

# Stress, Coping and the Impact on Parenting in the Downtown Residential Communities of Winnipeg

## Interview, Focus Group and Online Survey Results

Communities 4 Families Downtown  
Parent-Child Coalition – AGM  
June 25, 2008





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# Introduction and Purpose of Study

Communities 4 Family Downtown conducted community based interviews, focus group sessions and an online survey to examine the sources of stress experienced by parents residing in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg, including ways parents cope and how these stressors and ways of coping impacted on parenting. This report seeks to fill a gap in the research on understanding the stressors experienced by parents and families living in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg. The information collected will help inform the work of *Communities 4 Families*.



# Research Methods

Information from parents residing in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg was gathered one of three ways:

1. Through 10 *Personal Interviews* with parents living in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg (Interviews were conducted throughout the months of July 2007 through February 2008);
2. Through 7 *Roundtable Discussions* with parents in various downtown residential community locations (held during September 2007 through February 2008); and
3. Through a 15 minute *Anonymous Online Survey* targeting downtown residential community parents (conducted through Survey Monkey from July to October 2007).



# Research Methods Cont' d...

- This report focuses on the aggregate (collective) findings from the personal interviews, roundtable of focus group discussions held during the period from July 2007 to February 2008 and the aggregate results of the online survey
- Data Collection conducted by principle researcher and assistant - Majority of interviews, focus group sessions were conducted by Linda Lamirande, a community researcher
- Notes for some focus group sessions provided by Genny Funk-Unrau



# Ethics

- Research approach and research instruments developed by Research Team
- Research questions vetted through the Research Committee before ethical review
- The research commenced once ethics approval was granted by the University.
- Project was approved by the Psychology/ Sociology Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba in May 2007.
- Limitation: no gender specific questions



# Recruitment of Participants

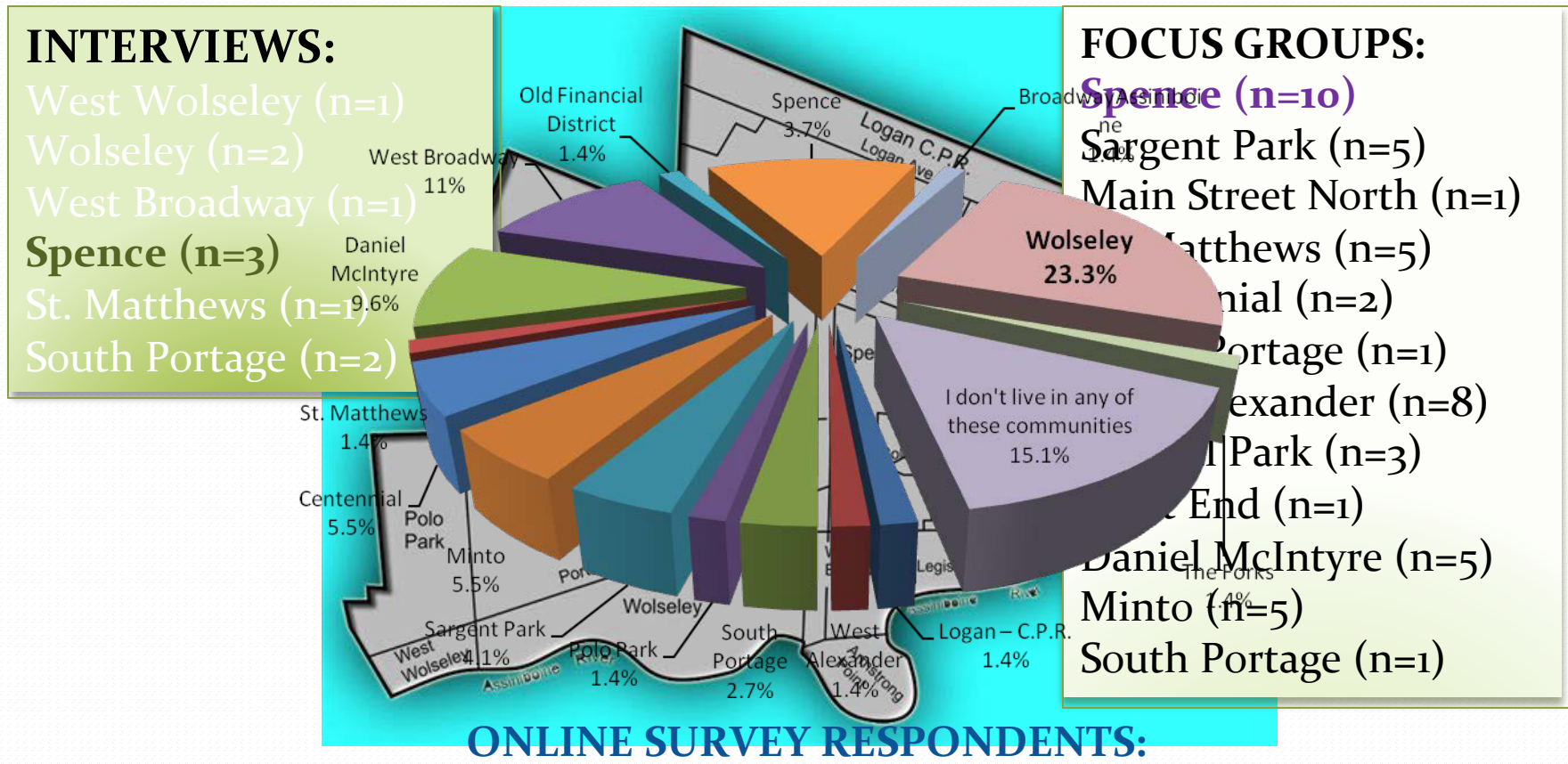
- Recruitment in partnership with the community partners involved through Communities 4 Families and the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada.
- Recruitment for the seven focus group sessions was done with specific community groups and organizations.
- Recruitment was done primarily through word of mouth and through an email strategy. Information about study was distributed through Communities 4 Families email and through the research team's networks.
- An email notification advising 500+ people about the opportunity to respond to online survey when the survey went “live” through [www.SurveyMonkey.com](http://www.SurveyMonkey.com).

# Number of Participants...

Key Informants	Estimated Target Number of Participants	Actual Number of Participants	Total Number of Personal Information Forms <b>Completed</b>
Personal Interviews with Parents	15	10	10
Focus Group Discussions with Parents	8 focus groups (possibly groups of 10-12) = 80-96	7 Focus groups held (Total # of participants = 55)	44
Online Survey	20	<b>60</b>	N/A
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>115-131</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>54</b>

Online Survey response rate exceeded our expectations in terms of visitors to the site. However there were not as many responses from newcomers. Limited use of the English language and the access to computers may account for lack of response from immigrant and newcomers and hence knowledge about the online survey.

# Communities Where Participants are from





# Findings

- Based on comments provided through interviews, focus group sessions and from online survey responses.
- Key findings organized into 9 specific categories along with many sub-categories:
  - Stressors identified parents (environmental and personal – 12 in total)
  - Stressors identified by new parents and newcomers
  - Recognizing stress
  - Symptoms of stress
  - Coping with stress
  - Impact on parenting
  - Identification of stressful times (time of day vs. time of year)
  - Positive and negative aspects of parental stress
  - Role of culture in diffusing stress
- Helpful Community Resources that need to be developed as identified by participants



# Stressors identified by Parents

- The responses provide insight into how parents define and understand how stress impacts upon their parenting. There is general consensus amongst the participants' responses that stress involves feeling tired, overwhelmed, frustrated and often includes difficulties managing various responsibilities and tasks related to family, relationships and work. Many participants stated that it was difficult to define and put into words exactly what stress means for them.

# Stressors identified by Parents Cont' d

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- Stressors categorized into two sets of factors that were either environmental or personal.
- **Environmental factors** are things that parents felt powerless to control. These included issues dealing with gangs and crime, addictions, and neighbourhood vandalism and crimes that ultimately impact on the safety concerns of the participants and their children.
- **Personal factors** were categorized by parents' ability to deal with their family schedules and personal time management. Other personal factors included parent's personal issues around finances, housing, lack of child care, need transportation and parking, health, dealing with teachers, schools and the child and family services system.



# Environmental Stressors

- Crime, Gangs, Drugs, alcohol, vandalism, theft:
- Gangs in particular were identified as being a major source of concern to parents. Participants feel that gangs are responsible for many of the criminal activities that occur within their communities. Some participants said they feared these gangs and the criminal activities within their communities. This fear along with threats from gangs has led some parents to relocate their families to other communities.
- The presence of addiction to drugs and alcohol within downtown communities was highlighted by many participants as being another problem associated with gangs and criminal activity. Gangs are seen as openly participating in activities such as property vandalism, drinking, and fighting. In addition, participants note that gang members appear to openly sell and smoke illicit drugs (i.e. pot, crack, meth, cocaine) with impunity.
- Participants report vandalism, crime and thefts in their neighbourhoods. Some participants reported feeling generally safe within their neighbourhood. The poverty reflected in the community was also identified as a stressor by some participants.
- Because of the crime, gangs, drugs and vandalism in the community, many parents who participated in the interviews, focus group sessions and online survey reported being constantly worried about their own personal safety and that of their children. Parents indicated that they worried about the influence gangs may have on their children and youth.



# Personal Stressors

- Eight personal factors were identified from the interview, focus group and online participants' responses as contributing to stressful experiences. These personal factors deal with family scheduling and personal time management including parent's personal issues around finances, housing, the lack of child care, transportation (lack of funds and/or places to park), health, dealing with teachers, schools, and the fear of child and family services.



# Stressors identified by New Parents

- New parents raised specific concerns around stressors they were dealing with which they did not previously have when they had no children.
- These new parents were primarily new mothers.
- Reduced Incomes
- Quality of relationships with partners seen as compromised with a new child. Many of these new mothers indicated feeling they had to sacrifice their relationships with the new family addition and that this is a source of stress for them.
- The loss of individuality, independence and self-identity was reported as a stressor as well as learning that with a new child, to accept that the schedule is not their own. For some parents this unstructured environment is stressful and many feared losing control.
- Many new mothers spoke of having difficulty in trying to understand, find and access resources within their communities that would help them deal with being a new parent. Information about community resources, they note, is not readily available.



# Stressors identified by Newcomers

- Many newcomers to Canada shared that they deal with many stressors on a day to day basis.
- They are dealing with the stress of learning a new language so they can communicate about their own needs and the needs of their children.
- They indicate that they are stressed with the housing conditions as these homes are often times unsuitable and inadequate for their family needs.
- And because they are on social assistance, newcomers reported their finances are not enough and that many times they are unable to pay the utilities.
- Newcomers worry about their children being bullied, not just at school but when they are playing in the neighbourhood.
- They report being stressed about the crime in their communities and fear for their own and their children's personal safety.



# Recognizing Stress

- We asked parents to comment on how they recognize when they are under stress. There is no uniform response from the participants on when they recognize they are under stress. Many of the participants shared feeling “angry, depressed, tense, agitated, impatient and anxious” when stress sets in.



# Symptoms of Stress

- Many of the participants clearly indicated that their sleep patterns were deeply affected by the stress in their lives. When they have difficulty sleeping because they cannot “shut off” their minds, they recognize this as being one of many symptoms related to stress.



# Coping with Stress

- Participants shared various coping mechanism used for reducing the stress they experience on a day to day basis. For some participants, removing themselves from the moment seems to work. This was characterized as “taking a time” out from the situation for themselves. Other reported coping with stress through “*crying, positive self-talk, going to the gym, ‘going out for a smoke,’ walking, exercising, cooking, taking deep breaths and using relaxation techniques.*”



# Impact on Parenting

- Parents shared that stress causes them to be less patient with their children.
- Parents said that they tend to do things themselves instead of making children do what has been asked of them (for instance, household chores) and they report feeling resentment toward the children at times followed by feeling guilty for feeling this and unsure whether they are doing a good job of parenting and just being there for their children.
- Sometimes stress causes parents to have unrealistic expectations of their children and many admitted to being easily frustrated with their children. One parent noted that when returning home from work with stress from the day, it affects her *“ability to parent effectively and I become short tempered and disinterested in my role as a parent.” “I feel I am inadequate and feel bad at getting mad at my children.”*
- Another parent noted: *“Sometimes I find myself short with my son and then feeling very guilty about it – I’m learning to talk to him about what happened – I tend to blame others for my life – I’m working to take responsibility – it’s a tough one – learning to let go of how I was raised as I find myself saying and doing what my mom did to me.”*



# Children's Awareness

- Participants report that their children are aware when they are dealing with stress.
- Children are very perceptive: New mothers note their babies can feel their tenseness when they are stressed. Other parents note their children can feel their mood changing and this causes their children to be uneasy and they experience stress themselves.
- Children become aware that parents are dealing with stress when there is a change in parents' moods. Another mother noted that “*my son knows that I am stressed – it usually comes out in his behaviour. If I want space, he clings to me more. Sometimes he is angry and it's hard for a three year old to be rushed around all the time.*” One mother noted that her child doesn't like to be with her when she is stressed and exhibits a reaction that mirrors what the mother feels when under stress:

*My child prefers to be with other people when I'm stressed. She doesn't want to play with me because I'm not fun. She doesn't want to eat because I'm not eating. She cries more. She wants to be held more. She feels bad because I feel bad.*



# Coping with Stress

- Participants indicate that they draw upon internal as well as external resources in helping them cope through stressful situations and events. Parents' defined internal resources as those they are able to draw from within themselves. External resources were characterized as resources that are outside of themselves such as friends, families, and money among other tangible resources and community services.



# Identification of Stressful Times

- Most reported stressful moment: in the morning – difficult getting everyone out of bed and out the door in time for school and work.
- For some: after school was tagged as the most stressful point in their day.
- Evenings or bedtime was considered stressful by other parents. Children are often restless and resistant to sleep and parent feel tired from the stress and activities of the day.
- The change in weather from fall to winter was flagged by the majority of parents as being the most stressful time of the year.
- Other Stressful times in the Year include:
  - Christmas holiday season and birthdays were especially stressful times within the year as these events have a detrimental impact on the family's finances;
  - back to school times within the year (at the end of summer, after Christmas and after spring break).
  - Summer presents a challenge as there is no school and often times there are no structured activities for children and little money to engage in recreational activities.



# Positive and Negative Aspects

- **Positive:** Parents say that stress motivates them to make changes to improve their situation. Stress motivates parents to find someone to help them (i.e. like seeking out counselling) or it motivates them to look for resources within their community to help them alleviate the stress in their family life. Stress has been described as having a positive impact on parents in that it helps them grow and learn about themselves and helps parents to “put things into perspective”. It teaches and helps parents to look at their situations differently and forces them to find alternative and sometimes creative solutions for dealing with parental stressors.
- **Negative:** feelings of depression, sadness, frustration, anxiety, and isolation which make parents doubt their parental abilities and whether they are doing a good job. The negative side of stress also means that parents sometimes say things to their children that they normally wouldn't say or mean.



# Role of Culture in Diffusing Stress

- Very few of the participants indicated that culture played a part in diffusing everyday stressors faced on a daily basis. Many of the participants clearly indicated that culture is not relevant or that it doesn't play any role in their lives. For the Aboriginal participants in this study many indicated that culture “*helps to reduce the stress*” but no elaboration on exactly how culture helps reduce stress was provided.



# Helpful Community Resources

- Lastly, parents involved in this study identified a number of resources which need to be developed and/or implemented within the downtown communities to better help children, families, communities and newcomers reduce everyday stressors.
- These recommendations have been divided into sub-categories that focus on parental, family, community and newcomer needs.
- Many of these recommendations are interchangeable and could easily fit into any one of the other categories. They are in no particular preference and/or order.



# Parental Needs

- *Community billboard for temporary employment that pays weekly for small jobs;*
- *Skills bank;*
- *Need ways to cope with anger without fighting;*
- *Service to help get photo identification to open a bank account;*
- *There should be career / education resources and guides that are informative and realistic;*
- *A way of getting information to parents. A community bill board or email system that lets parents know what 's available out in the community;*
- *Parenting sharing circles;*
- *More support groups for pregnant mothers;*
- *Need "mom 's helper" (support line) on phone – 24/7;*
- *More programs for fathers and children;*
- *Working single parent social groups;*
- *Parent groups for parents with preschool kids;*
- *Groups for blended families;*
- *Dealing with shared custody issues;*
- *More programs for couples on parenting;*
- *Being around other parents and talking about personal experiences;*
- *Mom's groups other parents at play structure/school pick up; and*
- *I want the government to hold my job for me for 3 years and pay me a living wage (not \$100 per month) to stay home with my child.*



# Family Needs

- *There are no community programs for family activities just for kids;*
- *Need to show kids a positive lifestyle;*
- *We need more centers that introduce new elements and holiday celebrations. Celebrations help balance the work load stress of school and home life;*
- *More counselling services;*
- *Needs – it's difficult to find a place that offers free counseling (therapy) for a parent and child together;*
- *There's also no free sports activities for the kids even just getting a few kids together to teach them now to play basketball or something;*
- *Playgroups – right now it is difficult to fit schedules;*
- *Make programs available in the evenings because difficult to fit family's schedules;*
- *Need family activities in the evenings and on weekends;*
- *Needs supports open longer hours;*
- *More programs for parents and kids;*
- *Age appropriate activities for children across the different age ranges; and*
- *Women's and men's sharing circles – a ladies craft night on the weekend – more evening activities in the evenings for parents and children.*



# Community Needs

- *An accessible central resource list;*
- *Library has a lot of programs and information about free programming – information not available / known to community residents – there needs to be a better way to make this information known;*
- *Affordable respite centers;*
- *Babysitting co-ops;*
- *CFS Community advocates;*
- *A tool lending library;*
- *Activity centers with later hours for the older kids/teenagers;*
- *All night sports programs. Supervised night activities;*
- *Public Health Nurse;*
- *Cultural programs – different cultures – share;*
- *Kids going to outings (hockey games, etc.) – aren't getting the free tickets – community women don't know how to access;*
- *Need place for kids to run in winter (safe environment)*
- *More help with children with special needs (respite, groups with others in like situations);*



# Community Needs Cont' d...

- *More child friendly buildings --such as a high rise that has a community centre attached to it and a floor as common area for visiting--like on the fifth floor a space for people to have tea, coffee, resources, and outside bar-b-que area, and a room for children's parties, and if possible the roof top with a high fenced in area with a playground and trees). An ideal dream I think needs to happen--a community centre in a high rise or a high rise for families and working poor;*
- *Quality accessible daycare is very helpful but it can be VERY stressful trying to find a space in a quality daycare – we need community support and pressure so that all kinds of workplaces provide flexible scheduling for workers who are parents;*
- *I think kids need to be involved in sports, music or other initiatives that interest them. There needs to be more programming that is publicly known with little or no cost to children and families;*
- *Engage youth in healthy, non-violent activities - enforce by-laws regarding public drunkenness - more public education teaching acceptable parenting practices and personal responsibility - community policing;*
- *Community patrols, more police presence;*
- *More or a constant police presence in the neighborhood. 24/7 patrol of a community – officer/team with increased property taxes. They would be part of the neighborhood and may deter the drive-in criminal element. They would be more of a health and wellness focus and not punitive;*



# Needs Identified by Newcomers

- The immigrants that participated in this study noted specific needs that should be implemented in order for them to live stress free in their adopted country. These were highlighted as:
  - *Tutors for us and our children to learn English;*
  - *Orientation for immigrants with a sponsor person assigned to a family for 6 months to 1 year;*
  - *Resources for people of the same culture and language;*
  - *More free or affordable activities in the community;*
  - *Drop in for kids or community centre sports;*
  - *Our own resource centres;*
  - *Parenting support groups and orientation to parenting “Canadian Style”;*
  - *More cultural awareness and support in the schools;*
  - *People of the same culture get together and read the Koran and pray – this is supportive; and*
  - *“Teach us and give us time!”*



# Parental Quote

*Non-denominational programs that don't have to be Aboriginal-oriented, though I know the importance of programming like that and don't expect it to be changed. When I was a teenage mother, there was no programming telling me how to be a good person, how to run a household, how to handle conflict, how to be a good role model or leader. There were basic programs that felt they did these things. I feel they were wrong and not oriented towards a general attendance. I would like to see a wading pool every few blocks ... I would like to see park programs, where every playground has summer activities for kids, possibly run by local teens. Every school should have a summer program, not as a daycare but running almost as often, with crafts, a healthy lunch and outdoor/gym activities. I would like to see more supervision in every community, more role modeling for young parents and families over all. I would like to see people go into communities to do things, rather than just leaving communities to make things happen. I would like to see more guidance, less governance. People need to stop taking for granted that we as parents know what's best for our kids. We know what's best for US to survive. We don't always know how to raise them to be good unstressed people.*



# Where to get copy of report?

Full report available online at  
<http://www.communities4families.ca/home.html>  
<http://www.fncaringociety.com>

## Suggested Citation of Report:

Bennett, M. (2008). *Stress, Coping and the Impact on Parenting in the Downtown Residential Communities of Winnipeg: Interview, Focus Group and Online Survey Results*. Winnipeg, MB: Communities 4 Families Downtown Parent-Child Coalition. Available at:  
<http://www.communities4families.ca>.



**THE END**  
**Thank you!**

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