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JOURNAL OF HUNGER & POVERTY

**STRUGGLES, STRENGTHS AND SOLUTIONS: EXPLORING FOOD SECURITY  
WITH YOUNG URBAN ABORIGINAL MOMS**

Cyndy Ann Baskin, Bonnie Guarisco, Ruth Koleszar-Green, Nadya Melanson, Cheryl  
Osawamick

**ABSTRACT**

This article begins with a literature review of factors affecting food security for young Aboriginal mothers. It goes on to describe a unique research approach that combines an Aboriginal research methodology, the use of a secure website, and the creation of an art mural that was implemented in conducting original research with young Aboriginal mothers in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The article offers a number of concrete social policy recommendations to address issues of food insecurity for young Aboriginal mothers which could have applications for all lone mothers living in urban settings. It concludes with strategies and ideas for research to improve the lives of marginalized women and their children.

## **Introduction**

In previous research projects with urban Aboriginal youth, participants easily comprehended their life experiences within the realities of the current impacts of colonization. A striking comment from one youth - "mostly we're taken away by child welfare because of poverty and this translates into neglect by them" (Baskin, 2007a; Baskin, 2007b) highlights one of the factors leading to this current project with young Aboriginal mothers. Inspiration for this project came in the form of inspiring words from young Aboriginal mothers who, despite financial hardship, found the strength to do the best they could for their children. This research project in the area of food security explored food choices and access; relationships between food insecurity, housing and child welfare; strengths; and advocacy related to food policies.

## **Literature review**

Although this research project focused on Aboriginal women in an urban centre, the information included in the literature review cites data, including statistics, that come from the municipal, provincial and national levels.

## ***Definition of food security***

Ryerson University's Centre for Studies in Food Security (CSFS) (2008) defines food security as having the following five components:

Availability: sufficient food

Accessibility: economic access to food

Adequacy: food that is nutritious and safe

Acceptability: culturally acceptable food

Agency: policies that enable food security

## ***Current situation of food security for Aboriginal women***

According to the national Census, 1,172,790 Canadians, who participated in the survey, reported some Aboriginal ancestry, which is about 4% of the total population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008). In this same census, 54% of Aboriginal peoples reported living in urban centers and 29% of Aboriginal children were living with a lone mother. Statistics from 2003 indicate that 52.1% of all Aboriginal children throughout Canada were identified as poor and 46% of the Aboriginal population had an annual income of \$10,000 or less-- well below the poverty line (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003).

Social isolation has been strongly linked to food insecurity (Tarasuk, 2004). As Canadian society generally seems to value a private family sphere, young mothers are often left without a social network that they can turn to in times of food insecurity. As many Aboriginal peoples are being displaced from their home communities and moving into urban centres, there is a higher chance that there are less familiar bonds and supports to assist young single mothers living in cities.

Some research links housing issues to food security. Miko and Thompson (2004) interviewed two lone parent Aboriginal women in Winnipeg, Manitoba to explore the issues they faced in securing safe, affordable housing. In this city, there are over 3,000 families currently on the waiting list for rent-geared-to-income accommodations, with

many of the homes not large enough for families with multiple children. This lack of affordable housing could mean that many Aboriginal lone parents are spending the majority of their income on housing which causes financial shortages that result in food insecurity.

Across the country, employment is a struggle for the majority of lone parent Aboriginal families as well, especially since 75% of them have children aged 0-6 (White, et al., 2003). When taking this statistic into consideration, the younger the child is, the greater the chance that s/he will live in an impoverished family. Indeed, children 0-2 years old make up 16% of those living in impoverished families (Leschies, et al., 2006). Overall, more than 40% of all Canadian children who live below the poverty line are in lone female parent households (Guccairda, Celasun and Stewart, 2004; Leschies, et al., 2006). Within Ontario specifically, 62% of single mothers are on Ontario Works (OW) - a government social assistance program - and another 10% rely on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2005). Neither of these programs provides enough financial resources for families living in urban centres. Food security is a key determinant of life, health, dignity, progress, justice and sustainable development for all peoples (McIntyre, 2004). Yet the structural inequalities resulting from colonization have contributed to contemporary manifestations of oppression for Aboriginal peoples where concepts such as dignity and justice are often non-existent. The myriad of social, economic and political issues affecting Aboriginal peoples and communities are virtually the same across Canada and have resulted in the descendants of the original peoples of this land as not having the same level of overall health and well being as other Canadians (Health Canada, 2003).

### *Attempts at helping*

There are a number of temporary measures introduced through public social support programs that are meant to assist low-income earners in addressing issues of poverty. However, these services are temporary and over-extended, meaning that they are only intended to assist in times of crisis, rather than affect long-term systemic change.

In urban areas, food banks, for example, are intended to provide short-term relief from hunger (Scruby and Beck, 2007). They are immediate, temporary solutions to empty cupboards, but they do not offer long-term change needed to address food insecurity (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2006). By accessing food banks, women are finding an alternative method of feeding their families. A study that looked at food insecurity with women who accessed charitable food assistance programs in Toronto, demonstrated that women find other means of securing food, including sending children to friends "or family's" homes for meals, delaying payments of bills, forgoing services such as telephones, and selling or pawning possessions in order to raise money. These means of survival are some of the ways that women will work within the system to ensure that their children can eat. However, these other means of securing food can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of mothers (Tarasuk, 2001).

### *Aboriginal women's organizations are taking the lead*

Aboriginal women have always resisted maltreatment and, especially over the past few decades, have been regaining their rightful places in their communities. Throughout

Canada, Aboriginal women activists are at the forefront of the decolonization and healing processes of Aboriginal peoples (Howard-Bobbiwash, 2003). National organizations that focus on the re-strengthening and political actions of Aboriginal women, such as the National Aboriginal Women's Association and Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada have been working diligently to further the rights Aboriginal women. In working to expose the inequalities that Aboriginal women face, these organizations also highlight the strengths that Aboriginal women carry in order to overcome the historical traumas affecting them (Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, 2006).

There are also a number of grassroots services in urban centres across Canada that assist Aboriginal women. These services may offer educational programs and/or peer support driven services where young parents come together to socialize and network. In building a stronger sense of community amongst these young families, urban Aboriginal agencies are attempting to address the social isolation and lack of community support that colonization has created. In Toronto, Native Women's Resource Centre offers Aboriginal women many supports aimed at advancing their lives, such as education and literacy programs, traditional parenting programs and a food and clothing bank (NWRC, 2007).

#### ***Toronto food charter and Toronto food strategy***

In 1976, Canada signed the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, which includes "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger" (Toronto Public Health, 2007:18). Although the City of Toronto has supported this national commitment to food security since then, it was not until 2001, that Toronto City Council adopted the Toronto Food Charter. This Charter is the official vision of a food secure Toronto. Of most significance to this literature review is the Charter's statement that "every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally-appropriate food" (Toronto Public Health, 2007:5).

When Toronto adopted this Charter, it committed to several goals in the areas of nutrition, income adequacy, and urban agriculture. However, the question of how to implement the goals of the Charter has only just begun to be addressed. In 2007, Toronto Public Health released a document which asked for feedback on how "a Toronto food strategy [could] improve health, promote economic development and social justice, protect the environment, and reflect and celebrate community diversity" (Toronto Public Health, 2007:17). Feedback on the document relating to Toronto's Aboriginal population was provided through CSFS which the research team kept in mind while conducting our project.

#### **Theoretical Lens**

An anti-colonial discursive framework highlights key issues such as colonialism and resistance. Many academics (Alfred, 2004; Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2000; Dei, et al., 2004; Kelley, 2000) write about the definition and ongoing effects of colonization. According to Alfred (2004:89), "... the true meaning of „colonialism“... is the fundamental denial of our freedom to be Indigenous in a

meaningful way, and the unjust occupation of the physical, social, and political spaces we need in order to survive as Indigenous peoples”.

Indigenous bodies and knowledges have survived in spite of colonialism. Prior to colonization, Indigenous knowledges explained world views and today these knowledges are the means by which Aboriginal peoples can challenge dominant discourse. Anti-colonial thought argues that power and discourse are not possessed entirely by the colonizer. The colonized also have the power to challenge and subvert the “oppressive structures of power and privilege. Discursive agency and power of resistance also reside in and among colonized groups” (Dei, et al., 2004:300). Thus, an anti-colonial lens is not simply against colonial discourses. Rather, it promotes our own powerful discourses to guide us as researchers in using our own Indigenous concepts and cultural frames of references in our work. It encourages researchers to make use of oral traditions as forms of resistance and a celebration of our knowledges and cultures. Anti-colonial discourse also “entails a shift away from a sole preoccupation with victimization” (Dei, et al., 2004:301).

Several North American Aboriginal female authors apply an anti-colonial lens to how poverty and its many impacts is gendered (Anderson, 2000; Anderson and Lawrence, 2003; Gunn-Allen, 1986; LaDuke, 1997; Lavell-Harvard and Corbiere-Lavell, 2006; Maracle, 2003; Monture-Angus, 1995; 1999; Sunseri, 2000). For example, Aboriginal women face structural racism and sexism as evidenced by the Indian Act which continues to discriminate against Aboriginal women and their children. However, Aboriginal women are not passive victims of such discrimination. Rather, they have been at the forefront of resistance movements for decades – from pressuring the state to make changes to the Indian Act to creating social and cultural agencies for Aboriginal families in urban areas (Anderson, 2000; Anderson and Lawrence, 2003; Lavell-Harvard and Corbiere-Lavell, 2006; Maracle, 2003).

An anti-colonial framework is also about decolonization which involves a process of dismantling the colonial relationship between Aboriginal peoples and dominant society and forming a new relationship. An anti-colonial framework emphasizes that it is not only Indigenous peoples who need to decolonize – the colonizers must as well. This stance is taken by authors such as Kelley (2000:13) who writes, “colonialism results in the massive destruction of whole societies – societies that not only function at a high level of sophistication and complexity, but that might offer the West valuable lessons about how we might live together and remake the modern world.” Settler societies have lost out on the knowledge sustained by Indigenous peoples, which could greatly contribute to their quality of life and to the future of our earth. Thus, an anti-colonial stance advocates for a future that privileges *all* knowledges equally for the betterment of *all* humanity.

### **Methodology**

The literature available on conducting research with Aboriginal peoples is consistent regarding the privileging of Aboriginal knowledges, ethics and cultural guidelines when working on projects with Aboriginal peoples. Several directives have emerged from Indigenous scholars on how ethical guidelines for research centre on respect, reciprocity

and the importance of relationships with those who participate in projects (American Indian Law Center, 1999; Battiste and Henderson, 2000; CIHR, 2007; Mihesuah, 1996; RCAP, 1997; Schnarch, 2004; Smith, 1999). These guidelines include that research findings be the intellectual property of the community; be of direct benefit to communities; transfer skills; and include mechanisms for continued gains and work. Keeping these guidelines in mind, this research project implemented an innovative methodology, which combined three methods to gathering data:

- 1) Storytelling circles which included spiritual/cultural practices.
- 2) Since some participants might be uncomfortable sharing information related to food security in the presence of social work researchers, they were invited to do so anonymously through a secure internet site created solely for this project.
- 3) As some participants might prefer to express themselves visually, they were invited to imagine a food secure Aboriginal community in Toronto and create a mural that reflected this community.

Within the storytelling circles, the concept of "food security" was explained and, in addition to participants being invited to share their stories about food, visual prompts, in the form of small posters made by the research team, were also present if they needed points of reference. The information on the posters came from the literature review on food security and from the team's understandings.

The website, created by an Aboriginal designer with the direction of one of the team members, incorporated pictures, symbols and a list of community services with descriptions and contact information. The invitation via the site stated, "Would you like to add anything about food security through this confidential site that you did not feel comfortable sharing during our circle?" During the research circles, computers were available in a separate room for the exclusive use of the participants.

For the making of the art mural, the research team first met with the artist to orient her to the project and explain her role as a facilitator. During the workshop, the team was careful not to impose our ideas and interpretations on the participants' art. Rather, team members asked participants to describe what they were painting and took notes throughout.

Another way in which Aboriginal worldviews and ethical guidelines were incorporated into this project was through the hiring of Aboriginal women as research assistants. This was just as important as the research project itself because providing opportunities for women to learn how to conduct research by implementing Aboriginal methodologies, or further their skills in this area, contributes to our self-determination. It was also important that some of the research assistants be young Aboriginal mothers for they would be living similar experiences as those of the research participants.

The recruitment of research participants occurred through our partnership with an Aboriginal women's social service agency (NWRC), flyers that were distributed amongst agencies and personal contacts with community members by the research team. We did our best to take into consideration the needs of young Aboriginal mothers

so that they would be better able to participate in the project. Thus, we provided public transportation fares for them and their children, on site child care and the inclusion of their children in the making of the mural, healthy, traditional Aboriginal food, an informal, comfortable space they were familiar with, and honouraria for participation.

### **Demographics**

The research team developed a typical demographics form which each of the participants completed. This is presented in Appendix A.

### **Data Analysis**

All members of the research team took notes during the storytelling circles and the art mural workshop. They frequently checked their notes with the research participants for accuracy. Next, the team met with their notes. They read through the notes searching for major themes and then organized the notes under each theme. The team came to a consensus on how research participants' responses would be organized. Overall, there were many similarities in what the participants were suggesting, but differences were also included as it was important to privilege all the stories.

We did not use pseudonyms or numbers to represent participants' names in the data analysis sections. Our rationale for this decision is connected to issues of Aboriginal identity. The team had discomfort with assigning false names or numbers to Aboriginal women as these were tools of the colonizers who changed our original names to English ones for their benefit and who continue to assign numbers to those of us who are "registered Indians" according to the Indian Act.

### **Findings**

Findings from this research project reveal content on some topics, such as food banks and traditional food access, which are directly related to food security. Other areas that emerged from the participants' stories which affect food security in indirect ways were, for example, income, child welfare and the urban Aboriginal community. These young mothers emphasized, however, that all of the topics they discussed impact and influence one another and they articulated clear social policy recommendations that included all of these areas.

#### ***Food banks***

Almost all of the research participants discussed the use of food banks by framing them as either non-Aboriginal or Aboriginal. The majority of participants were critical of non-Aboriginal food banks, saying that these tended to mostly give out "canned food", "day old bread" and "milk where the expiry date is up." One participant summed up her critique of these food banks with:

Some of the food banks that I have used in the past that were non-[Aboriginal] didn't give me that much to provide my family with. First, they did not give fresh fruits or vegetables. Second, they did not give out any meat. Third, they did not give out food that could make a complete meal.

The young women in this project spoke more favourably about food banks that are located within Aboriginal agencies. Many reported that they no longer go to food banks at non-Aboriginal agencies because they get more healthy food at the Aboriginal ones. The quality of the food and the availability of other necessities at Aboriginal agencies with food banks were commented on by one of the participants:

[Aboriginal] food banks that I use always give a variety of different food such as soup, bread, fruits, vegetables and frozen food. I also get baby food and cereal, diapers, wipes and formula. Since I am a registered mother [in a program at the agency], I also get food vouchers, which I usually use to buy meat and toiletries.

The women in this project also had suggestions for all food banks. One of these was connected to the teaching of children: "I think all food banks should give out food that has all four of the food groups. That would be a start to helping children get proper nutritional meals and also teach them to eat healthy." Another idea was connected to the access of food banks: "I think it would be a great idea for some of these food banks to deliver food to parents who do not have a vehicle or childcare."

### *Traditional food access*

All of the women in the project agreed that accessing Aboriginal traditional food while living in Toronto is difficult. They spoke of how there are no Aboriginal grocery stores or even Aboriginal sections in stores, or restaurants in Toronto. As one woman stated, "other cultures have [specific] neighbourhoods or special stores, but Aboriginal peoples do not have any of that." According to these women, Aboriginal agencies do not serve traditional foods unless it is at a special event such as a ceremonial feast. Or, as one of the participants said, "you have to wait for a pow wow [to happen here] to get traditional foods." Lack of access to traditional foods was concerning to these young mothers as they tied their Aboriginal cultures to such foods and wanted to be able to pass this knowledge on to their children. The participants were unanimous in stating that if they could affordably access traditional foods, they would do so.

### *Food within an urban Aboriginal community*

One of the prompt quotes shown to the research participants read "food affects us physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually." Responses to how food affects women and their children physically focused on how their health is compromised when they do not have enough nutritious food. Women also believed that they are impacted negatively on an emotional level as they become stressed when they do not have enough food for their children. On a psychological level, participants stated that they believe healthy foods affect the brain and "make people smarter", so it is particularly important for growing children. This belief is supported by scientific research which finds that food has profound impacts on the psychological functions of children, such as enhancing problem-solving abilities and concentration levels and improving reading and non-verbal IQs (Associate Parliamentary Food and Health Forum, 2008; Connors, 1989; Gomez-Pinilla, 2008; Holford & Fobbester, 2007; Logan, 2007; Portwood, 2006). On a spiritual level, participants discussed how traditional foods are always connected to spiritual ceremonies that all cultures have their own foods and that Aboriginal peoples are not functioning at their best when they are not eating these foods.

The young women in this project consistently connected food to Toronto's Aboriginal community. One way in which they did so was by relaying their stories about who they receive help from in accessing food. Help came from their mothers, extended family members, friends and Aboriginal agencies. However, the participants also pointed out that some women do not receive much help as they do not have family members in the city and they do not know where to go for assistance. One woman added another important point by saying, "I've had some of my family members come to Toronto from up north and [when they are in need of help], they are too shy to ask." A few of the participants talked about being cautious about receiving help from extended family members, in-laws and the fathers of their children. They feared that such help could be withdrawn at any time and then what would they do?

The majority of the participants spoke at length about the roles and importance of Aboriginal agencies in their lives. They were able to point out all the services they access at these agencies such as clothing banks, pre/postnatal teachings, parent relief, and children's activities. The young women also explained that Aboriginal agencies are helpful in providing "treats" for their children such as summer camps. Participants viewed these agencies as important in another way - they provide opportunities to socialize and meet new people.

These participants also had several suggestions as to how Aboriginal agencies could be more helpful to them and their children. For some women, these suggestions focused on location:

"I think that there should be more widely spread organizations in different areas of the GTA [Greater Toronto Area]. It is hard for single families to access agencies when they're not in the same area as where you live." Other participants offered suggestions which centered on access to services:

I think that more [Aboriginal] organizations should give out food vouchers for families without the criteria that you have to always be attending programs on a regular basis to get them. It's hard for some mothers to always go to programs and it would be nice for them to get vouchers like those who always attend. These mothers need food as much as someone who always attends the programs.

### *Income*

As the majority of the young mothers who participated in this research project received their income from Ontario Works (OW), they had a lot to say on this topic. The overriding theme that emerged about OW was that the amount of money is inadequate to meet the needs of mothers and their children. As one woman stated, "When the cheque arrives, you have to ask yourself if you are going to buy groceries or pay this month's rent." Trying to live on OW is a constant juggling act where women "have to steal from Peter to give to Paul" as the saying goes.

Participants also raised concerns about the pregnancy allowance that is part of OW which provides \$40.00 per month for extra needs, such as more healthy food and vitamins, of pregnant women. As one of the young mothers explained, "I don't agree with the pregnancy allowance that women receive. \$40.00 a month is just plain ridiculous when you have to provide yourself with pre-natal vitamins and proper fruits and vegetables for a whole month." If a pregnant woman is paying for pre-natal vitamins and iron tablets, that leaves her \$5.00 per month for extra fruit and vegetables. One of the young mothers spoke about how lack of income directly affects her health:

**I nurse my son. As a nursing mother, every time he is at my breast I lose between 200-500 calories, so if there is not enough food for me, I lose a lot of calories, which are not replaced. This causes health problems, and with no proper health care benefits, if something happens, what can I do?**

As in other areas of this research project, the participants offered ideas for improvements to OW. One suggested "parents receive a metropass for transportation in their assistance so that they can get around to different agencies where they can find good resources and get help if needed." Another woman urged that "OW be updated [financially] to a place where [recipients] can prepare themselves to contribute to society by getting ahead and going to school so they don't have to be on assistance for long."

#### ***Child care and Transportation***

All of the research participants were in agreement that childcare is expensive and there are not enough subsidized spaces for mothers who need them. This is one of the major barriers for young mothers to attend school or gain employment. One of the participants told her story about recently having to drop out of college because she could not attend school and care for her toddler child. She was waiting for a subsidy even though there was a day care space open for her.

Several women shared their stories about the difficulties of accessing services due to problems with transportation. Women spoke at length of having to take small children, strollers and baby bags on public transportation; of having to lift all these up the streetcar steps or carry them down subway stairs; of babies being fussy and small children getting restless; of other public transportation patrons bumping into them or their children, not offering to help carry a stroller down the stairs or "giving them dirty looks" if a baby or child cries or makes noise. And that is just the trip *to* the food bank! The way back is all this, plus carrying bags of food. As one mother said, "if I don't have child care, I can't get to the food bank."

Research participants also linked the challenges of transportation to poverty: "when you are poor, you cannot have a car" and "TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] is costly - it costs almost \$6.00 to get somewhere and back."

#### ***Education***

Participants spoke about both the importance of education and the challenges of it. They recognized that "you cannot get anywhere in the world without education." Women

described going on to post-secondary education as difficult mostly due to the financial strain. Even though some Aboriginal peoples with status under the Indian Act can access funding for post secondary education, it is not guaranteed and is never enough to live on. In addition, First Nation educational programs prefer to fund students who have recently graduated from secondary school, which is often not the case for young mothers.

### ***Child Welfare***

Research participants voiced strong opinions on the prompt quote "child welfare comes into Aboriginal peoples' lives because of poverty." These young mothers understand that poverty is often seen as neglect when it comes to Aboriginal families. According to one, "we are not neglectful of our children. We are poor." Some participants wondered why provincial child welfare continues to ignore Aboriginal mothers' values, cultures and needs. They asked such questions as, "who is to say that our ways are wrong?" and "why are we judged by other peoples' cultural standards?" Women acknowledged that there are benefits to being involved with a Children's Aid Society (CAS). As one of them put it, "if you're involved with CAS, you can get food vouchers and other kinds of help." However, such benefits come with a cost as another woman added, "but who wants them involved? That is what you're trying to avoid." All of the research participants agreed with one woman who made a statement on how help needs to come from CAS in preventative ways: "They [CAS workers] ask „how can we help you?" But by the time they get involved, help comes too late. Help me before I lose my home. Offer me some relief from the struggle."

### ***Responsibility***

When it came to the area of responsibility for food security and all of the factors that affect it, research participants responded in two distinct ways - individual and structural. Some of the individualistic responsibility comments included "it's easy to access resources if you really try, " "people make their own choices in eating, " "some parents do not buy the things that they really need, " and " a lot of mothers find it hard to get out of old bad habits."

In responding from a structural analysis to prompts from the literature such as, "Aboriginal families are two to four times more likely to experience food insecurity in Toronto than the rest of the people here", participants' comments included: There is an assumption that if you are brown and do not have enough money, you must be drinking or getting high.

I think it's very unfair to all women or families to say it's their fault to not have. The cards are stacked against us [minorities, single parent families, Aboriginal peoples]. When one says this I feel they are taking away from the very real struggles that people endure every day.

In response to another prompt from the literature, "food prices in Toronto are lower than in most other countries, but low wages, low social assistance rates and the high cost

of housing still cause many people here to go hungry", one participant added the following:

This statement makes me want to get political. I really have a problem with the direction that Canada is taking. The welfare state is deteriorating. The government is changing Acts like the Landlord and Tenant Act [which does not help low income people] with rent controls. There are OW cut backs and minimum wage is going up too slowly. Who does most of the food banks - churches and charity organizations because the state is not fulfilling its duty.

### *Aboriginal women's strengths*

A great deal of enthusiasm emerged from the young mothers when responding to the prompt, "Aboriginal women are resourceful and have many strengths." Responses that reinforced this statement included, "It's in our makeup [to be strong], "You do whatever it takes to take care of your family", and "Doing this [being a single mother] alone takes a lot of discipline."

However, most of the research participants also saw their strength as a down fall at times because they often find it difficult to ask for help and so do everything on their own. As one of the participants stated, "**As a mother I have a hard time asking for help. I feel that [child's name] is my son and I should be able to handle whatever comes our way.**"

Some examples of Aboriginal women's strength and resourcefulness centered on dealing with the system such as OW. According to participants, they need to educate themselves about what is available because "OW will not tell you unless you ask about it" and then they must stand up for their rights and advocate for themselves by, for example, writing letters to access what they are entitled to.

One of the mothers in the project told her story about how she went about initiating change within a children's program that her child attended. The bus that picked up and returned the children to this program did not come directly to her apartment building. She had to walk her child to the nearest major intersection for pick up and drop off. She did not agree with this arrangement, so she joined the parents' council of the program and was able to change it along with making many other contributions over time.

Research participants also spoke about their survival skills and how they help one another. They talked about shopping together at basic or wholesale stores where food tends to be up to 50% cheaper than other grocery stores and then sharing what they purchase and a taxi home. Another way in which participants help each other is by sharing meals but they "also do this for good company."

Finally, young mothers talked about a strategy they favour for working towards social change. All were in agreement with one of the women who stated, "Aboriginal women work together because one voice is not as strong as 20 when we want something to change."

### ***Art mural***

In response to the invitation to imagine, dream and create through a mural “ a food secure Aboriginal community in Toronto”, research participants along with their children, painted a picture of what they believed this would look like. Some of the themes that emerged from their painting included:

- An Aboriginal grocery store: a place where traditional foods could be purchased
- A truck: to deliver traditional foods to the city
- Traditional vegetables and fruits, such as corn and berries, which are used

in ceremonies and in every day meals

- A community garden: where traditional vegetables, fruits and medicines could be grown

The artist who facilitated the painting of the mural had this to say about a food secure Aboriginal community in Toronto:

Access to our traditional foods straight from the land in our First Nations communities would create more employment opportunities. We could open our own businesses. It is important that we produce our own traditional foods because we have cultural beliefs that our food be produced in a way that is respectful of the animals and the earth. Accessibility to our own stores, restaurants, gardens, greenhouses, etc. in Toronto would create a stronger, healthier community - mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally. It would decrease our poverty significantly and open new doorways of success for the next generations. It would bring back and strengthen our cultures and traditional teachings, which all peoples must have.

### **Recommendations**

Depending on the area of responsibility, the recommendations that came out of this research project involve municipal, provincial or federal governments. Even though this project centres on the city of Toronto, the research team believed it was important to include areas that apply to other levels of government as these areas are intertwined and impact on one another. In addition, in reference to Aboriginal peoples, governmental jurisdiction is a political issue that must always be considered.

When research participants discussed food banks and other related services, location and transportation were the most significant factors. Thus, we recommend that food banks and other services be spread out so that they have sites other than in down town Toronto and that they offer a delivery service to the homes of young mothers.

All of the women in this project wanted to be able to affordably access traditional Aboriginal foods in the city, but found this to be difficult. Therefore, we suggest working with Toronto's Food Strategy to implement the Toronto Food Charter's commitment that everyone should have access to affordable culturally-appropriate

foods through grocery stores, restaurants, food banks, community gardens, Aboriginal agencies, etc.

Clearly, social assistance such as Ontario Works, is not meeting the needs of young mothers. We recommend:

- Raising the level of OW to a standard where recipients will be in a position to pursue education by, for example, issuing metropasses
- Raising the OW pregnancy allowance so that it covers the cost of prenatal vitamins, iron tablets and fresh fruits and vegetables
- Including a baby formula allowance in OW or (preferably) a food allowance for breastfeeding mothers.
- Ensuring that all benefits which OW recipients are entitled to are directly revealed to young mothers and all access processes are made transparent
- Adding Aboriginal traditional foods to OW's "special diet" allowance so these can be accessed as, for example, Halal or Kosher foods are. Income is connected to child care and housing, and access to these will also aid young mothers in being able to attend school. Hence, we recommend:
- Universal child care whereby every young mother has access to subsidized access to care for their children
- More subsidized rental units, along with the subsidy going with the mother and her children, rather than being attached to particular rental buildings
- Creation of a national universal family social policy
- Working with Toronto's Food Strategy to implement Toronto's Food Charter that states that City Council will advocate for income, employment, housing and transportation policies that will support access to the food everyone needs

Education for young Aboriginal people is crucial to the future improvement of their lives and to the successful future of the country (Sharp, Arsenault and Lapointe, 2007). According to recent reports on the 2006 national census, the median age for Aboriginal peoples is 27 years while that of non-Aboriginal peoples is 40. Children and youth age 24 years and under make up 48% of all Aboriginal peoples whereas 31% of all non-Aboriginal peoples are of this age. According to Statistics Canada's analysis of population projections based on this census information, Aboriginal peoples could account for a growing share of the young adult population over the next decade (Statistics Canada, 2008). Canada needs to do all that it can to assist young Aboriginal people to successfully complete post-secondary education. Thus, we suggest that young Aboriginal mothers have greater access to funding for education. When it comes to child welfare, research participants are certain that the vast majority of young Aboriginal

mothers come into contact with CAS because of poverty. We, therefore, recommend the development of an national Aboriginal Family Services Act which addresses the impacts of colonization and Aboriginal world views about the family, and changing the focus of child welfare from protection to prevention.

As some of the participants in this project viewed food insecurity as an individual concern, further awareness on structural issues may be helpful for a wider understanding. However, this applies to all Canadians, so we suggest that there be public education, including within the educational system, on colonization, poverty and racism, and that racism be included as one of Canada's social (structural) determinants of health.

There is no doubt that young Aboriginal women have many ideas on how to improve their lives and that of their children. They are strong, resourceful and capable of making diverse contributions to both this city and country. We, who are the current leaders and mentors, need to nurture these young women so that they can work towards social change. Hence, we recommend that, across Canada, Aboriginal agencies, political leadership, researchers, etc., bring young mothers together to prepare presentations to policy-makers and government representatives, and Aboriginal agencies recruit and support young mothers to sit on their committees, boards of directors, etc.

#### **Limitations/challenges/rewards**

Since this was a small research project therefore it is not generalizable to the population of young Aboriginal mothers living in Toronto. Nevertheless, valuable information about food security and its related concerns for young Aboriginal women emerged from the project which can be beneficial to both policy-makers and service providers. The work of this project also provided evidence that Aboriginal research methodologies work with young Aboriginal women and that they can be successfully combined with other creative, non-intrusive methods such as the use of computer technology and the arts.

There is no doubt that there are many challenges for young Aboriginal mothers when they take on the role of research assistants. The two young mothers who worked on this project had children under the age of two; were struggling financially; were attending college full-time; lived an hour's travel away by public transportation from down town where the research took place; and had never been involved in research before. Such circumstances meant that at times it was difficult for them to meet the expectations of the project. Having a strong team was critical to overcoming the challenges that arose. Despite the challenges, this research project was particularly rewarding as we were able to work with young Aboriginal women who eagerly soaked up all that they could learn, mastered all of the tasks that came their way, stepped forward to take the lead when needed and made countless contributions. Like the actor Denzel Washington states, it is immensely rewarding to watch young people succeed!

#### **Future Work and Conclusion**

The mission of the Toronto Food Strategy is to conduct a wide assessment of the present state of food security in order to assist Toronto Public Health and other City and

community partners "to identify the most effective and appropriate ways to meet current and future food challenges and opportunities" (Toronto Public Health, 2007:5). It will "work with community agencies, residents' groups, businesses and other levels of government to achieve the goals of the Toronto Food Charter" (Toronto Public Health, 2007:19). The results of this research project answer some of the questions which the Toronto Food Strategy asks. Thus, our future work, which will continue to involve young Aboriginal mothers, will focus on contributing to the development of a Toronto Food Strategy with the aim of meeting some of the needs of these mothers and their children.

This research project with young Aboriginal mothers confirms available information in the literature on issues of food security with urban Aboriginal peoples, particularly regarding poverty and inter-connecting factors such as income, housing and child welfare. However, the project reveals important information not found in the literature about the strengths and resourcefulness of young mothers when it comes to caring and providing for their children and their valuable ideas for improvements to urban food security. Further research with this population in other Canadian cities is warranted to confirm or refute the findings from this project.

Furthermore, the project supports the appropriateness of implementing Aboriginal research methodologies, such as storytelling circles and creativity, in conducting research with this population. In addition, our project reveals both the challenges and rewards of involving young Aboriginal mothers as research assistants in a project with this population. The rewards of enhancing the capacities of these young women and benefiting from their ability to relate to research participants far outweighed the challenges. Future projects, which include members of the research group as research assistants, would be helpful in addressing, and finding solutions to, the challenges that arose.

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