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CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

RESEARCH • ANALYSIS • SOLUTIONS

Election 2011

UNSPUN

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Winnipeg's Inner City and North End Neighbourhoods: Lessons from Ten Years of Research

The inner city suddenly becomes important to politicians during elections.

Some political parties choose to focus solely on crime and fear. The approach they take is punitive, shaped, we believe, from a lack of understanding of how complex challenges really are.

Others have a better grasp of the issues. They know that while some people ought to be imprisoned, putting ever more people in prison is not a solution. In the long run what will work is preventing crime. This of necessity means continuing the long, patient process of poverty reduction, and creating educational and employment opportunities for inner-city people. That process has been underway over the past decade, and it is working.

CCPA Manitoba, in partnership with several community-based organizations who know first hand the realities of the inner city, has conducted research in the inner city for over ten years, much of it funded by research grants from the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada. For the past 6 years we have captured inner-city stories in our annual State of the Inner City Report.

Here is what we have learned.

Poverty has declined.

In our 2009 State of the Inner City Report titled "It Takes All Day to Be Poor", we showed that while it continues to be extremely high relative to what is desirable and what is possible, poverty in the inner city has declined. Census data show that the percentage of households in poverty (using after tax low income cut off) dropped from 48.25% in 1996 to 39.60% in 2006. We still have a long way to go, but we are moving in the right direction.

The example of Lord Selkirk Park

A good example of what is possible is Lord Selkirk Park. There have been significant gains made in recent years in this large public housing project in the heart of Winnipeg's low-income North End. A decade ago, 50 percent of the units in Lord Selkirk Park sat empty. When we first spoke with community members in 2006, they thought the housing complex should be bulldozed. Today, every unit is occupied and there is a wait list of families wanting to move in. People now want to live there because of the changes that have occurred in recent years. These include a Family Resource Centre that is a thriving hub of activity and community support; an Adult Learning Centre that has graduated 29 people in the last three years--all of them people who would not otherwise have



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earned their grade 12; a literacy program; a Tots and Families program for pre-schoolers; and an enhanced childcare centre now under construction and scheduled to open in January, 2012. New opportunities are being created here for inner-city people—opportunities for education and jobs—and in growing numbers residents of Lord Selkirk Park and the surrounding North End community are seizing these opportunities and improving their own lives and the character of the community.

Community and Government Working Together

The success in Lord Selkirk Park is but one example of successful collaborations between community organizations and government. Community members identified what they needed to do to turn things around and the government stepped up to the plate with the public funding necessary to make it happen. Our research has shown time and time again that this is the recipe for success - genuine community involvement combined with government support.

Building Capacity and Creating Opportunity for At-Risk Youth and Families

What is happening in the inner city is that the community's capacity to promote change is being enhanced. We see this in innumerable ways: the outstanding community-based organizations, most of them Aboriginal-run, that have come together in the coalition called CLOUT (Community-Led Organizations United Together) work very effectively with low-income people; organizations like BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development), that hire inner-city youth and put them to work doing energy retrofitting of buildings, and moving many of those youth into apprenticeships, thus creating jobs and improving the environment; educational organizations like Urban Circle Training Centre and the University of Manitoba's Inner City Social Work program and University of Winnipeg's Urban and Inner-

City Studies program, and the high school support program Pathways to Education, all now part of the exciting Selkirk Avenue "alternative education hub", and the Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations—North End Community Renewal Corporation and Spence Neighbourhood Association, for example—that are spearheading positive neighbourhood change throughout the inner city and North End. All of this and more is going on in Winnipeg's inner city and North End neighbourhoods. The work is driven by the community and strongly supported by government.

Many years of research tells us that this is the way forward. Supporting community-led initiatives that provide opportunity is a more effective option to endless incarceration of ever more young people. This is what we think needs to continue and be built upon into the future.

It would be a shame to bring this productive work to a halt. The process of producing change in Winnipeg's inner city is of necessity long and slow. There are no instant solutions. But what we know from our research is that what is needed is consistency of investment in the solutions that work, solutions crafted by the community and supported by governments. What would be destructive would be to bring this work to a halt.

The challenges in the inner city are difficult, but they are not insurmountable. We are making progress. We need to keep on doing what we are doing.

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