

Quality of Life Research in Saskatoon, Canada: Fifteen years of co-creating knowledge and action in the community

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The Community-University Institute of Social Research (CUISR) has conducted a research program focusing on quality of life in Saskatoon over a 15 year period. The research started in 2000 and the mixed-method surveys have been repeated five times on a 3-year cycle. This program evolved out of meetings of a “quality of life roundtable,” a forum that enabled a group of academics, community leaders, and practitioners to bring their expertise and passion to enhance quality of life in Saskatoon through research. The group recognized the need for generating new knowledge, with a view to action, whether it be policy, programs, or advocacy, and understood that the ideal model will include, in equal measure, university researchers and community practitioners and leaders.

This group formed the core of the membership for a successful application to the then innovative funding program, Community University Research Alliance (CURA) of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The application detailed a collaborative research project in which governance would be shared equally among university researchers and community practitioners and which would conduct community relevant, action- and change-oriented research in three areas of focus: health determinants and health policy, community economic development, and quality of life indicators. This case description focuses on the evolution and history of the quality of life research program in Saskatoon and lessons learned.

The initial CURA grant was the basis for establishing CUISR. Community-University Institute of Social Research and the quality of life research subsequently benefited from a CURA completion grant and a large SSHRC team grant. The City of Saskatoon has consistently supported CUISR’s quality of life work through inkind and monetary contributions.

Purpose of the Research

The quality of life research program was envisioned as an undertaking to achieve deep and balanced (quantitative and qualitative) understanding of the community and to use this knowledge to guide change to improve quality of life for all in Saskatoon. To accomplish this, the program set its sights on undertaking participatory action research, soliciting meaningful and frequent input from the community at large

not only on research questions and methods but also on the implication of results, and disseminating knowledge widely. The program was intended to be longterm and longitudinal (repeated cohorts) to allow ongoing evaluation and monitoring of community outcomes, and continued guidance for ways of improving quality of life.

Design and Methodology

A number of descriptors have been used for the Saskatoon quality of life research: mixed methods, participatory, collaborative, community-based, multi-stakeholder and action oriented. Community-based, participatory action research best describes the research design developed to achieve the purpose of the project. The program intends to combine the experience of community practitioners and the mandates of community agencies with the expertise of the academics to produce an evidence-based platform for change. To this end, the projects have employed extensive community collaborations in developing the design, analysing the results, and in developing strategies to improve quality of life on the basis of the evidence generated.

The methodology is centred on a mixed-methods approach. Since its inception the program has employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for understanding community quality of life along with developing community action plans based on that evidence. The data collection consists of a quantitative telephone survey of 1000 residents with the sample stratified into high, medium, and low socio-economic neighbourhood groups. A stratified sample recruited randomly allows for survey results to be analysed for the city as a whole, as well by the neighbourhood clusters representing the socioeconomic and geographic diversity in Saskatoon. In addition, the research gathers qualitative, interview-based data by employing focus groups and one-on-one discussions with citizens.

The quantitative survey has three components: an evaluation of how respondents rate their personal quality of life, an evaluation of how respondents rate the elements quality of life in the city (community quality of life), and their thoughts on how to improve quality of life in the city.

The qualitative data collection consists of two phases. First, respondents to the telephone survey were asked if they would be interested in doing face-to-face interviews as a follow up. A sample of 90 respondents who agreed were then engaged in one-on-one interviews with questions about quality of life. Second, focus groups were conducted to discuss quality of life issues from the perspective of group participants. Focus group participants were drawn from community groups that typically are harder to reach and who represent smaller, non-mainstream populations. Over the years of the program, focus groups have engaged seniors, youth, First Nations and Métis, low income groups, recent immigrants, and the LGBT communities. The data collected from these mixed-methods have been analyzed separately and then integrated to produce technical, research oriented papers and “briefing” papers for use in community fora.

The final component of the research design and methodology is the use of

community gatherings to realize the participatory-action mandate of the research program. In the first few years of the program, the process employed a quality of life advisory committee to guide both the research and action elements of the program. The committee was made up of academics, community agents, and community activists. The most important mechanism for community engagement, however, is the community fora. These events are, in part, community gatherings employed to tap into knowledge and experience of community members at large who interact with each other to draw out implications of research results and to develop strategies for community action. These events are also, in part, celebrations of community commitment to work across many divisions.

Finally, the quality of life research program was designed and executed as a study with repeated data (time series). Focused as it was as an instrument to guide community change, the program needed to produce comparable information over time in order to inform an ongoing dialogue on quality of life and on implementation of change. To date we have completed five iterations of the research instruments on a three-year schedule, resulting in an evolving picture of the quality of life in one community spanning a generation.

Summary of Results

Over the years, research has consistently shown that a clear majority of residents in Saskatoon rate their quality of life highly, meaning 8 or 9 out of 10 indicating that their quality of life is 'good' or better (Figure 1) (Disano, Holden, McCrosky, Muhajarine, 2013). Further, respondents indicate optimism for quality of life in the city in the future; typically about 80% of the total sample state that Saskatoon is headed in the right direction, that as a community we are creating the conditions for improving quality of life. However, this overall picture hides many differences and important nuances. Our research has consistently found that evaluation of quality of life is tied to socio-economic status (SES) of neighbourhoods. Typically 50% of respondents from low socio-economic status neighbourhoods report their quality of life is 'excellent' or 'very good', compared to 80% of respondents from high SES neighbourhoods stating the same (Figure 2).

The research results have led to analysis of the data across three themes: the growing income gap, social inclusion, and responsibility for change (Chopin, Holden, B, Muhajarine & Popham, 2010). Analysis on these themes continues to show that income inequality in Saskatoon is widening, that it is related to quality of life, that the physical and social characteristics of neighbourhood impact quality of life, and, finally, that certain priority areas need greater attention in order to sustain and improve quality of life for all. For example, of the top 10 government spending priority areas identified by the respondents, health services figured as a top priority (one of top three), but so did infrastructure, specifically roads. These results show, given the opportunity, that members of the community could not only evaluate how they and their community are doing in terms of quality of life, but also declare what

needs to be done in the future to sustain, and improve, quality of life determinants in the community.

Government Spending Priorities				
2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
1. Health services	1. Health services	1. Roads	1. Roads	1. Roads
2. Protection services	2. Schools	2. Housing	2. Health services	2. Traffic Conditions
3. Social programs	3. Roads	3. Caregiver services	3. Protection services	3. Health Services
4. Recreation programs	4. Protection services	4. Neighbourhood organizations	4. Social programs	4. Schools
5. Schools	5. Social programs	5. Protection services	5. Schools	5. Social Programs
6. Care-giver services	6. Housing	6. Safety from violent crime	6. Housing	6. Public Transportation
7. Safety from property crime	7. Safety from property crime	7. Religious and spiritual activities	7. Snow removal	7. Protection Services (e.g. police)
8. Roads	8. Recreation programs	8. Schools	8. Safety from violent crime	8. Housing
9. Safety from violent crime	9. Safety from violent crime	9. Safety from property crime	9. Safety from property crime	9. Recreation Programs
10. Environment	10. Environment	10. Shops and services	10. Recreation programs	10. Safety from Violent Crime

Reflections on the Quality of Life Research

Community Relevance

Community relevance is a founding principle of the Quality of Life project. Community relevance was the unifying theme of discussion of the quality of life roundtable and a founding principle of CUISR. The community practitioners, decision-makers had a mandate for community building and they needed rigorous knowledge development to make the most of that mandate. Members of the academy had the skills to build evidence and the desire to apply those skills in service of creating a better community. The concept of quality of life seems to resonate with a broad audience. It is a positive label rather than one that suggests a deficit. Quality of life is understood as something everyone strives to achieve. It is inclusive not divisive. Most importantly, however, was the project's engagement of the community through its community fora which

brought a broad range of people and agencies (consistently drawing over one hundred people and twenty or more organizations) into the discussion about how to measure the community and how to create positive change. By including grassroots people in the development of the research, the discussion of the results and the organization of strategies for change, the research attained relevance in the community.

Equitable Participation

The project strove to be equitable and inclusive. Methodologically, the process was always vetted through the University of Saskatchewan's research ethics process to ensure that the research respected the rights of research subjects. The stratification of the quantitative sample meant that we heard about quality of life from across the socio-economic spectrum of the city. The qualitative research filled the gaps and enhanced inclusivity by reaching out to members and groups in the community who are marginalized or not heard from. This served both our desire to develop a complete picture of quality of life in Saskatoon and a desire to include the voices of those often not heard. The community work aimed to be as open and inclusive as possible. Community events were promoted widely, invitations were extended broadly through the community based organizations' networks, and reimbursement for transportation and child care costs were made available. Most community events were held in locations easily accessible to all. Those with lived experience, or 'First voice', were a priority of the project and were heard at all stages of the program. Finally, the stakeholders that participated in the process represented a broad and inclusive representation of the city: government agencies and community-based organisations; business organisations and anti-poverty activists; individuals and faith-based congregations—at some point in the quality of life research program people from all of these areas were involved in the process.

Innovative research design

The research design of the quality of life project started from a desire to be relevant to the community. Such a goal requires the application of mixed methods and diligent community participation. Employing sample stratification and qualitative methods ensured that the broadest possible community voice was recorded. Building in community participation through the community forum model went a long way to ensuring the research itself respected the community at large and engaged the community in a meaningful way in working on solutions to community issues as a community. Our research design broke the mold of community as research subjects and recipients of solutions, and instead enabled the community to be the researcher and to be the creator of solutions.

Action and Change

This project pursued new understanding of the community with the express intent of making the community better. Community-based research needs to incorporate the

concept of applied knowledge in order to succeed in achieving community relevance. The quality of life project uses the production of knowledge and dissemination of knowledge hand in hand with community engagement at all times as the unifying principle, to drive change in the community.

Final Reflections

Saskatoon's Quality of Life research program explicitly set out to create evidence-based change to improve the quality of life in the community. Simply put the plan was as follows: a) undertake a participatory, inclusive, action-oriented research program that identifies what needs to be accomplished to improve quality of life, create a community-based action plan for accomplishing these goals, have all the responsible agencies in the community adopt the action plan and implement the recommendations. Of course, community building is neither that simple nor that easy, which isn't to say that the program has failed to accomplish its goals. On the contrary, the quality of life research program has succeeded in producing a stream of community relevant information in a community relevant framework; it has succeeded in engaging a meaningful segment of the community in doing research and working on solutions to identified issues. But the program was neither the first nor the last to point out that lack of income and income inequality impacts individuals' ability to realize a good quality of life. It is neither the first nor the last to identify safety, housing, and transportation as important elements of quality of life. While the Comprehensive Community Action Plan that the quality of life program developed was not implemented (as planned), it did ignite and foster community-wide collaboration on local and specific issues that were addressed in the Plan. The community has subsequently developed a number of collaborative action strategies including a poverty reduction strategy and a Housing First program. The quality of life research program is the forerunner to these ambitious and targeted programs currently in play in Saskatoon.

Table 1. Key details of the Saskatoon quality of life research project, 2000-2015

Name(s) of Researcher(s)	Various and many: Dr. Nazeem Muhajarine, Dr. Jim Randall, Dr. Allison Williams, Dr. Ron Labonte, Bill Holden, Vanessa Charles, Jesse McCrosky, Jethro Cheng, Nicola Chopin, Heather Dunning, Tracy Carr, Kate Waygood
Research Project Title	Quality of Life in Saskatoon
Location of Research	Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Dates of Conducted Research	2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013

Partner(s)	City of Saskatoon, Saskatoon Health Region, United Way of Saskatoon, Saskatoon Star Phoenix, Social Sciences Research Laboratories
Funder(s)	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, City of Saskatoon, United Way of Saskatoon, Saskatoon Foundation, Saskatoon Health Region
Research Methods	Mixed methods, participatory action research
Links to Project Report(s)	http://www.usask.ca/cuisr/publications

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<http://communitybasedresearch.ca/resources/677%20National%20Summit/Participant%20Case%20Studies%20Oct%2029.compressed.pdf>.

About the Authors

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Foundation's Achievement Award, and 2014 Alumni Achievement Award from the School of Public Health and Health Sciences, U of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA.

References

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