passed all my classes with high eighties, low nineties, high nineties. It was hard but it's each individual person has to persevere and get through that anxiety attack. It's fight or flight, and I did a lot of flight.*

Lindsay: *I tried to apply at [a pet store]. I thought I was going to try to go through to get trained for being a groomer, cuz they'll train you, and I love animals so I'm like, "why not? I'll work with dogs. Screw people, I'll work with dogs!" Right? But, oh my god, the process of freaking trying to apply to that thing was insane! I tried three times and I still couldn't fit my resume through there. Oh, you gotta click on it and it says, "apply now." You hit "apply now" and then all of a sudden it pops you to this other screen, and you gotta fill in all this information and then it doesn't go through right. Oh my gosh. I was like, "okay, so that's not gonna happen." (laughs) Like, oh my god.*

At Program D, three participants shared their disappointment when the visual arts space (the garage space that was funded) shut down, which had become their life-line to well-being and community inclusion:

Josh: *Well, since the garage has closed and has gone it's been, for a lack of a better explanation, it's fallen apart.*

Julie: *We're alone and doing this.*

Alice: *And I can say for myself that since it's been closed I have went back into my isolation, you know, because I love coming here. I love the people here but I was more comfortable [at the garage]. Like, it is quite loud here sometimes for me. And so, that was so much better for me. And plus it was accessible.*

(2) Perceptions of Success to Support Literacy

All three participant groups in this study (Service Users, Leads, Staff) discussed their perceptions of success to support literacy, linked to the delivery of programs by agencies. This portion of the research garnered ample qualitative and narrative data, supporting the positive effects of NPI funded programs that were directly related to successful literacy acquisition, literacy knowledge and literacy capacity. Furthermore, it was reported that successful literacy programming contributed significantly to Service Users' advocacy skills, opportunity for employment or post-secondary education, inclusion and daily living in their communities, and to overall health and well-being.

Literacy: Verbal, Oral, Writing, Reading, and Emergent Literacies

Service Users at Program C and Program E shared stories directly related to literacy acquisition and successes they attributed to the programs offered by the agencies. Andrea described her son's ADHD at length and his enrolment of therapy and emergent literacy programming at Program C. She has perceived large gains in her son's progress, describing the way in which emergent literacy skills have helped her son understand the

world at large and how the literacy skills learned at Program C have helped him learn to orally and verbally communicate:

Andrea: *I really love that—understanding the world, and learning to communicate properly, and how to communicate properly in different scenarios…Just right now, how he came up and put his hand on my arm instead of, "Mom!" That's something I'm trying to work on… Umm, when he would interrupt I would stop him, and grab his hand, and put it on my leg. And then when I was done with my conversation I would turn to him and explain what I did and why. "This is how you get mommy's attention instead of yelling at me" (laughs)…we're still working on that. I'm still working on it.*

At Program E, Hannah relates a story of adult literacy reading acquisition, and how women help women to learn basic reading. Hannah shares a compelling narrative of how she has witnessed a Service Provider help other women read, and how Hannah herself has assisted in daily tasks such as helping other women read the lunch board, so they know what is on the day's menu, or purchasing books for her women peers. The importance of books and reading, which leads to oral and verbal communication, within a safe women's community is shared by Hannah:

Hannah: *I know for just basic reading, [Bella] comes in and will help you read. [Bella], she comes in and she helps people read. We've watched a couple women go from non-readers, literally illiterate women, and one's graduated up to grade three--and you know what? For her, that was amazing. She never thought she could read a thing. Now when she asks what's for lunch, I look at her and say, "read the board." …And it's good because I bought her a book that was at her grade level and she loved it…And it was just that little thing I did, not knowing that I gave her the encouragement she needed. So even, like, Chelsea could say something to Vivian, and it would make the end of her day the best, and not know she had done it. Nancy comes in and she says "hi" to me all the time and gives me hugs, and doesn't know I might have needed that hug. You know?*

Agency Lead Coordinators and Service Providers also shared their program successes, related to literacy skills, acquisition, and knowledge. Laura, the Lead at Program C, has been a literacy advocate for many years and has focussed the agency program at Program C on emergent literacy, and speech and language. She described partnerships with Brock, as well as academic publications that helped support the agency's Summer Literacy Program, which was funded prior by Trillium, before being funded by NPI for a number of years:

Laura: *So, we had about four or five publications on it and we did a couple of different studies with it but three of them were based on the Summer Literacy Program. So, we had statistically significant results because we kept a control group. We had so many referrals that we compared the sixteen children that were in the program to sixteen children that never received the program…and brought all thirty-two back the year after. And, a year later, the kids that were in our program still maintained those gains. Their performance was statistically significant and better than the control group. And so, we have the proof to show that this program works and the benefit for those kids who are in low income…that they are most at risk for the summer learning gap. …I mean literacy is everything around us… But that's the first thing—is really just making people aware of the importance of emergent literacy It's the stuff that happens before so that…they're better able to develop literacy skills when they get to school. So, phonological awareness, or letter recognition, letter sound correspondence. If you're doing a literacy project there should be some literacy measures as opposed to just the surveys of whether or not they enjoyed the program or not.*

The highly trained (speech pathologists, communicative disorder assistants, early childhood and literacy educators) Support Staff make up the literacy team at Program C. Bianca, Lucy, and Danielle echoed emergent literacy successes based on detailed and planned programming, which catered to low-income families whose children experienced language challenges and learning needs.

Lucy: *We're giving them the skills and confidence that they're going to need. Even providing those skills to the parents, not necessarily just for the children, but we're supporting the unit. We're giving the parents the education, and the confidence, and some knowledge for themselves. And also so that they can translate it to their children, so it's a long-term trajectory.*

Danielle: *A team of us went into the schools. And so, we could quickly see, "Okay. Do we have a lot of kids that are having difficulty with phonological awareness? Overall awareness of what a word or a letter is? Where is the break down happening for these children?" And then from that group of children, you know, we were able to say, "Okay. What kind of activities should we target?" But we also were looking at severity as well, like, how we were trying to have a mix of children who, you know…based on how poorly they did on these assessments, we prioritized the children for the program and offered them spots. And then from how they did on the assessments, we made sure we had activities to target those different areas for the children.*

Lucy: *Our activities were very very hands-on. So, we would have a scavenger hunt where they would have to identify environmental footprint. They'd take their little magnifying glasses, they got their little clipboards and pens, and they're walking around the room and discovering where they can find the signs. So, there's a lot of interaction with the facilitators of that particular programs... So, first, middle, last—they had to put things in order.*

Lucy: *Every year, we kind of geared based on the children's age and interests for sure.*

Bianca: *But always based on what we've identified as the learning blocks of literacy, right?*

Lucy: *Alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, sound play, book skills—even if they enjoyed books.*

Bianca: *And narratives, oral language.*

All three literacy specialists shared their expertise and team work, which helped the program function to the best of its ability. They emphasized their commitment to families in need, often providing resources to families, such as picture books, and partnering with local doctor clinics:

Bianca: *And it really has been a priority, I think, for [Program C] to have a focus on emergent literacy skills in our therapy sessions. We offer, as I said, Lucy is incredible at getting out into the community, and so is Danielle in the French speaking community, and sharing this message with as many people as we can. We have a spin off where we go into doctor offices and we have been providing free books for them for when children come in for their eighteen-month well baby visit. Doctors ask about some of the foundational skills for emergent literacy. The kids are provided with a book but more than just, "Oh, here's a book for being a good boy and girl." The doctor is having a conversation with parents about the importance of shared booking reading, and emergent literacy, and how impactful it can be. And that you as a parent can make the difference! Don't wait, right?*

Lucy: *And we provided them with books to take home as well…So, everybody got a book based on how weak or what that focus [is]…So, every book was either focused on alphabet knowledge or phonological awareness. And they had all the take-home, so they had little packages of crayons, scissors, and markers, and activities that they could actually carry over whatever they did that day.*

The literacy team at Program C also focuses on family/parent needs, including hands-on literacy strategies for parents on how to read with their children:

Bianca: *And then at circle time [we] model the book reading and the parents would come and they would watch, right? So, we had talked about how to read a book and then they would come and join Lucy, and*

Danielle, and [other staff member]. And they would actually be using the strategies that we had talked about with the book that they were now going to take home that they were reading. So, it was all very effective... We would do hands-on with the parents and we would follow the themes that they were doing. So, if it was print awareness we would discuss that topic, and why it was important, and introduce parents to the idea. And then we would make a menu! We would say, "Okay. So, let's…" –because pretend play would be critical—"You could pretend play in a restaurant. So, let's make a menu of your child's favourite things" but then the parents would go and do it for the last little bit with their children. So, we would kind of brainstorm what that would look like. They'd start the activity and then they would go and complete it after they had done some intensive [learning] with Lucy.

Lucy*: I'd like to think long-term for sure. Yeah. We're giving them the skills and confidence that they're going to need. Even providing those skills to the parents, not necessarily just for the children, but we're supporting the unit. We're giving the parents the education, and the confidence, and some knowledge for themselves. And also so that they can translate it to their children, so it's a long-term trajectory.*

Bianca: And empower parents, right? I think sometimes families living in poverty feel like they don't have a lot of control over outcomes, right?

At Program H, the Lead Coordinator, Cristina, coordinates an ESL program for adults. She prides herself in the program's focus, not only on Canadian culture, but also language acquisition and life skills. This is predominately due to: the complexity of immigration; the complexity and lack of literacy skills in Service Users' home language; and, the lack of English literacy knowledge. Cristina relies heavily, therefore, on making the ESL program an individual education plan for each student:

Cristina: *Okay. So the centre has a busting literacy program, which means that we have lots of people who come to Canada that have zero English skills and they lack—I mean it's not an official diagnosis— but they lack literacy in their own language as well.*

At Program B, the Lead Coordinator, Donna, explains how the homework clubs work with high school students to achieve literacy and numeracy skills, while at the same time engaging youth with daily life skills, such as cooking classes:

Donna: *We do offer homework clubs where kids come here after school. We help them with their homework… We've had the cooking classes [too]. Actually, one of the young people caught me yesterday and said, "when are you gonna start that again?"… that's a very expensive program because NPI even paid for the food. So, between the food and having the staff run it… And all kids love [the homework club] and they love cooking. They really learn, like I mean, you have to learn how to measure everything, right? And they come in and work on reading, and writing, and phonics…math. We had one young lady [Service Provider] who is in university, who was working with a high school student, who was failing miserably in math…She was able to get the girl to, you know, make it through and actually pass her math.*

Service Providers Jennifer, Sarah, Monica, and Nicole at Program B shared their views of what literacy means to them as it applies to their programming. They contextualized world applications in how: literacy knowledge helps avoid isolation; literacy assists Service Users with social skills and relationships; literacy helps with abstract communication and articulation of meaningful concepts, such as mathematical fractions:

Jennifer: *For me, literacy is connection to…Connection to everything... people, your relationships, the world around you.*

Monica: *I would almost say social skills and just the relationships that people can build.*

Sarah: *I think [literacy] does impact every aspect of a person's life. It truly does. As well as taking those skills and transferring them to school, to home, to work, into relationships…it impacts on everything.*

Nicole: *I'll say that literacy would be communication and learning.*

Jennifer: *I ran the Lego Club afterschool and without the funding we wouldn't have had the Lego Club—plain and simple…We taught a lot of fractions to the kids because, in that age group, they're just learning it at school… you know, what a quarter was, what a half was. How do you know it's a whole? So we used the Lego bricks. And we said, you know, "Here's one with four dots. That's a whole. Here's one with three, that's three quarters…and half, and a quarter."*

Jon, a Service Provider at Program F, shares a favourite story of literacy success by a Service User who felt safe enough at Program F to discreetly disclose that she was experiencing reading difficulty, which prevented success in every subject matter at school:

Jon: *Um, one of my favourite success stories is--we had a girl who had been coming for years who finally confided in our programmers that she couldn't read. And she'd never been able to tell any of her teachers that. She couldn't tell her parents that. She was incredibly embarrassed because she was at that point in grade seven almost, and she had a very, very hard time reading. It was really affecting her school work. She was afraid of failing and our programmer worked with her every day just reading little bits here and there. Finding, um, not just things to read, but things that she was interested in reading. You know, trying to engage on that level. And now she's an assistant manager.*

At Program E, Lead Coordinator Yasmine speaks candidly about illiteracy and how the programming overcame some obstacles for Service Users by attending to specific ways of learning. For example, at Program E, a Montessori reading program was implemented for adult women:

Yasmine: *We have a teacher from [school]. We tried the literacy program from the [city] program. We tried that for two years, and the women learned to read but it took forever. And they felt that, um, it was very monotonous. So then, um, we went to a Montessori way of learning. So we have a teacher that teaches Montessori reading, and we have two ladies, [name] and [name] who neither one could at all. Didn't even know the alphabet. If I showed them a letter and said, "what letter is that?" No idea. And both of them can read well enough now to, like… They read in church! They read the Bible… Pretty amazing….But it's so interesting, eh? How you just have to find the right way to teach somebody.*

Yasmine and co-worker Service Provider Danny, also shared the importance and success of oral literacy in their programming:

Yasmine: *Like, even…sitting around the table and playing Monopoly. It's, like, no big deal. We're just playing Monopoly, right? But for that other person who lives alone and no one ever visits, she's over the moon about the fact that she's playing a board game …To me…it's what meaningful interaction is.*

Danny: *If you want social [oral] communication, just having to help with that one meal everyone's required to help with, forces them to talk …who's gonna do what prep and stuff like that.*

Literacy: Financial, Numeracy Skills

Participants highlighted the vital necessity of literacy skills they applied to numeracy and financial knowledge. At Program B, Sydney spoke about her son's accomplishments as a Service User, which helped him

gain apprenticeship opportunities, and credits the Lead person of Program B for seeking such skill set opportunities for her son. While Drew, as Coordinator at Program F, detailed the significance of money management in their programming, declaring it the most critical component of their programming for youth Service Users. Money management was seen as a critical form of literacy for successful budgeting, required beyond post-secondary education for Service Users:

Sydney: *So, [her son] was paid for the program. It gets even better. He was paid like twelve to fourteen dollars an hour to be in the program. And I'm like, "How can you say no to that?" You just have to be there, and listen, and be polite. And take the class. So, I told him to take every class they give you. Don't turn anything down. So, they also taught him carpentry measurements and carpentry mathematics. Now the reason I bring this up, and I'm sorry for rambling, but I really don't want to pass this chance up to say how great this place is because they work in tandem, I think, with Port Cares. So whatever programs they might not have, they have a little bit of communication with Port Cares. So, the only reason I found out about it is because of Donna.*

Drew: *We teach our kids the importance of, "Okay, when you finish high school, you are most likely going to go on to college or university and you're gonna be on your own, and this is how much toilet paper costs. This is how much rent costs. This is how you can save money." So we actually do have a big focus of teaching kids about life skills and how to prepare themselves for it. So money management is 100 percent part of our programming. And we physically will take them to the grocery store and say, "You have a hundred dollars. You need to make this last all week long and you are just starting out. How do you do it?" We teach them how to look for sales… We teach them how to look for coupons. We teach them how to look online to get coupons. So we're absolutely teaching our kids financial literacy. That's a very big part of our program because we do have high school kids moving on, right? That's the success of our program, is based on those kids moving on. So, yeah. That's 100 percent part of our programming….It gives them an opportunity to compete…without these opportunities, they would be missed throughout the system. They'd get missed…So this program is extremely valuable for those kids.*

Literacy: Visual Arts as a Mode of Literacy

Arts-based literacy at Program D was reported as a predominant program for the motivation and expression of Service Users. Visual arts experiences became 'the glue' that brought Service Users together in community. Many Service Users incorporated their visual arts abilities into job opportunities that had originated directly from the arts program. Although visual arts at Program D is highlighted significantly in section #3 entitled Community, Belonging, and Social Capital, we focus on visual arts in this section as a form, or mode, of literacy and literacy expression.

Dawn, the Coordinator of Program D, believed in the arts as a way to "help people find jobs, set goals, stay with their planning, whatever they've done." The Service Users from Program D held tight to their visual arts program not only as a sense and way of living in community with others, but also as a viable opportunity for some to also sell their art pieces, for financial assistance. The previous section #1, we may recall, cites the disappointment of Service Users at Program D, when funding is stripped of the visual arts program. The sense of safety and community, as it pertained in this case, to the visual arts programming when the garage site (where the program took place, and where the space for community was located) was shut down, was a sudden blow to Program D and the NPI arts-based funded program. Service Providers, Carmen and Alexia, share their insights on how successful the visual arts NPI supported program was to the center. Carmen describes how a specific arts-based program at Program D began:

Carmen: *And when we had the art garage, folks would complete things there and then they could sell it in the shop. So, that would be the obvious direct link to employment or to income increase. But just going back to my example…so, when I was working in the employment piece before moving over to the art garage, there was one*

gentleman who we tried to place. Like we tried to help him get traditional employment and it was not working. Like it wasn't working but he doodled on napkins. It was like tissues. And he would draw houses and we saw this, and spoke with him, and then sort of morphed this into like… "Why don't we try and sell these pieces?" "We'll give you all your materials." And then he would just draw, and draw, and draw. Fast forward a couple years later, like, he got really involved with the [arts-based] program and he's got canvases. He's moved to colour…And it was his! He sells his pieces all the time and his language, how he talks about his art, is a completely new skill….And I think being in that environment, being in the [arts-based program] garage, surrounded by other folks who were creating at the same time—and then connecting with the community through the art shows, that kind of stuff. And now he's like doing pieces that are huge, and selling them, and framing them. Yeah. How he talks through each piece and gives it a story. It's pretty impressive.

Alexia describes further the success of the arts-based program:

Alexia: *So we had markers, and we had paints, and we had everything. And everybody who came in for this thing was just encouraged to take part in it. The regional people were here 'cause it was part of, you know, showing off how different agencies were supported. And they went by and I heard this guy say, "This is our program!" He was so proud of it, you know? And then we just handed them markers and said, "Go to it!" Yes. Put your mark on it! So, it was inclusive…It's there to lift humanity. And that's what I believe is that the arts, literacy, all these things come together.*

Trying to recuperate the agency's arts-based program was the undeniable living narrative that was shared by all three participant groups at Program D when the research team interviewed everyone. Voices were heard loudly at the misfortune of the NPI fund cuts just announced before our research team came to conduct the interviews, coupled with the sudden closing of the treasured visual arts garage space. Visual arts as a life-line literacy mode of expression and skill set, both transcended the community it formed, the inclusivity that was evidenced, and the skill set that offered hope for success for community members. It was considered as a success literacy story. This narrative undoubtedly requires a spotlight and further attention on how funding is valued. In the case of Program D, funding was seen as a necessity for the lifeline of continued successful programming, and for the ultimate success of the community as well as the life skills for Service Users. Carmen depicts the success nicely:

Carmen: *So, although the [arts-based] program had wonderful connections with the community, you know, showing at the NAC. Showing at City Hall, Rodman Hall, all of these beautiful places downtown. And that was great and it was such a celebration with the folks that were part of it. The way I saw [arts-based program], too, was in the neighbourhood and I thought it was such an important piece to be in this neighbourhood because the folks are from this neighbourhood. I loved that community members were coming to the Queenston neighbourhood to see the art.*

Literacy: Career and Opportunity

When participants were asked about literacy success and literacy application for Service Users, many Service Users, Leads, and Service Providers provided evidence of career and life opportunities that manifested directly from the literacy funded programs. At Program E, Vivian, Mariana and Hannah expressed how they came to appreciate the program services that led them to the literacy knowledge and intricacies related to career opportunities like resume writing, website searches, oral language skills, computer knowledge, skills certificates:

Vivian: *…translating and filling out forms online properly, and so it's nice to have someone who can sit there and say, "here, we can go through this together." You know? And they don't just do it for you. They make sure you're aware of how it's done so that you have that skill to take with you. It's not like, "hey, I need help."*

"Okay, let me do this for you." It's, "alright, let's sit down together, figure out what it is that you're not comfortable with, change that, and then next time you need to photocopy or whatever, you're gonna be like, 'can I use the photocopier?' And you're gonna do it by yourself." And it's just that simple asking for help for such a small task that gives you that skill to bring with you for whatever it may be in your future. So, like, there's not one thing here that isn't helpful. It's an amazing, amazing tree of resources. And everyone, I think, just--just reaps the fruit benefits, right? We all need help. We all need help, and it's incredible that we have something so accessible. Cuz not a lot of women have this, especially all over the world. Like, we're very lucky.

Mariana: *You go on our webpage and [staff member] has listings of job after job after job that you can apply for. And she'll get you on the computer and help you do your resume. She'll help you learn how to use the computer to send your resume off. It's like a teaching resource without being a school.*

Vivian: *Yeah. It's these stepping stones to go for it and do whatever it is that you want to acquire. It's--not everybody has a computer. Not everybody has the skills to write a proper resume these days, and it's all technical and online applications.*

Hannah: *...the Y presented ...an eight week, nine week program. They got their Smart Serve. They got their Food Handlers course. They got their CPR, and their First Aid Certificate or something like that. They got four or five certificates if they completed the course. Well, one of our women--well, actually, two of the women--one is now a breakfast cook here and the other one works at, ah, [fast food chain].*

The Lead and Staff at Program E echo their Service Users' sentiments when it came to real-world literacy application skills. Yasmine and Danny share how they make sure to provide safety for the women, and to offer them the best opportunities possible, even when they are living in homelessness:

Yasmine: *We have these survival bags, where we put, like, a little bit of everything that you would need if you slept on the street. We put them all together, and we have a little booklet in there that's got phone numbers, stuff like that you might need, and we give it to them when they're on the street. Say, "here, you need this bag, this stuff, to help you." And they're like, "what's in here?" Like, everything you could think of. There's a pair of sock, there's a towel, there's a water bottle, there's some snacks.*

Danny: *A can opener.*

Yasmine: *A can opener cuz you get canned food from Community Care that you can't open. All these little bits and things that you could use. Bandages, whatever. All in this bag. A bar of soap. All in this bag and you go, "okay, I can take care of myself." Like, if you choose to sleep on the street, that's fine, I get it. But let's make sure you're okay. You know, so it's so interesting to me that we don't—sometimes people see a homeless person and they don't see a person. They just see a problem.*

At Program B, Sydney, the parent of an autistic son who is a Service User, is very grateful for the opportunity that the programming at Program B has offered her son, and how it has built family resilience. She retells this lived experience:

Sydney: *I think the worst thing I saw my son dealing with on a mental basis, like on an emotional basis, where I had to take his door off of his room because he wouldn't come out of his room. He's not a violent or an aggressive individual but he was so isolated, he just felt so immensely isolated. And us as a family, I felt that. And I'm not Autistic. I'm not Aspergers or OCD. And if I felt that, like it was magnified with him. That was probably the worst thing for years and years and years of that—and then coming here, and just the acceptance. I don't know. I was really angry when I came here because I was ready to fight for him and advocate for him.*

And you can leave that at the door (chuckles). You don't have to do that when you walk in here. It was like winning a million-dollar lottery.

Program B Service Providers, Monica, Sarah, Nicole and Jennifer take pride in the opportunities the program offers their children and youth Service Users:

Jennifer: *I think for our programs you really have to work it into whatever it is you're doing 'cause kids are at school for six hours.*

Sarah: *Yeah, they don't want to come here and write.*

Jennifer: *Like writing a recipe to take home.*

Sarah: *That's identifiable to them. That's their own personal identity and I don't think it's focused on enough.*

Sarah: *Employment [opportunities].*

Sarah: *For almost all the kids that I worked with, I would say that did not happen at home. They weren't given that opportunity to be proud of themselves and what they've accomplished, and especially… I understand some parents, you know, it's dangerous in the kitchen. "You can't be around knives. You can't be around stoves." You don't have the ability to be able to be around those things. But here, in a controlled area with a smaller number, being able to learn knife skills, learn cooking skills, read a recipe or even if they can't read the recipe, to know that, you know, "this is how I crack an egg and this is how I fill a cup with water. This is how I do that." It was just amazing to see how well they responded to having some responsibilities in the kitchen.*

At Program F, Program Lead Drew and Service Provider Jon express the ultimate value of their programming for youth and the literacy skill sets and opportunities for writing university applications, job applications, and how to approach job interviews.

Drew: *Certain times a year, it's college application, university application time. Um, a big focus of our program also is offering them volunteer opportunities, so they have something to put on their resumes and their applications. So when we run events, we ask our kids to help. So we partner with Salvation Army, we cook for 60 families once a month--those kids are in the kitchen cooking. We, uh, volunteer with Special Olympics. We do that right until the Olympics, and these kids get to put that on their application… Okay, so, ah, most recently, last summer, we had a devastating situation where we had two girls that got kicked out of their house and it was severe, severe neglect. Ah, and they were living in a treehouse. So by the time they actually approached me and told me about it, we immediately got them into, um, the RAFT. So they had proper shelter. We immediately got them into job training. We put them into contact with the [employment agency] here in [town] and they're both working now, and they managed to finish school.*

Jon: I *mean, when you're 16, you're applying to Tim Hortons. You don't have anything to put on a resume… Right? So what we're getting them is volunteer opportunities, just showing that they're capable of doing things which a 16 year old is not gonna think about… We'll do mock interviews with them. Some of them--we even help them figure out how to dress, because they may not have nicer clothes for an interview. So we work together with them, make sure that they're, you know, presentable, that they know how to behave in an interview. So--and it really has an effect. A lot of these kids wind up getting jobs.*

Jon makes evident how their program fills the gap between literacy as school curriculum, versus literacy as practical skills for living, for opportunity, and for goal-oriented success:

Jon: *I also think we supplement quite well in terms of, um--and I saw this a lot, you know, going into my Education program--practical skills. Schools, ah, again, don't have the time or resources to teach practical skills... But it's these things that we feel, you know--it's really important for these kids to know how to do that, that aren't being taught in schools. So we're trying to fill that gap in.*

At Program C, Service Providers Bianca, Danielle, and Lucy share how literacy is interconnected to 'everything' like health, nutrition and education for life:

Bianca: *Well, I always…something I think a lot about, and I think all of us do, everything is interconnected. Right? You can't work in silos. Like housing is connected to literacy, is connected to health, is connected to food and nutrition, and is connected to education. It's not like, "Let's target this!" And I don't know that people making decisions always see that. Right?*

For Danielle, she sees the teaching of literacy skills as an opportunity to be in relationship with the world and other peers:

Danielle: *I think for the kids as well, like, you're asking for benefits? I think this type of activity, you know, I do it one-on-one with children sometimes. We're going to do a scavenger hunt for things that start with "mmm" in the room, you know? And that can be really difficult for some of these children that we're seeing. So, to do it with peers, you know, they're getting not only that practice for those emergent literacy skills but they're doing it with other children. They're seeing it being fun, you know, other children are modeling it for them. They're having a chance to model for other children, like, there's…well, not to say that there weren't any behaviours like this and that (laughs) 'cause you got a bunch of four and five/six year olds. But it's also beneficial for them to have that learning in that environment. But I think the biggest takeaway, even with the parent piece, that's the carryover. That's really where, you know?*

For Lucy, she details literacy a 'long-term' skill for a life of confidence, and strong connection to familial and societal benefits:

Lucy: *I'd like to think long-term for sure. Yeah. We're giving them the skills and confidence that they're going to need. Even providing those skills to the parents, not necessarily just for the children, but we're supporting the unit. We're giving the parents the education, and the confidence, and some knowledge for themselves. And also so that they can translate it to their children, so it's a long-term trajectory.*

Evidenced in this data is literacy acquisition and knowledge tied directly to how community ties and belonging manifest. The next section Community, Belonging and Social Capital will provide further data into the importance of literacy as a positive form of "reading the world" in order to belong in community, and build social capital.

(3) Community, Belonging and Social Capital

In addition to literacy in any strictly defined sense, Service Users derived a number of other benefits from their participation in these Niagara Region support programs. Notably, such programs gave Service Users the opportunity to experience a sense of community and inclusion as well as build social capital that elevated their confidence and better positioned them to engage with the wider community and achieve personal goals. This is invaluable for people who, owing to intersections of social class, mental health challenges, addiction issues, geographic location, and/or immigrant status, often find themselves marginalized and lacking meaningful and productive networks of support.

Support Programs as Sites of Inclusion, Affirmation, and the Cultivation of Community Cultural Wealth

Support programs are settings where Service Users can cultivate rewarding, affirming, supportive, and collaborative relationships with Staff as well fellow program participants. In one of our focus groups, Alexia and Carmen, two front-line workers at Program D, spoke of how their program offered Service Users the opportunity to build social connections and, through collaboration and mutual support, realize untapped potential, particularly that pertaining to participants' artistic aptitudes:

Alexia*: I think, anybody is exposed to arts or in any way, shape, or form where you're being lifted up—and people worked together to lift each other up—What do they say? They don't have the arts so you can have more professional artists or performers. It's there to lift humanity. And that's what I believe is that the arts, literacy, all these things come together.*

Carmen*: You get to see, like, the skills and the talents that are in the community already. You know? Like that you wouldn't have really known that were there. So, you have folks who were dancers for twenty years and want to teach a class. Or you have ladies who maybe made costumes back in the day or had employment. Whatever it might be. Or quilters. Like the amount of skills that would come out of folks that you didn't know were there.*

When Carmen talks about "skills and the talents that are in the community already", she invokes scholar Tara Yosso's (2005) concept of 'community cultural wealth', which refers to strengths, assets, talents, and sources of perseverance that marginalized individuals foster within their families and communities that often go unrecognized, or are undervalued, within the wider dominant society. Support programs such as Program D provide a space, resources, and networks of support that enable Service Users to nurture those assets. Dawn, a Lead at Program D, notes the tendency of the wider community to pathologize the program's catchment area while largely ignoring the positive elements that her program aims to cultivate:

... what is this neighbourhood seen as? This neighbourhood is seen as poverty, addictions, prostitution. Let's lift this up a bit because if people in our neighbourhood, they have creativity, they have imagination, they need places to talk. So, if it was around the arts we'd have some focus.

Julie, a Service User at Program D, explained the role the program, and one Staff member in particular, played in supporting the artistic endeavors of program participants:

Julie*: Yeah, you get positive feedback and encouragement. And Steven's real talent, besides his art, is creating opportunities for each of the artists. So, getting them involved in the art battle and out displaying their works. You know? And like, that's all I gotta say. Yeah. (To Alice) Like you're a great coach!*

Drew, a Service Lead at Program F, echoes this theme when she trumpets her program's commitment to cultivating and nurturing the talents and assets that young program participants bring to the program:

Drew*: So, um, this is just one example that's popped into my head. Every one of our kids has something, okay? And we find that something and we capitalize on it. So, if you look over there, we have musical instruments, okay? So, we have singers. We have musicians. We have songwriters. We have poets. We have artists. So our Christmas card is just one example of how we make sure we find that talent in each one of our youths and we showcase it. So we have a competition every year between all two of my centres now that, ah, whoever wants to be the feature of our Christmas card, and that's what goes out to all of the community. And this is just one example of how we showcase each talent that every--cuz every kid's got something. Every kid has something that is special. That they do better than others at.*

Perhaps the most vital and rewarding aspect of participation in the eight programs studied is the sense of community and inclusion Service Users experienced. Indeed, in most cases, these programs provided Service Users with a sense of belonging and ongoing opportunities to socialize and build connections within the context of safe and supportive settings. This countered the isolation and marginalization that previously, or ordinarily, marked the lives of many program participants. Carmen, a front-line worker at Program D, likens her organization to a supportive family:

I think the main reason for me is that it's a sense of community unlike anything else I've ever felt in the Niagara Region. And I've worked and lived downtown for, oh my gosh, many many years! I've always been part of downtown. I even consider elementary school, [name of elementary school], is right there. So, it's definitely a sense of community and folks look out for each other here. And personally, somehow, I find it very hard for people to gather. And I find the hub of the drop-in centre is just this gathering place for folks. And it becomes a family. Everybody is extremely supportive of one another. And if you go places now, everybody is always on their phones and very isolated. That doesn't happen up there [motions to the first level of the Program D building by pointing her finger towards the ceiling]. It's bingo, like you see today. It's card games, it's chess, it's just sitting down having coffee, and chatting. It's knitting and sewing. It's just a wonderful community.

Service User Oden highlights how, in his experience, Program D's organizational culture lives up to its "policy of acceptance and tolerance." He draws attention to the program's openness in accepting and welcoming a diverse array of people and creating an environment where individuals are free to pursue their individual interests and goals. "So like, there's so many varieties of people," observed Oden, "and, like, nobody has to say, 'you can't do this here; you can't do that; you have to be like this to come here'. You know, basically, everybody is their own self." Alice, another Program D Service User, spoke of how taking part in the program and becoming part of a community affected her life in a positive way: "…I was always doing art in my apartment 'cause I live on [name of street] in Niagara Housing and I was very alone—isolated. And it was through this program that I totally got out of isolation and out of depression."

Support Programs as Sites of Mutual Aid

A theme that reverberated throughout Service Users' narratives was the characterization of these programs as sites of mutual aid. Indeed, within these programs, the various forms of support Service Users received from each other seemed as important as that provided by trained Staff and volunteers, if not more so. One of the focus groups conducted as part of this study consisted of parents of kids with intellectual disabilities. Through Program B, in which their children were enrolled, these individuals took part in a parents' support group where participants exchanged information and helped each other deal with the challenges and stigma that come with raising a disabled child. "Yeah, the stigma is there," noted one focus group participant. This parent goes on to juxtapose the supportive, empathetic and inclusive environment at Program B against the society at large which participants experienced as harsh, judgemental, unforgiving and exclusionary:

[The stigma is] a huge barrier. Part of the reason that we all love this place is that there isn't. My kid could have a bad day, or act inappropriately, or I could be late for a meeting or whatever might happen because that's life and we all have to deal with it. We are still moving ahead here.

Hannah, a Service User at Program E, noted in another focus group how the collaboration, mutual support, affirmation, and encouragement that individuals experienced in her program benefited participants trying to make positive and profound changes in their lives:

And here, we've had women that have gone homeless and they've taken the steps--and we got them off the street cuz they want to get off the street. Other women, they want to stop their lifestyle, everybody pulls together. And I think you said something--no, it wasn't you. One of the other girls said something to one of the night ladies, and

whatever it was she said, it made her want to make herself better. And this is what we do for each other. We make each other better, we support each other.

Chelsea, another Program E focus group participant, echoed this sentiment:

I think what I take away from this group, if I were to leave tomorrow and never come back, just knowing that there are good people still left in a world that's so scary, and people that are there to support. And whether I'm here or not, they're always willing to help somebody else that is in need. And I think just knowing that the option of that being there and the people that come together for this group--it's really incredible to know that you have somebody.

Role of Support Programs in Counteracting Stigma and Exclusion

Another important function of the programs appeared to by countering, or providing a safe refuge from, the stigma and discrimination Service Users experienced in other contexts and areas of their lives. These programs provided a supportive, non-judgemental environment where participants were not demonized, labeled, and set apart. Programs also provided supports and resources that were frequently lacking in other realms, such as Service Users' schools and workplaces. In the focus group consisting of parents whose children were enrolled in Program B, study participants described how mainstream schools largely failed to viably address the needs of kids with intellectual disabilities. Within schools, such youth were stigmatized, set apart from other students, and labeled as people with special needs. This, in many instances, had a debilitating effect on the confidence and self-esteem of young people. Sydney describes how this affected her son:

He internalizes that exceedingly—extremely. In fact, it changes his personality by being labeled or for years, he was told that he was stupid when he was in the school system. Umm, there were numerous things that happened when he was within the [school] system…. he was told that he was stupid when he was in the school system. There were numerous things that happened when he was within the system… But in regards to being labeled, that was a huge social barrier because he was put in, you know, a certain group of people that… this is how they behave, so you stay over there in the corner.

Buoyed by the agreement of fellow focus group participants who were able to relate, Sydney explained how, at Program B, her son found the acceptance and sense of inclusion that he was deprived of at school:

Sydney*: They don't get that treatment [at Program B]. When they're with groups in the gymnasium they don't get treated any different than any other kids. My son, my oldest son, does not get treated. He goes with a pack, and they get their little pack on Fridays, and they all get together and some are at different, you know, spectrums than others. And, they don't get treated any different. They all get treated the same across the board, which I think, has made him extremely comfortable to the point where he is getting snotty and saying, "You know, I'm more normal than they are."*

Participants laugh.

Sydney*: And I'm like, "Do you remember when people used to talk about you? When you flapped your hands? And do you remember talking to me about that?" And he goes, "Yeah." And then he would just be quiet.*

Jill*: But they want to be… 'cause they want to fit in. But it's hard.*

Sydney*: But they are. They're all normal. When they come here on Friday night, they're all the normal. The ones that come in and are not Autistic, or not the normal ones, do you know what I mean? Like they're the majority. Majority rules.*

Focus group co-facilitator (Kevin): *So, unlike school and other contexts, where kids are labeled, they're segregated, they're othered—if you will. Not the case here?*

Gabi: *No, not at all.*

Kendall: *Nobody tells them that they can't. "Oh, I can't do that." "Yes you can do that! Yeah, you can!" And then they'll go, they'll show them how to do it, and you know. My daughter wanted to play school sports. "You can't. You have this diagnosis." What do you mean?*

Melissa: *They're allowed to be them here.*

Indeed, the idea of support programs countering the stigmatization and/or exclusion that Service Users faced within the wider society, and offering supports, resources and a social network that they otherwise lacked, was a salient theme. Cristina, a Service Lead at Program H, described how her program provides people who are new to Canada and living in poverty with a much-needed support system and sense of community:

I think of things like a support group almost. So, when people are living in poverty often, they have a very small—if any—support system. So what I see the role of this program, it was like a mini support system for the families. And really, overall, that's what I would say [Program H] is for newcomers in general. You will hear lots of people say it's like a family away from home and, you know, they had big families where they came from and when they came here they were just a small group. Just a small pocket of people.

Support Programs as Sites for the Cultivation of Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Ideally, becoming socially ensconced within support program communities means that Service Users are actively developing vital forms of social capital that would otherwise be lacking in their lives. The eight support programs studied provided Service Users with opportunities to build both bonding (intra-group ties) *and* bridging (connections beyond one's social circles) forms of social capital. The programs fostered bridging capital by linking individuals to people, supports, resources, and opportunities to which they would not otherwise have access. When enrolled in programs, most participants, as discussed above, built close collaborative relationships with Staff, volunteers and other Service Users thereby cultivating bonding social capital. As the narratives of Service Users, Staff and Program Leads illustrate, these relationships very much seemed to exemplify "norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" that strengthened as bridging opportunities turned into bonding ties (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). By way of program-facilitated social networks, Service Users gained access to resources (e.g. legal advocacy, art supplies, food, child care), skill-building opportunities (e.g. art, cooking, resume writing, gardening, employment-related experience), employment and civic engagement opportunities, and services (e.g. parenting support, mental health support, health care). Hence, by way of these support programs, Service Users had ongoing 'bridging' opportunities.

Carmen, a front-line worker at Program D, describes her work with a Service User who had trouble adapting to conventional forms of employment. His involvement with Program D provided an opportunity to nourish his artistic aptitude and translate that into a modest source of income. This ultimately led to this Service User obtaining a direct link to employment within the Program D community, thus illuminating the value of program-facilitated social capital in providing Service Users with the necessary support to nurture their talents which, in turn, can generate worthwhile opportunities. As Carmen explains:

… when we had the art garage, folks would complete things there and then they could sell it in the shop. So, that would be the obvious direct link to employment or to income increase. But just going back to my example…so, when I was working in the employment piece before moving over to the art garage, there was one

gentleman who we tried to place. Like we tried to help him get traditional employment and it was not working. Like it wasn't working but he doodled on napkins. It was like tissues. And he would draw houses and we saw this, and spoke with him, and then sort of morphed this into like… "Why don't we try and sell these pieces?" "We'll give you all your materials." And then he would just draw, and draw, and draw. Fast forward a couple years later, like, he got really involved with [Program D] and he's got canvases. He's moved to colour.

Service Users spoke of the value of being linked to external services and supports by way of their programs. Sydney, the parent of a youth Service User at Program B, used the analogy of a wheel when speaking of the information and referral services offered at Program B:

It's like [Program B] is the wagon wheel and here's the middle of the wagon wheel. And whatever else they send you to is the spokes on the wagon wheel. Like, they keep everything together. Like they hold it together.

While the analogy is a little awkward, Sydney is making the point that her program served as a conduit through which Service Users accessed various resources and supports. Sydney went on to give the example of Program B inviting a lawyer to speak with Service Users about setting up a Registered Disabilities Savings Plan (the need for information regarding RDSPs emerged in the Program B parents' support group discussed above). Hannah, a Service User at Program E, spoke of a dental hygienist coming in to address the dental needs of participants' kids. Other examples littered the narratives of Service Users who participated in the various programs. In addition, participants spoke of receiving job-related advice and support. In this vein, Service User Leah enthusiastically described the support she received at Program A, which included resume preparation and help honing her job interview skills:

They're great with helping me try and find something and helping me with my resume and stuff and, like, I don't know. They've just always been a good support. Like, especially with the people I deal with in the [agency], I think they're just amazing. And they're so helpful. They really help me and, you know, she actually took the time to really know who I am instead of just another client.

Even when opportunities acquired by way of programs did not work out, Service Users still expressed appreciation toward their programs and the people who made an effort to support them. An example of this is Lindsay, another Service User at Program A, who obtained employment at a winery after completing a course to which the program had linked her. Lindsay did not last long in the position. She conceded, however, that "[i]t wasn't that the program failed me. It just wasn't the right situation for me, that's all. But they were very helpful in every other way. Like, it wasn't their fault that I didn't go that way. Just wasn't the right job for me." Lindsay went on to express gratitude for the opportunity and what she managed to gain from it: "I mean, I still finished the course and, you know, you take information away from it, it all helps. Somewhere, down the line, you never know. [*laughs*]."

Finally, the social connections and skills cultivated within programs, along with enhanced personal confidence, emboldened Service Users to take advantage of opportunities to become more outgoing and socially engaged. Chelsea, a Service User at Program E, described how the ongoing support she receives in her program enables her to overcome her social anxiety and resultant isolation and foster supportive social ties:

I heard about [this agency] through my mum. She was the cook here for about two years and I started coming with her. Just--I have a severe anxiety disorder. So I try and get myself out of my house and coming to group was one of the best ways to do it, and I could come three days a week, get out of the house, and have a support system. Every time I come, there's somebody here to talk to, and somebody willing to help.

Hannah, another participant in Chelsea's focus group, readily identified with the plight of the latter. Hannah spoke of how the social capital she generated by way of Program E helped her to deal with her anxiety

and broadened her perspective on various social issues. Also, when she speaks of a disillusioning experience trying to obtain employment at McDonald's, she reiterates a theme discussed above, specifically the notion of support programs countering the stigma and exclusion Service Users encounter in other contexts:

I applied for a job at [this agency] after applying at McDonald's and being told it was too fast paced, even though that company would advertise that 'we help people with disabilities, we help the elderly. We hire these people'. They wouldn't hire me but I walked into [this agency] as any other person would like Chelsea's mom. Now I've been here for three years and this place is amazing. It's helped bring me out of my shell. It's made me more compassionate. It's changed my influence and ideas on a number of social issues, from being negative to being positive, and trying to help each other.

Carly, a Service Lead at Program G, describes how a pollinator garden initiative provided Service Users with the opportunity to forge bridging social capital and contribute to the broader community:

So, we're doing a pollinator garden. So, they're going to learn about plants and they're building bee houses and birdhouses. They're planting the garden, and we're giving back to the community because we're making some birdhouses for [city], that's going to [name of city park]. And we're bringing seniors and kids together to do it! Yay! (Begins clapping aloud) Yay us!

In addition to offering Service Users support with literacy, the eight support programs studied helped participants to cultivate bridging and bonding forms of social capital: social ties and networks of support that provide resources, information, connections, mutual aid, and opportunities of various kinds. The social capital generated by way of these programs provided Service Users with a sense of community, belonging, acceptance and ongoing opportunities to build bridging capital, all of which were previously lacking in the lives of many. This, in turn, countered the isolation, marginalization, and stigmatization Service Users endured in other settings and, for many, instilled a sense of optimism and hope. By and large, all three study participant groups – Service Users, Staff, and Program Leads – spoke enthusiastically of their programs. Like Service Users, Staff, and Program Leads seemed to appreciate the communal atmosphere fostered within their programs and took pride in the support that programs were able to provide along with the achievements of Service Users. Administrators and Staff appeared to prioritize creating program cultures conducive to the development of social capital and mutual support.

(4) Challenges with Service Delivery

All three participant groups (Service Users, Staff, Leads) who took part in this research discussed challenges associated with the effective delivery of the program/service. Challenges with service delivery included: human resources; agency needs; applying for additional grants and funding; cooperation and collaboration among agencies; direction and support from leaders. While challenges were expressed, it is also important to note that participants in the research were grateful for the support that the agency provided and were fully aware of the integral funding support that NPI had provided.

Human Resources: Staff and Volunteers

Service Users discussed both Staff and Leads in positive terms. Service Users thought Staff were well trained and experienced for their roles. They found the Staff to be knowledgeable, helpful, dedicated, resourceful, friendly, and not judgemental. Sydney, a Project User from Program B, sums up:

And I have no problem dropping him off here. That's probably one of the only places I can say because he's safe here, there's well trained staff here, they're all very knowledgeable about the individual person that they're also dealing with on just a human level. And never once has anybody said, "You're Autistic", to my son.

Despite this, all of the study participants discussed the need for more trained Staff, while Leads and Staff argued for a need for more funding to hire more Staff, the Service Users discussed the need for more Staff so that Leads could have some relief from their workload. Leads also discussed the difficulties in retaining good Staff due to funding inconsistencies and restrictions.

An additional challenge Staff discussed was with project volunteers, who they found could be inconsistent and difficult to train. Drew and Jon, the Lead and a Staff member at Program F, discussed the consistency and qualified training for volunteers in the following focus group exchange:

Drew: *Volunteers come and go, and teens take a while, right? Like, they need to feel comfortable, and it's not something that happens after meeting them once, right? It comes with consistency, it comes with structure. It comes with the things that kids needs. That goes back to the dawn of time. Bedtime, brush your teeth, Like, they need structure. That's where they feel safe, that's where they feel secure. So having these relationships and having this staff be here every day is exactly why we're successful.*

Jon: *Yep. And if you're relying on volunteers as well, you'd kind of take anybody you can get, right? Because especially--we're running a program five days a week. If we were solely volunteer based, we'd be desperate for help. We'd be begging people to come in. And then you'll take anybody. Whereas when you have paid staff, you know, people who know what they're doing. They know how to handle—*
Drew: *They're trained.*

Jon: *There's programs like non-violent crisis intervention that they've got. You know, they've got First Aid. They know what they're doing in terms of, like, youth psychology. Like, they're not going to accidentally say the wrong thing to completely trigger a kid because they're actually experts in their field. Whereas with the volunteer, it's, "boy, I hope you don't say something stupid to these kids."*

Challenges Related to Agency Needs

An additional challenge the participants identified was enough funding to afford all of needs that an agency has. Leads discussed how opportunities were inconsistent for certain programs to get funds which were needed to succeed, and how more funds were needed to pay for operating costs and enable more activities within the programs, such as pay for field trips. Staff also discussed the need for more funding specifically for administrative support to respond to application deadlines and respond to the ensuing discontinuity in programs. Jon, a Staff member at Program F, described:

But, I mean, in terms of support--like, the best way to improve the programs will always be funding… If there's more we can do, then there's more that we can spend, right? In terms of, like, administrative support towards the staff, while we're spread over a wide area, we only have now four full time staff… Right? So we're a very close-knit organization. We are work very, very closely together. So it really just comes down to funding.

The participants identified additional issues that all related to a lack of support for their specific circumstances and needs. In many programs, Service Users identified the need for more dedicated program space, a lack of budget for their transportation to the programs and childcare, and an alternative funding source for the program when they lost NPI funds and their programs closed. Service Users at Program B identified a lack of understanding and respect from the greater community manifested in specific ways such as: poor school programming which necessitated homeschooling, negative experiences with educational assistants, expulsions/suspensions from schools, being barred from school trips, being isolated, an over-reliance on labels and schools not making accommodations.

Each participant group described challenges with the scope and reach of the programs, but Service Users were most passionate about this. Service Users suggested more programs for different activities such as cooking. Service Users were also keen on a schedule for additional programming to run the programs more frequently. Vivian, Hannah, Sally and Chelsea, all Service Users at Program E, discuss one project challenge related to scope below:

Vivian: *Maybe running more often?*

Hannah: *If we could get the funding, Yasmine would open five days a week.*

Vivian: *Yeah, exactly. So I was gonna say funding but that's such a blanket statement. I wanted to make sure that I was very adamant that--it's not that we want the money to do fundings, it's that we want it to be available all the time, absolutely.*

Sally: *For more people.*

Chelsea: *Some people can't make it Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, right? Friday they can come and those days aren't open for anybody to come.*

Staff and Leads described rural-based challenges that made their program delivery more difficult including isolation, transportation issues, a lack of diverse programs, the tendency to get less funding and resources in rural areas, limited jobs, and the fact that it is harder to fund raise there. Drew and Jon, the Lead and a Staff member at Program F, describe some of these challenges in their focus group:

Drew: *We're the only program for kids out here. Like, there's nothing else like us at all. Like, there is no-- outside of a church group, we are the only free resource for youth, in all of West Niagara. So this is a critical program, if you ask me, if you ask anybody who uses our program. They have nowhere else to go. They'd have to go to [nearby city]. There's no transit here. So how are they getting to [city], right? Like, if these start to shut down, then this whole youth group will be cut off from resources. Like, anger management, gambling, drugs, social inclusion. Like, anything to do with them--if what we offer--and they'll all lose this resource, and that's what's so hard. That they're not valuing the program a little bit more than--because we're not competing with anybody else. We are the only ones.*

Jon: *But all they see is, "oh, in a rural area, this program's helping 200 kids. Well, if we give that money to a city, it'll help 2000 kids." Right? But then those 200 kids, they get left out.*

Applying for Additional Grants and Funding

Staff and Leads saw firsthand how difficult funding sustainability can be and the impact of this on their programming. A particular issue that Staff and Leads reported was that they could not apply for additional NPI funding due to a change in NPI application criteria and they wished that they could have had a personal connection with representatives from NPI to communicate the impact of these changes. Cristina, the Lead at Program H, described how it was difficult to maintain NPI funding due to the changing criteria:
You know, more money would always be great. But from an organizational perspective, the other piece of it is too; there's been changes in the ways in which the application—like the application is pretty standard, but the criteria. The criteria have changed from one year to the next.

When Staff discussed their role challenges, the conversation was around the difficulties they had writing grants and fitting into the mandates for the grants. Jennifer and Sarah, Staff members at Program B, discussed some of the restrictions of grants:

Jennifer: *Sometimes it is very restrictive because you have a great idea for something, then you look at the grants and the grant says, "oh, you need to do this, this, this, and this."*

Sarah: *Yeah, you don't qualify.*

Jennifer: *And then you're like, "oh, you know what? We don't have that" or "that doesn't apply to us." So, you can't apply for that specific grant. So you have to look elsewhere to some other program and sometimes its not as much money or you know?*

To add to this, Leads and Staff also did not see much support from the outside community by way of other funding sources and limited private donors. The following quotes from Drew and Jon, the Lead and Staff member at Program F, discusses the challenges in getting private donors:

Drew: *Yes. Not as many as we'd like, obviously… See, the problem with our program is, um, we're not cancer. Cancer's heartstrings and everybody--everyone had a grandma or somebody was affected by--we have kids that people consider "at-risk," "bad" kids. So they don't, ah, yeah. "Somebody's gotta take care of them, but I'm not donating 10,000 dollars to that. I'm gonna give it to the hospital. I'm gonna give it to GBF. I'm gonna give it to [another agency]." So we compete against, um, heartstrings cuz we are not pretty, I guess.*

Jon: *Yeah, and nobody sees us as life or death.*

Cooperation and Collaboration Among Agencies

Staff discussed the isolation that they experience in program delivery. For example, Bianca, a Staff member at Program C, describes a challenge around the difficulty of siloed approaches in programs:

Well, I always…something I think a lot about, and I think all of us do, everything is interconnected. Right? You can't work in silos. Like housing is connected to literacy, is connected to health, is connected to food and nutrition, and is connected to education. It's not like, "Let's target this!" And I don't know that people making decisions always see that. Right?

Additionally, Leads felt a lack of cooperation among other non-profit organizations, as they found collaborating with existing projects to be difficult but had to often do this out of necessity. Carly, Lead at Program G, described what she felt was not a genuine partnership as:

So, we partnered with this organization that was already there. So, it was good that we were part of it and were able to come on board and to help them with their program but it was limited in some ways because it wasn't a partnership. In the sense that it was a partnership, and we went in, and like we were already an established program presence there. And us coming on board, I think they were looking at it more of us coming on board to help them with what they were doing than to partner and come up with all these other ways of addressing things.

Direction and Support from Leaders

Leads also discussed the need for a means to debrief with others as a support system for the demands of their role. This is a call for Leads to receive professional support from others that appreciate the breadth and demands of their role. Yasmine, the Project Lead at Program E, describes this particular challenge:

I feel like, for me, like, whenever I've worked anywhere else, there was always some system of debriefing. So if you dealt with something really crazy--you know, if I was in court or if somebody died at the hospital--if I was dealing with something, there was always some sort of debriefing that happened, and that just doesn't happen here. We kind of are on our own to cope with that, which I find very stressful. Um, I try not to dump it on any employees. I try to deal with it myself, but I find that really stressful.

An interesting consideration that Leads recognized as a challenge to their effective program delivery was consistency in NPI board members. Drew, the Lead at Program F, discussed this consideration related to how NPI board members come to appreciate the work that they do and this consistency leads to sustainability:

Like, how can you go to the board and say, "you should see this program. I've been there, these kids are amazing. You should see what they're doing"? Because a lot of times, their board members are constantly changing there too. So people get to know, okay, the [interviewing agency] or, uh, [another agency], or whatever is applying for it--and then the next year, it's a whole new board. So, for example, I fear that we lost half our funding this year because the ones who advocated for [our agency] that used to be on that board are no longer there. And, so now, because no one advocated for us, it was easy to go, "yeah, pfft." ...Right? And to me, that's where it's, like, oh, there's no consistency. Like, what is the incentive to work hard? What is the incentive? Like, we're hitting our numbers. For every year, we are gaining more and more sustainability.

While all three groups of participants were grateful for the NPI funding, the most predominantly expressed concern that was discussed by both Staff and Leads referred to the impact of when their programming funding ended and the program needed to close.

(5) Experiences with the NPI Application Process

Program Leads who took part in this study expressed appreciation for the support they received from the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. At the same time, study participants reported frustration with the application process on a number of grounds. Concerns included application forms that were needlessly complicated and time-consuming to complete, narrow and constantly shifting qualification criteria, a limited conception of what constitutes evidence of program effectiveness, the lack of support available at NPI for applicants as well as programs currently receiving funding, and narrow funding windows.

Complicated Application Forms

Some Program Leads argued that the NPI application forms were overly complicated and time-consuming and therefore difficult to complete. This was particularly problematic as, due to limited resources, many programs had trouble attracting experienced grant writers to their Staff or management teams. Study participants who commented on the application procedure generally emphasized the need to streamline and simplify the process with the aim of making it more expedient and user-friendly. In particular, these participants failed to see the point of an involved and elaborate application process for programs seeking a renewal of funding. Drew and Jon, the Program Lead and a front-line Staff member at Program F, share their perspective in the following focus group exchange:

Jon: *… the applications can be—I just think they could be worded better.*

Drew: [*groans*]

Jon: *There's a lot of questions that kind of feel redundant… Um, and I think—honestly, I think [Lily] would save a lot of time if they just phrased the questions a little more approachably. (laughs)*

Drew: *You have a lot of, um—so, we come with experience, okay? Which is not always the case in non-profit. A lot of people, it's just got good heart. They've never written a grant before, and it doesn't mean that their work isn't valued. It just means that they're getting lost in this. [Flipping through a hardcopy of their project's grant application.] Like, it's just unnecessary. "What do you do? Show us your numbers. Where are you gonna spend the money?" Done!*

These participants note that the inordinate amount of time and resources devoted to the NPI funding application each year prevents them from pursuing other sources of funding:

Drew: *It takes us three weeks, which means we are no longer out generating money cuz we are now sitting here, trying to gruel over this brutal application for weeks on end, which goes against the whole point of applying— like, it's taking three weeks of us going out and trying to generate money on our own, right? Cuz these are brutal…. And we do well at it. We do well at it. But I can tell you, even after all the years, it is—we dread this application.*

Jennifer, a Service Provider at Program B, agrees that, in the case of programs seeking funding renewal, the NPI application process needs to be streamlined: "if you had something that's going well and you're getting results in your community, not having to maybe re-…like do a whole application for a whole fresh grant but maybe a, you know, submit a report and say, "This is going really well. These are the gains we've made this year.""

Funding Criteria

A number of Program Leads perceived the NPI funding criteria to be problematic. These study participants argued that the criteria were too narrow and inconsistent from year to year. Program Leads also took issue with what they described as an NPI requirement that, when funded programs apply for renewal, they need to show that they have modified, expanded or innovated the program in some way. Where the latter criterion is concerned, some participants noted that they spent resources modifying or expanding programs in hopes of NPI funding renewal, but found themselves strapped for resources when that funding did not materialize. Cristina, a Program Lead at Program H, explained that the challenge of meeting these criteria and expectations actually deterred her from applying for NPI funding a second time:

… we have run a variety of different summer programs for children and youth since that NPI funding. So, we have had Trillium funding that has allowed us to do some summer and after school programing with children and youth. So, we did not seek out NPI funding again because we didn't feel that we necessarily fit the criteria perfectly any longer. However, we were able to subsidize with other programs, you know, through different funding streams and kind of just juggling things around a bit.

Cristina continues, this time commenting on the NPI requirement that programs seeking funding renewal show that they have added new dimensions to programming:

And that's the thing. All these programs, and I've received NPI funding for many different programs, my criticism—if I have one—is that there always had to be a new initiative with the funding. And what we have learned, I think just from the non-profit sector, is that consistent ongoing support is so important for success.

Jennifer and Sarah, two Staff members at Program B, echo Cristina's frustrations with trying to fit the agency mandate and goals into the narrow NPI criteria:

Jennifer: *Sometimes it is very restrictive because you have a great idea for something, then you look at the grants and the grant says, "oh, you need to do this, this, this, and this."*

Sarah: *Yeah, you don't qualify.*

Jennifer: *And then you're like, "oh, you know what? We don't have that" or "that doesn't apply to us." So, you can't apply for that specific grant. So you have to look elsewhere to some other program and sometimes its not as much money or, you know?*

Danielle, a front-line worker at Program C, spotlights the problem with narrow eligibility criteria when she explains how different needs and outcomes invariably correlate and interlock in complex ways. This makes efforts to specify particular needs or outcomes when formulating funding criteria problematic and short-sighted. As Danielle explained,

...something I think a lot about, and I think all of us do, everything is interconnected. Right? You can't work in silos. Like housing is connected to literacy, is connected to health, is connected to food and nutrition, and is connected to education. It's not like, "Let's target this!" And I don't know that people making decisions always see that. Right?

Regarding the NPI requirement that programs innovate or expand their programming in order to qualify for funding renewal, Carly at Program G sees little point in altering a program that is functioning well and meeting needs:

Like, why do I have to reinvent something when this is already an identified need and we're trying to address it? Having good results from it. But you know, we're limited. We either have to create something new or we can't apply.

Laura, a Lead at Program C, reiterates this concern about the seemingly arbitrary requirement that programming be modified or expanded to qualify for funding renewal, especially when a given program is addressing community needs:

The other thing too, though, with it was that they didn't want to continue to fund the same program year after year without some sort of change to the program. I can see their point but at the same time, we're servicing different families, so we've given them the tools that they needed. Now they're off and running. Let's take another sixteen families and they'll be off and running. You know what I'm saying? Like why did I need to change the criteria every year and really struggle? Because we didn't want to modify it from the original research that we did otherwise we'd be invalidating the research. So, we had to make it shorter, right? Just to make a change. And then we made another small change as well just to meet the qualifications. But it didn't make sense to me.

Carly highlights the reality that it is difficult for programs with limited and precarious funding to continually innovate and expand:

A lot of it—yes. The grant portion of it, it has to be something new or something we're building on. Very, very rare if any, I think—I don't know if there's any that's been funded—the exact same program. It seems to me there always had to be something new or we're building on, which is good 'cause you want to build on but sometimes you can't keep building.

Assessing Program 'Effectiveness'

Another concern expressed by some participants had to do with what NPI took into consideration when assessing program effectiveness. Yasmine, the Program Lead at Program E, pointed out that NPI only

considered activity and participation that took place "Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 10am to 4pm," the designated days and hours of operation for her program. Many social events took place outside of those hours, including retreats and even weddings and funerals, which the program organized for Service Users who lacked resources. As noted above, one of the significant benefits of the support programs studied is that they provided Service Users with a sense of community and the opportunity to cultivate social capital, and after-hours activities were instrumental in this regard. According to Yasmine, however, programming that took place outside of the specified weekly timeframe was not considered by NPI. When Yasmine would try to include those numbers in reports to NPI, she would be told "'that's not part of your stats. You're reaching. You're stretching way too far. You're reaching'." As Yasmine explains:

The comment I get is, 'you're not making a meaningful impact on those people. Just because they arrived and they left--but you're not providing meaningful activity. Like, a meaningful impact on a person." And I feel like we are. And they feel like, "no, it didn't happen between these hours and those are the hours of your [agency]…. We want the stats from your program. We don't want stats for other things that you guys are doing to hang out together'…. I've literally seen friendships build very tightly after the retreat for some people. And there've been more than a few emotional breakdowns that have helped do some incredible healing.

Availability of NPI Support Personnel

Yet another issue to which study participants drew attention was the lack of support available at NPI to assist applicants and funded programs with challenges and concerns. Individuals expressed a desire for an accessible contact person at NPI who is readily available for consultation. This would be particularly useful for new applicants given the involved and complicated nature of the application process (discussed above). Yasmine at Program E notes that people who were previously available at NPI to answer questions and address concerns are no longer with the organization:

… but I think it would be nice--the gentleman's name was Rick, I can't remember his last name. If you ask Chris, Chris will remember Rick. Rick worked for NPI, I would say, five years ago? And he was a great person to go to if you needed support. There was another woman who was a support after that, that helped out. And she has left too. And I think that that support person who gets in touch and says, "what can we do? As NPI, what can we do to help you guys? Like, we've given you money, but is there any support systems you need in place?" And those people are gone now, and they were a huge help to us. You know, they connected me to [organization name]. They connected us to different groups that really helped! And so I wish that that was still in effect.

Drew and Jon at Program F note one helpful support person at NPI, but lament this individual's limited availability:

Drew: *So there's one woman that works there and it's [Lily]. And, ah, she's a very nice woman but, unfortunately, she's not available enough to answer everybody's questions. Like--or actually even get involved into the programs. Like, for--in over the five years, how many times has [NPI staff] been to our program?*

Jon: *I think once.*

Focus group facilitator (Amanda): *In four years?*

Drew: *Yeah.*

Jon: *Yeah. She's just one person, right? …And there's so many projects. There's so much to do.*

Drew: *There's so many projects…*

Holly, the Program Lead at Program A, suggested that it would be beneficial to have a representative at NPI regularly checking in on funded programs to ensure that things are running smoothly and they are properly supported. "[W]ouldn't it be great," asked Holly, "if there was some guru of programs you can meet with and they could say, 'geez, you know, we're six months into your one year program. What's your feeling going forward? Are you able to go forward?'"

Narrow Application and Funding Windows

A final concern raised by participants was the narrow one-year NPI funding window as well as the narrow period of time between the application deadline and NPI's announcement of results. As Drew and Jon of Program F explain, these narrow timeframes do not leave programs with sufficient time to formulate an alternate funding strategy in the event the NPI funding does not materialize or is not renewed:

Jon*: And, actually, that does help to highlight an issue with the way the funding is structured as well. For these programs that are coming back year after year, ah--so the application for NPI every year is in February. Ah, generally, the end date of the grants that NPI gives is usually April 30th. And then the grants start on May 1st. But when you hear on April 23rd that your grant has suddenly been cut in half or that you're, you know, maybe not getting a grant next year--that doesn't give you time to react. Your reaction is, "I guess we're done." So I-- now, I don't know how feasible it is for a program like NPI--I like the way that United Way staggers it, where there's three year grants and you apply in your second year to renew it. So that if you're not going to get it--*

Drew: *You've got a year.*

Jon: *Now you've got a year to react.*

Drew: *To try to save it.*

Jon: *A week is not enough time to try to react… For any organization, no matter how big or small. So, um, in terms of the way NPI is structured, I do find that as an issue.*

Even when programs are successful in securing NPI funding, the limited one-year funding window, with no guarantee of renewal, makes it difficult to address the long-term needs of Service Users and communities. As Jennifer of Program B explains, sustaining programming continuity over time is challenging when funding is inconsistent:

… if you can grab onto something, like say, having a community garden and then using that produce to learn how to cook and prepare and work on literacy skills with recipe writing and grocery lists and all that. And have that as something that happens throughout the year, twelve months, once a week or twice a week. Whatever it is. But it seems with the funding it kind of starts and stops, starts and stops, and then you're re-applying and then different people are involved… and things are lost.

(6) Sustainability Post-NPI Funding

Staff and Leads discussed a number of topics regarding program sustainability post-NPI funding. Participants discussed some challenges with sustainability related to the fact that they are: hamstrung by restrictions; reliant on donations; impacted by realities; dependent on existing resources.

Sustainability Hamstrung by Restrictions

Jennifer and Sarah, Staff members at Program B, describe the restrictions of trying to gain other outside funding:

Jennifer: *Sometimes it is very restrictive because you have a great idea for something, then you look at the grants and the grant says, "oh, you need to do this, this, this, and this."*

Sarah: *Yeah, you don't qualify.*

Jennifer: *And then you're like, "oh, you know what? We don't have that" or "that doesn't apply to us." So, you can't apply for that specific grant. So you have to look elsewhere to some other program and sometimes its not as much money or you know?*

Additional resource challenges include the lack of options for obtaining funding. Government funding pockets are often narrow and restricted, and to apply for call for proposals takes time and expertise. Donna, the Lead at Program B explains:

If it wasn't for like Niagara Prosperity and Niagara Community Foundation…like all these… there's no way we would be able to do what we're doing. There's no way and so I think about that. I think. And when you look at other [Program B agencies], they don't offer anything for children because they don't get government funding for it. So, it's just strictly adults.

However, obtaining provincial funding like the Ontario Trillium Funding becomes more difficult in rural areas, as Jon, a Staff member at Program F, describes:

And these rural areas tend to get ignored by granting organizations. We don't receive any provincial funding from Ontario Trillium Foundation. Uh, they stopped funding rural areas, basically. All of their funding now goes to, like, [nearby city], [another nearby city]. That sort of thing. Uh, we don't get any federal funding in this area. The only regional funding we get is from NPI. We barely even get municipal funding because these towns don't have big budgets, so they can't really afford to give us that much money… So it's very difficult in this sort of area. I mean, that's part of what led to that decision to close [the agency's third location]--is there's no way that community's ever going to be able to sufficiently support that program without funding from another level.

Sustainability Through Donations

In terms of sustainability without NPI, Staff and Leads discussed attracting private/corporate financial donors as well as encouraging individual donations. Some methods included doing fundraisers to highlight the agency, getting private donations, and as Jon, a Staff member at Program F, describes, doing presentations, "for local community groups, town councils, businesses. Getting people to recognize that the [agency] is an important part of the community and that it needs their support. And, you know, what the value of our program is." Yasmine, a Lead from Program E, also described getting private donations from outreach presentations:

We have two women. [names the women], who have made it their goal--they both wrote speeches and presented them to different agencies and got them critiqued, and now they have memorized speeches and they go and talk at different groups. So two weeks ago, [name] was at the Hepatitis C Day. Like I said, this guy came yesterday and he wrote a cheque, and it was completely because of--about two months ago, [name] and I went and talked at the United Mennonites Church and they were really interested.

Donations went beyond monetary resources. Dawn, the Lead from Program D, described donations of materials and supplies, "The facilitator contacted different art organizations, artists, a paint supplier. We got a lot of paint donated. People can build an easel, that's not hard. So, it was a lot of grass roots stuff to support it."

Realities Impacting Sustainability: Operating Costs, Shifting Funding, Grant Writing

One challenge Leads described was that NPI funding was prioritized for basic operating costs and this was contradictory to the goal of NPI funding which was to grow a program and move toward self-sustainability. As Carly, the Lead at Program G, states, "When you don't have any money; it's hard to be sustainable."

Despite the challenges, Leads also described being flexible in order to meet funding needs. Cristina, the Lead from Program H, describes:

So, we have had Trillium funding that has allowed us to do some summer and after school programing with children and youth. So, we did not seek out NPI funding again because we didn't feel that we necessarily fit the criteria perfectly any longer. However, we were able to subsidize with other programs, you know, through different funding streams and kind of just juggling things around a bit.

To make applying for government or other funding easier, Jennifer, a Staff member at Program B, suggests training Staff in grant writing. She states, "I think it's something that more people should know because then the more eyes and ears you have out there about available money, and how to get it and how to use it, the better." Yasmine, the Lead at Program E, suggests that sharing best practices in grant writing among agencies would be helpful; she notes, for example, that adding statistics of how the program is helping Service Users is illustrative when attempting to get funding.

Existing Resources Begat Continued Sustainability

Drew, the Lead from Program F, further explains that the existing resources of an agency have implications on securing additional outside funding:

They're in the cities, right? They have a bigger population. They have more, um, they got a ton of money from the government, first of all. So they got federal funding and provincial funding. So that was their big kick-off. So there goes your marketing campaign. My marketing campaign is, ah, me handing out fliers because we have no budget for it, right?... So there's the critical difference. They have money to market themselves. Um, mental health is becoming a major topic of discussion. Like, Bell Talk Days. Ah, the federal government, they're all giving them money right now. I can't get that money because I am in [rural town]. I'm [rural area]. And this isn't a priority area…

Despite the challenges, Staff and Leads discussed different agency marketing techniques. These include attractive websites, flyers, newsletters, word of mouth at schools and doctors' offices. Dawn, a Lead at Program D, confirms that educating the public about what we do is, "this is our biggest tool for changing mindsets."

Leads and Staff are extremely grateful for NPI funding, discussing how some programs would not be possible without it. While participants acknowledged funding challenges and a lack of external support, they also discussed different agency marketing techniques, tips and possible strategies to obtain external funding moving forward to gain sustainability in a post-NPI funded time.

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this qualitative research study illuminate the fundamental role that the delivery of NPI-funded programs play in ensuring communal success, a strong sense of belonging, and providing the necessary connections (and equitable access) to resources required for continued socio-emotional, academic, familial, communal, and financial success. When revisiting the triangulated data obtained from in-depth individual interviews with Program Leads, coupled with focus group cohorts held with Program Staff and Service Users at the eight non-profit programs researched, it is important to recall the six overarching themes that emerged from the study: (1) perceptions of needs and challenges of Service Users; (2) perceptions of success to support literacy; (3) community, belonging and social capital; (4) challenges with service delivery; (5) experiences with the NPI application process; (6) sustainability post-NPI funding. Such themes revealed an inherent interconnection among the eight support programs documented in this report and its respective delivery and outcome of programs; that is, cultivating various forms of social capital, fostering increased literacy and multi-modal literacy acquisition, and correcting the concerning degree of isolation, marginalization, and stigmatization Service Users continue to endure in their communities. In a similar vein, the themes from the data illustrate the importance of creating program cultures of care, despite challenges of mental health, poverty rates, addiction issues, and rural isolation, as reported by Program Leads, Staff, and Service Users. As articulated throughout the six themes of this study, the NPI-funded programs not only cultivated successful literacy acquisition, literacy capacity, and literacy knowledge, but also contributed to Service Users' strong sense of self-advocacy, inclusion, and positive overall health and well-being. Hence, the themes that emerged from this study make it clear that Service Users co-created and constructed a living curriculum of literacy acquisition, as it pertains to world knowledge application (e.g. financial literacy), with the guidance and support of passionate Program Leads and Staff. Indeed, the findings and respective themes that emerged from the present study are reflected in the positive program outcomes and successful literacy acquisition, as voiced by study participants. Although positive outcomes for programs were reported by Service Users, Program Leads, and Staff, however, there remains problematic issues around experiences with the NPI application process, such as the narrow application and funding windows, and agency challenges pertinent to financial buoyancy, obtaining funds to cover basic operating costs, and determining how to best meet increasing Service User demands. Such demands and challenges related to service delivery and experiences with NPI, particularly the application process and sustainability post-NPI funding, are addressed in the subsequent section of this report.

Positive Program Outcomes as Perceived and Experienced by Study Participants

The findings propose that Service Users experienced successful literacy support, linked directly to the delivery and outcome of programs. Ample qualitative and narrative data detail the positive effects related to successful literacy acquisition, literacy knowledge, and literacy capacity. Additionally, literacy programming contributed to Service Users' advocacy skills, opportunity for employment or post-secondary education, inclusion and daily living in communities, and to overall health and well-being. All participants gave credence to literacy success attributed by programs that assisted Service Users, where such 'literacy curriculum' may not have been accessible to them in school or other educational spaces due to systemic barriers related to low-income living and its effects on advocacy, as cited by many Service Users. The funded programs became a saving grace and generated ample successes. This was evidenced, for example, for: children with needs to acquire emergent literacy skills; youth-aged Service Users to gain literacy skills to access and complete post-secondary applications or employment resumes and applications; ESL adult learners to access individual assistance for language acquisition combined with life skills; parents to learn strategies to assist their children in reading comprehension; women supporting women to learn how to read using specialized Montessori programs, and to use literacy skills for daily functioning and world knowledge; youth and adults to access literacy knowledge related to career opportunities like resume writing, website searches, oral language skills for job interviews, computer knowledge, financial literacy to budget bills, and skills certificates resulting from literacy successes garnered from programs. Arts-based literacy programming led to job opportunities and suggested that literacy skills, stemming from the arts, had a positive effect on general motivation, well-being, and sense of community building, all of which generated further life skill success that 'bridged' to civic engagement, and

social capital (see below). Literacy acquisition and knowledge, then, suggests a direct link to world knowledge application and self-advocacy, so that it is not only about reading the word [of resume writing, word recognition, language learning] but also about reading the world [of their community, the arts, their life experiences and civic engagement] (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The findings of this study also make clear that literacy programs are most successful when Program Leads and Staff are able to create a safe and judgement-free space where Service Users have opportunities to build bridging and, ultimately, bonding social capital with fellow program participants, Staff, and volunteers. Importantly, insofar as programs were able to link participants to people, resources, services and opportunities, Service Users had *ongoing* opportunities to cultivate bridging social capital. This curtails the possibility that individuals will become embedded in bounded and inward oriented social circles that might limit opportunities. We found that the programs studied were largely successful in creating spaces marked by mutuality and trust. This emboldened Service Users to share, exhibit vulnerability, and provide requited support. Indeed, as Balatti et al. (2007) note, bridging capital, specifically the term *bridge*, implies "a two-way flow" analogous to vehicular traffic traveling across a literal bridge (p. 12). By creating spaces where Service Users can forge meaningful connections with new people, programs facilitated opportunities for participants to share their unique lived experiences, skills, challenges, and outlooks. This helped to build bridges of trust that most Service Users found empowering, and ultimately resulted in bridging social capital turning into bonding ties amongst and between Service Users and, in many cases, Program Staff and volunteers. To again use the words of Balatti et al. (2007), these social networks provide opportunities for program participants to cultivate…

… new skills, new attitudes and beliefs about self and others, new ways of interaction and new links and connections. For many, the networks are a new and safe environment in which to play out new aspects of identity and practice new skills. Within these networks, social capital outcomes are experienced (p. 12).

We will add that, within the context of building social capital, it was clear from our study that Service Users had enhanced opportunities to practice and refine literacy and social skills and, armed with new skills, confidence and support, were better equipped to pursue new opportunities within the community at large. This creates potential for further bridging social capital outcomes. Of equal importance, the social capital that Service Users built within the support programs studied counteracted the exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization that many reported experiencing within the wider society.

Finally, insofar as non-profit community organizations bring people together and enable Service Users to cultivate critical forms of social capital, research shows that they play an instrumental role in strengthening communal bonds and enhancing social trust within communities (Putnam, 2000; Skarkey et al., 2017). And, given that well-established and funded programs are part of a network of interconnected programs and agencies, they are able to "connect communities to external sources of influence, resources, and political power, all of which strengthen the capacity to achieve common goals and values" (Sharkey et al., 2017, p. 1218). In short, healthy and well-funded community programs are instrumental in empowering individuals *and* communities resulting in a litany of positive outcomes.

Perceived Needs and Challenges of Service Delivery

Agencies were stretched to deliver their services and relied on human and financial resources to remain functional. While this is typical of all organizations in all sectors, the agencies that were the focus in this research appeared to be in precarious positions regarding continuance of their work without the security of the NPI funding. The Staff and volunteers were exemplary models of individuals who were dedicated beyond the call of duty – finding enough of these individuals is difficult. From the perspective of the Service Users, there were on-going pragmatic challenges that they sought for the services to overcome such as their transportation or childcare needs during the program or more frequent offerings of the program; these considerations are real and

integral for seamless participation. Agencies were challenged by competing internal needs for financial buoyancy and having the funds to cover basic operating costs while also having the means to apply for additional funding. Regardless of having the skills to apply for additional grants and funding, there were not many options as funding sources and private/corporate donations were also limited. Interestingly, siloing was reported among agencies that were offering similar services – there was a lack of cooperation and collaboration among agencies. This poses a moral and humanistic challenge along with a significant service delivery limitation. Specifically, it limits the ability of some programs to connect Service Users to external resources, supports, and organizations, thereby limiting the capacity to help individuals cultivate social capital.

Leads within agencies also noted a gap in support for their own professional and personal needs as leaders in the social services sector. They were looking for direction and support from larger organizations such as NPI.

Experiences with NPI: Application Process and Sustainability Post-NPI Funding

Where the NPI application process is concerned, Service Leads who took part in the study highlighted a number of frustrating challenges. These included needlessly complicated and time-consuming application forms, qualification criteria that were overly narrow and seemingly in continual flux, a limited conception of what constitutes evidence of program effectiveness, the lack of support available at NPI for those running funded programs as well as new applicants, and narrow funding windows.

The Leads and Staff of the agencies that participated in this research were less than optimistic about the sustainability of their programs post-NPI funding. There was a slight sense of frustration around many restrictions incurred when attempting to apply for additional funding such as the incompatible goals or mandates of the grant organization.

Leads and their Staff appealed to donors for funding to sustain their work after the NPI funds had run out but this was often not successful beyond donations of materials and supplies to run a program. This contributed to desperate actions such as Leads using funds to make up for deficits in operating costs and shifting funds into different streams. It would seem that to become resourced an agency needed to be resourced. This was true for even grant writing as Staff indicated that they required strategic training to write grants. Leads noted that they needed to market their agency and attract public attention to get consideration; thus, existing resources begat continued sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose the following recommendations based on our research findings:
- Programs and services are under-staffed and current Staff and volunteers are overworked. This is contributing to burn-out and shortages in human resources. Regionally, there should be a dedicated repository or individual who acts as a grant application support person for Service Leads to consult for potential additional sources of funding for human resources. This includes local private donors, cooperative education programs at colleges/universities, and provincial or federal funds for not-for-profit groups.
- The inequities of geographic dispersion came to the fore in the findings of this study. In Niagara, based on the vast and diverse geography, services are unequally distributed and Service Users in remote locations have distinct challenges accessing programs without transportation and convenient locations. Future NPI funding should consider transportation via Niagara Region Transit as an additional provision by default for remote programs.
- Literacy acquisition, skills, and knowledge (writing, reading, oral communication, and multi-modal

literacies including arts-based literacy, media, numeracy, and life skill literacies such as application processes, resume writing, etc.) are fundamental to successful living. There is vital consideration for all future NPI funding to consider literacy and multi-modal literacies as criteria for funding, as expressed by all participant groups.

- The funding periods of successful programs were often cut short due to NPI application procedures from one year to the next and various focus areas that changed from one year to the next. When funding fell short, successful programs halted, and in many examples, changed drastically the livelihood, mental health, and successful living of Service Users. Given the importance of sustainable and successful programs, future NPI funding should consider the criteria not only from year to year, but also how agencies with successful programs might reapply to continue, without limitations or changes, to their already existing successful programs.

- There is a clear and timely need for collaboration among agencies and programs that support individuals in need in the Niagara Region. All participants in this study conjectured that the independent, "siloed" activities of their services could benefit from pooling resources (human, space, goods, time) in creative ways. Globally and of course, regionally, as we imagine innovative ways to respond to the post-pandemic exacerbated needs of our communities, it is integral that not-for-profit services congregate and collaborate to support their common goals. A unit such as the Niagara Region might assist in this collaboration by hosting and supporting the coordination of their efforts.

- Social capital provides individuals with a sense of community, belonging, and the connections and access to resources needed to achieve social mobility and improve life chances. Social capital is also vital to the sociological health of communities insofar as it reinforces communal ties and promotes social trust. Given the importance of social capital to the lives of Service Users, it is imperative that funding bodies recognize and support initiatives and activities that enable residents to cultivate diverse forms of bonding and bridging social capital.

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