Struggles, Strengths and Solutions:

Exploring Food Security with Young Aboriginal Moms

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Introduction

In a 2004 research project entitled *Structural Determinants of Health for Homeless Urban Aboriginal Youth*, 40 youth explained their life experiences, which were for the most part contact with child protection and separation from their biological families and home communities, within the realities of colonization and oppression. A striking comment from a youth in this project -- “mostly we’re taken away by child welfare because of poverty and this translates into neglect by them” - was one of the factors that led to this research project with young Aboriginal mothers. Another factor leading to this present work was the many encouraging messages that the youth offered such as wanting to make contributions to the future of all Aboriginal children and how they saw positive change as centring on reforms to legislation and social policies. These youth were inspiring with their insights into the roots of poverty for Aboriginal peoples. Particularly remarkable were the young Aboriginal mothers who were struggling financially, but who found the strength to do the best they could for their children.

Purpose of the Project

A research interest in the area of food security led to an entry point into the daily lives of young Aboriginal mothers living in Toronto. This research project aimed to determine:

- What young mothers and their children need to be healthy;
- What factors are related to determinants of food choice and food access;
- What the relationship is between food insecurity, housing and child welfare;
- How food related policies impact upon mothers and their children; and
- How we can advocate for positive changes to food related policies

Summary of Main Findings

This report includes a literature review on factors affecting food security for marginalized
women with a focus on young Aboriginal mothers. Food security is defined as having access to enough culturally acceptable food that is nutritious and safe at all times, plus the governmental policies that support this. Few research projects have focused specifically on Aboriginal women and their children in the area of food security. There is even less information on how Aboriginal women and their children find ways to survive, and sometimes thrive, in a harsh society.

The findings from the research project highlight gaps in social services and policies, identify agencies and programs that are helpful and offer several beneficial recommendations to policy analysts to improve issues related to urban food security. The project also shows that Aboriginal research methodologies work with young Aboriginal women and can be successfully combined with creative methods such as the use of computer technology and the arts. In addition, findings describe the challenges and rewards of working with two young Aboriginal mothers who were research assistants on the project.

**Summary of Key Recommendations**

The recommendations that came out of the research project included some at the local level such as suggestions for agencies, others at the provincial level and those at the national level. Highlights of the recommendations include:

- Food banks and other services need to be spread throughout the city
- Work with Toronto’s Food Strategy to implement its commitment that everyone should have access to affordable culturally-appropriate foods
- Involve young Aboriginal mothers in agency boards of directors, committees, etc.
- Raise the level of Ontario Works while including pre-natal vitamins, baby formula and Aboriginal traditional foods
- More subsidized housing
• Greater funding for education for young Aboriginal mothers
• Creation of a universal family social policy
• Creation of universal child care
• Develop an Aboriginal Family Services Act

Literature Review

In Canadian society, like in some other ‘developed’ nations, there are large gaps amongst people in terms of access to resources. Some segments of the population are more affected by these gaps than others. Aboriginal peoples and single mothers of all ‘races’ tend to be some of the poorest people in Canada. Young women of Aboriginal descent that are heading lone parent families are likely to be the poorest of the poor in this country.

Certainly, food insecurity is just one of the many effects that poverty has on a family. However, there is no denying that access to healthy, nutritious food every day is important to the overall health and wellbeing of children and their mothers. This literature review will highlight what has been uncovered thus far in earlier research projects about the struggles that young Aboriginal women and their children face in the area of food security, as well as their strengths and resourcefulness.

Definition of food security

The research team of this project followed the definition of food security as outlined by Ryerson University’s Centre for Studies in Food Security (2008). The Centre defines food security as having the following five components:

Availability: sufficient food for all people at all times

Accessibility: physical economic access to food for all at all times

Adequacy: access to food that is nutritious and safe and produced in environmentally sustainable ways
Acceptability: access to culturally acceptable food, which is produced and obtained in ways that do not compromise people’s dignity, self-respect or human rights

Agency: the policies and processes that enable the achievement of food security

Marginalized women facing food insecurity

There is a fair amount of literature on food insecurity and poverty with low-income mothers living across North America (Green, no date; Scruby and Beck, 2007; Siefert, et al.; Delva and Ismail, 2007). Much of this literature includes Aboriginal women within the research population, but is not exclusively based on the lived experiences of these women. However, in reviewing the literature, it is possible to draw parallels between the experiences of marginalized women of colour and Aboriginal women. Nevertheless, even though there may be parallel experiences between these groups of women, the effects of colonization on women who are Indigenous to North America will be different due to structural and systemic inequalities that are unique to them.

In a research project with marginalized single mothers, Siefert, et al. (2007) found that poverty and food insecurity among low-income African American mothers increased their rates of depression. In this work, the authors noted that the daily discrimination towards these mothers (both racially and gendered) contributed to their depression and lack of involvement in the world around them. This lack of involvement, in turn, furthered the cycle of poverty. The authors note that these findings support the need for interventions that operate across individual and societal levels to address the fundamental causes of poverty and increase the self-determination of marginalized populations.

In research conducted by Green (no date) with low-income mothers in Saskatoon,
Saskatchewan, the women, and the researcher, came up with recommendations for changes to policies and program reforms regarding poverty. Some of these suggested recommendations were:

1. Provide adequate financial support (whether through social assistance, wages, or a combination of these) to enable all families to meet their basic needs;
2. Enable all parents to access childcare that meets their standards, if they are employed outside the home or attending school;
3. Increase the availability of safe and healthy housing for low-income families and strengthen the communities in which they live;
4. Make 'the system' more accessible and responsive; and
5. Support low-income mothers to develop skills to engage in social action.

Scruby and Beck’s (2007) research with 56 low-income mothers found that women understood that food banks are a band-aid solution and that the real issue is insufficient money and resource distribution. Many of the women in this project raised questions as to why they could not access food banks as they needed, instead of only on a monthly or bi-weekly basis, in order to feed their children. There were also comments from the women questioning the lack of basic needed items such as diapers and baby formula. In this study, Aboriginal low-income mothers also spoke of some of their unique struggles such as discrimination and assumptions around treaty rights.

In an American article, Olson (2005) discussed that in a food insecure family a mother will not eat in a way that is optimal for her own health for, if she does, she will deprive her children of eating properly. In most food-insecure families, there is little money for nutritious foods while a majority of childcare and meal preparation is the responsibility of mothers. This lack of food and the double burden of home and childcare causes many health problems for mothers. If a mother chooses to put her
children's nutritional intake first (which is what most women do), she will compromise her own health which, according to Olson (2005) is the plight of over 14 million American women today.

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

In the 2006 Census, 1,172,790 Canadians, who participated in the survey, reported some Aboriginal ancestry, which is about 4% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2008). In this same census, 54% of Aboriginal peoples reported that they live in urban centres 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, which is way below the poverty line in Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003). Other statistics state that twelve percent of Aboriginal families in urban areas are headed by parents under age 25 and of these, 40% earn less than $12,000 per year (Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2000).

Social isolation appears to be a major factor that can negatively affect single Aboriginal mothers. As Canadian society generally seems to value a private family setting, young mothers are often left without a social network or support circle 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 family bonds and supports to assist young single mothers living in cities. In fact, Tarasuk (2004) found that social isolation is strongly linked to household food insecurity.

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 and appropriate housing. In this city, there are over 3,000 families currently on the waiting list for low income or rent geared to income accommodations, with many of the homes not large enough for multiple children families. This lack of affordable
housing could mean that many Aboriginal lone parents are spending the majority of their monthly income on housing which causes financial shortages that result in food insecurity.

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, Maxim and Gyimah, 2003). Furthermore, 42% of these mothers with children over the age of 6 are unemployed anyway (White, Maxim and Gyimah, 2003). When taking these statistics into consideration, the younger the child is, the greater s/he will live in an impoverished family. Thus, children 0-2 years old make up 16% of those living in families affected by poverty whereas those aged 6-17 years old make up 13.9% of these children (Leschies, et al., 2006). According to key statistics within Ontario, 62% of single parents 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 provide enough financial resources for families living in urban centres. As a result, over 40% of all children that live below the poverty line are in lone female parent households (Gucairda, Celasun & Stewart, 2004; Leschies, et al., 2006).

Deiter and Otway (2001) found that when asking Aboriginal women to describe what is healthy to them, a majority of women strongly linked food to overall health and then linked health to traditional Aboriginal practices such as holistic healing of the physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological aspects of individuals, families and communities. These authors noted that this holistic view of health and understanding of the world is a place where Aboriginal women can find strength when facing difficulties.

Needless to say, food security is a 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 today’s impacts of oppression for Aboriginal peoples where ideas such as dignity and justice are often non-existent. The combination 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, 2004). In Deiter and Otway (2001), one woman summed up all of these political and personal struggles by saying that she just “Can’t afford the Canada Food Guide” (19).

For Aboriginal peoples in Canada, food security is a complicated issue, which includes more than poverty and access to food (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2004). While the gap between the rich and poor increases, inequality worsens. Aboriginal peoples and their families, especially those headed by young women, are most often hit the hardest, since many struggle financially to survive on minimum wage, underemployment, unemployment and government claw backs/cutbacks to social welfare.

Attempts at helping

There are a number of temporary measures that have been introduced through social services and public social support programs that are meant to assist low income earners in addressing issues of poverty. However, these services are short lived and over stretched, meaning that they are only intended to alter individuals’ and families’ lives temporarily, rather than affect long-term systemic change.

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 or systemic change that is needed to truly 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, Ontario, demonstrated that women find other means of securing food, including sending children to friends’ or family’s’ homes for meals, delaying payments of bills or forgoing services such as telephones, and selling or pawning possessions in order to raise money. These means of survival are just some of the ways that women will work within the system to ensure that their children and they can eat. However, these other means of securing food can have a negative impact on the health and self-esteem of mothers (Tarasuk, 2001).

Aboriginal women’s organizations are taking the lead

Traditionally, Aboriginal women were afforded great respect within their families and communities as the givers of life. Aboriginal women were pivotal in decision making with regard to family, communal property, education and governance, and were seen as the keepers of cultural traditions (INAC, 2004). However, the effects of colonization, most significantly patriarchy and capitalism, have for the most part forced Aboriginal women out of these roles. Yet Aboriginal women have always resisted maltreatment and, especially over the past few decades, have been regaining their rightful places in their communities. Aboriginal women activists today continue to be at the forefront of the decolonization and healing processes of Aboriginal peoples (Howard-Bobbiwash, 2003).

Organizations that focus on the re-strengthening and political actions of Aboriginal women are becoming more common in Canada. For example, Aboriginal women, like all women, are now enrolling in post secondary education at higher numbers than men (INAC, 2004). Aboriginal women are coming together to address the systemic and structural issues that have oppressed them for centuries. National level organizations such as Sisters in Spirit,
National Aboriginal Women’s Association, Métis National Council of Women, and Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada have been working diligently to further the rights and needs of Aboriginal women. In working to expose the inequalities that Aboriginal women face, these organizations also highlight the strengths and determination that Aboriginal women carry in order to overcome the historical traumas currently affecting Aboriginal individuals, families, communities and Nations (IAAW, 2006).

There are also a number of organizations, agencies, services and programs in urban centres that are being run at the grassroots level across Canada to assist young Aboriginal families, mostly geared towards single mothers. Many of these programs take place in urban Aboriginal agencies such as friendship centres. Such agencies may offer educational or upgrading components 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, Aboriginal urban organizations are attempting to address the social isolation and lack of community support that colonization has created. The Aboriginal Mother’s Centre Society of Vancouver, B.C. is one such grass roots organization that strives to address multiple struggles faced by young mothers on their own. In offering a range services “geared towards helping low-income families reduce their expenses”, this organization is women/children centred (AMCS, 2005). Specific food security programs include hot meals for both lunch and dinner five days a week.

In Toronto, Ontario, Native Women’s Resource Centre offers Aboriginal women many supports geared to advancing their lives and the lives of their children. Every week day this agency provides a hot lunch for the women in the community. It also offers counseling, education and literacy programs, traditional parenting programs, healthy prenatal groups and a
food and clothing bank. This agency is also one of the only ones in Toronto that always has baby food, formula and diapers (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” (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, led by the Toronto Food Policy Council and the Food and Hunger Action Committee, adopted the Toronto Food Charter. This Charter is the official vision of a food secure Toronto and highlights food as critical in connecting the city’s priorities. Of most significance to this literature review is the Charter’s statements that:

- Every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally-appropriate food; and
- Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity, and is an important part of the city’s culture (5).

When Toronto City Council adopted this Charter, it committed to several goals in the areas of nutrition, income adequacy, environmental responsibility, urban agriculture, and waste management. However, the question of how to implement the goals of the Charter has only just begun to be examined. In November 2007, Toronto Public Health released a document entitled, *The state of Toronto’s food: Discussion paper for a Toronto food strategy*. Ryerson University’s Centre for Studies in Food Security was one of the receivers of this document which asked for feedback on its contents on how “a Toronto food strategy would be an action plan to ensure that Toronto’s food system improves health, promotes economic development and social justice, protects the environment, and reflects and celebrates community diversity” (17). Feedback on the
document in terms of how it does and does not address food security within Toronto’s Aboriginal population was provided and the research team kept this in mind while conducting this project.

This literature review highlights the limited information that is available on the struggles and continual marginalization that Aboriginal lone mothers face. It has also attempted to emphasize the strengths and determination of these women along with those who try to assist and support them. The available literature shows that few research projects have focused specifically on Aboriginal women and their children in the area of food security. There is even less information on how Aboriginal women and their children find ways to survive, and sometimes thrive, in a harsh society. These gaps in the literature indicate a strong need for further research in the area of urban Aboriginal mothers and their children regarding food security issues and the strengths, resiliency and ways of resisting that these women carry.

**Methodology**

The literature available on conducting research with Aboriginal peoples is consistent regarding the privileging of Aboriginal knowledges, ethics, cultural guidelines and protocols when working on projects with Aboriginal peoples. Several directives have emerged from Indigenous scholars in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand 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 & Henderson, 2000; CIHR, 2007; Mihesuah, 1996; RCAP, 1997; Schnarch, 2004; Smith, 1999; Weaver, 1997). These guidelines include that research findings be the intellectual and cultural property of the community; that they be of direct benefit to families and communities; that they transfer skills; that they include mechanisms for continued gains and work; that findings be reviewed to ensure
accuracy; and that community members be included as co-authors in publications.

Keeping Aboriginal knowledges, ethical guidelines and cultural protocols in mind, this research project implemented an innovative methodology, which combined three stages to gathering data:

1) Participants were invited to share their stories about food security within a storytelling circle which included spiritual/cultural practices such as the offering of sacred tobacco for praying, smudging for cleansing, preparation of a traditional feast, and honourariums in exchange for their knowledge.

2) Since some participants might be uncomfortable sharing information related to food security in the presence of social work researchers and perhaps other participants, they were able to do so anonymously if they wished through access to a secure internet site created solely for this project.

3) As the researchers hoped to incorporate visual creativity into the project and believing that some people prefer to express themselves in this way, a “future visioning art mural workshop” was set up. In this workshop, participants were asked to imagine a future food secure Aboriginal community and, with the help of a young female Aboriginal artist, create a mural that represented 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 were also present if they needed points of reference to help them share their knowledge. These visual prompts were in the form of small posters made by the research team, which were taped to the walls of the room where the circles took place or were handed around by the participants as they sat in the circle. The information on the posters came from the literature review on food security
and from the team’s own observations. Some of these prompts were “Food prices in Toronto are lower than in most other countries, but low wages, low social assistance and the high cost of housing still cause many people here to go hungry”; “Aboriginal women help each other”; “Food affects us physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually”; “Child welfare comes into the lives of Aboriginal peoples because of poverty”; and “Aboriginal women are resourceful and have many strengths”.

The website, created by an Aboriginal website designer with the direction of one of the team members, incorporated pictures of Aboriginal mothers and children, symbols of sacred places, and clan animals with their young. It included a list of community services with descriptions and website addresses that participants could look at immediately, send to their email addresses or print. The invitation to add any information via the site stated, “Would you like to add anything else about the topic of food security through this confidential site that you did not feel comfortable sharing during our circle today?”

For the making of the art mural, which took place two weeks after the circles were conducted, the research team first met with the artist to orient her to the project, the general information that came from the participants in the circles and her role as a facilitator. It was decided that the artist would start the mural by painting a background on it in order to then have time for the research participants to paint what they wished. Children of the research participants also took part in the making of the mural. During the mural 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 they took notes throughout the workshop.

Another way in which Aboriginal worldviews and ethical guidelines were incorporated into this project was through the hiring of Aboriginal people as research assistants. It was just as
important to work with Aboriginal women as research assistants as it was to do this research project because providing opportunities for them to learn how to conduct research by implementing Aboriginal methodologies, or further their skills in this area, contributed to their 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. Four Aboriginal women were hired, making us an all Aboriginal team.

The recruitment of research participants occurred through our partnership with an Aboriginal women’s social service agency (NWRC), flyers that were distributed amongst several Toronto Aboriginal 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 that they were familiar with, and honourariums for participation in the circles and the art mural workshop.

**Demographics**

The research team developed a typical demographics form which each of the participants completed. It included six areas: information about the women and their families; marital status; Aboriginal status; education; sources of income and housing. A summary of these demographics is presented in Appendix A.

**Findings**

Some findings from the research project centre on areas directly related to food security such as food banks, food choices, traditional food access and food within an urban Aboriginal
community. Other findings reveal how many areas, such as child care, housing, transportation, education and child welfare affect and are affected by food security. Additional findings highlight responsibility for food security and the strengths of young Aboriginal mothers.

**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, so it has to be drank quickly. They emphasized that these food banks did not give the necessary foods to prepare a whole meal or fresh fruits and vegetables. One participant summed up her critique of these food banks with:

> Where do I start? 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. I also notice that these places do not give out enough baby food or diapers to last [until the next time you’re allowed to access them]. They also do not give out wipes, tampons or pads.

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 food, which is healthy, at the Aboriginal ones. Most agreed with one woman’s statement when she said, “Council Fire [an Aboriginal agency] gives you so much [food] that I can barely carry it all.”

The quality of the food and the availability of other necessities at Aboriginal agencies with food banks were commented on in writing by one of the participants:
[Aboriginal] food banks that I use always give a variety of different food such as soup, bread, fruits and vegetables and frozen food. I also get baby food and cereal, diapers, wipes and formula. In addition, I have gotten pads, tampons and panty liners when I needed them. 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 a couple of 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 the children get proper nutritional meals and also teach children to eat healthy.” Another suggestion 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.”

**Food choices**

On the topic of food choices, one area that the young women spoke about was “fast food” - already prepared restaurant take out or microwaveable foods. These women explained that they tend to eat these foods when they are busy, stressed or depressed. As mothers, they feed it to their children because children love both the food and the toys that come with the meals and are heavily influenced by the advertisement of fast foods. They are aware that these foods are “not healthy”, “addictive”, “make us feel blah” and “not cheap for every day eating.”

Some of the young mothers complained that baby formula is expensive, but that they must have it for their babies. Other women raised the issue of genetics - how many Aboriginal peoples are lactose intolerant, meaning that they cannot digest cow’s milk and other dairy products, so they need alternatives. One woman addressed the topic of food choices by stating, “we [Aboriginal peoples] are now more likely to eat what society tells us to eat to be healthy.
according to the Canadian Food Guide and not as Aboriginal peoples.” Another woman had a strong suggestion when it came to food choices - “throw out the f*htag%! microwaves! That’s not food, it’s cardboard with sauce!”

**Traditional food access**

Food choices led into a discussion by research participants about Aboriginal traditional foods. After reading a statement from the literature - “every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally-appropriate food” (Toronto Food Charter, 2001), one participant simply responded, “No, we do not.”

All of the women in the project agreed that accessing Aboriginal traditional foods 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 because these foods “are good for you.” One woman offered an idea of how to have some traditional foods in Toronto via a community garden: “we could grow traditional food in the city; after all, it’s not like our food isn’t native to the area.” To this, some participants asked, “Is there a good space?”, “Who would take care of it?”, “Where would it be?”, “How would we do it since we don’t have a [physical or geographical] community?”
**Food within an urban Aboriginal community**

One of the prompt quotes shown to the research participants in the circles 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 healthy food or money to purchase vitamins. Women also believed that they are impacted negatively on an emotional level as they become stressed when they do not have enough food or they cannot provide the best for their children. On a psychological level, participants stated that they believe healthy foods affect the brain and “make people smarter”, so is particularly important for growing children. On a spiritual level, participants discussed how traditional foods are always connected to spiritual ceremonies, that all cultures have their own special 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 and programs they accessed at these agencies such as clothing banks, pre/postnatal teachings, food vouchers, parent relief, “good food boxes”, parenting classes and children’s activities. The young women also explained that Aboriginal agencies are helpful in providing “treats” for their children such as March break day camps and 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 harder for single families to access these agencies when they’re not in the same area as where you live. Certain resources are needed to access food or housing but cannot be when they’re all down town.

I would like to see more things for the youth in the west end of Toronto. I have a daughter and she would like to be more into her Native roots, but she does not get that because it’s so far for us to travel down town to where these activities are available.

Other participants offered suggestions, which centred on access to services and transportation:

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.
I think it would be a good idea for the [Aboriginal] community to have dinners for each holiday such as Christmas and Thanksgiving where you do not have to be a member of an agency in order to go. There should also be transportation for families who need it to get to the dinners.

It takes a long time [for some of us] to get to these [Aboriginal] organizations. It would be good to get some of these services delivered to our homes.

Although the women in this project see Aboriginal agencies as contributing to community building in Toronto, they also see the need for more of this. They stressed the need for Aboriginal peoples in Toronto to address the loss of cultures and become more “culturally aware.” They expressed that, in their eyes, Toronto’s Aboriginal community is “fractioned right now” whereas “we need to be a strong Aboriginal community.” As one participant put it, “no community, no unity.”

**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 the 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.” Pre-natal vitamins cost about $16.00 per bottle and many women are prescribed iron tablets by their doctors, which cost $19.00 a bottle. If a pregnant woman is taking these vitamins, 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 and well being:

My son is almost 2 years old and I still nurse him. 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 both of us to eat, 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? I have a status card and that’s what I depend on, but that gives me fewer benefits than social assistance. I am also covered through the college [I attend], but my son is not. If I pay a fee then the college will put him on my student plan for benefits. The problem with this is that I have to pay upfront, send in the bill and then get the money back. I don’t think people understand the concept of NO MONEY.

A few other strong comments from these young mothers included:

What, do you have to be rich to have kids these days?!

Why do [OW] workers act like the money that they are giving you is coming from their own damn pockets?!

F@#* you, tighten up and try living my life!

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**

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 school because she could not do this and care for her toddler child. She was waiting for a subsidy even though there was a day care space open for her.

**Housing**

For young mothers on OW, “paying market rent is just not possible.” However, as they emphasized, there are not enough subsidized rental units to meet the need in Toronto.

**Transportation**

Several women shared their stories about the difficulties of accessing services such as food banks due to 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 or crying 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.”

Women often feel disrespect for themselves and their children when they are on public transportation. They see this disrespect as being part of the values of Western society -
individualized and self-serving - rather than helpful to those who may need it such as mothers carrying strollers and groceries.

Research participants also linked the challenges of transportation to poverty: “when you are poor, you cannot have a car”, “TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] is costly - it costs almost $6.00 to get somewhere and back”, “there’s a lack of buses in poor neighbourhoods.”

**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.” Some of them have a General Education Diploma (GED) or are currently working on one rather than regular high school because it is a faster process that fits better with their complicated lives.

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 (non-status and Metis students are not registered under the Indian Act, so are not eligible to apply for this educational funding) can access funding for post secondary education, it is never enough to live on. Thus, these students also need to work at a few part-time jobs and/or try to access loans through the Ontario Student Assistance Program or banks. It is also important to note that not all students who apply for educational funding from their First Nation will receive it. In addition, some participants pointed out that First Nation educational programs prefer to fund students who have recently graduated from high school, which is often not the case for young mothers. They were in agreement that not only is more funding needed for post secondary education, but also that such funding needs to be more accessible.

**Child Welfare**

Research participants voiced strong opinions on the prompt quote “child welfare comes
into Aboriginal peoples’ lives because of poverty.” As one woman stated, “yes and that is bullshit!” 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 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," "you can do a lot of things yourself if you really try," "and" "a lot of mothers find it hard to get out of old bad habits." There were several comments focused on individual budgeting as well, stating that young mothers need to learn or be taught how to budget.

On the other hand, some of the research participants had a structural analysis of the issues
associated with food security. In responding to the statement prompt from the literature, "Aboriginal families are two to four times more likely to experience food insecurity in Toronto than the rest of the people here", some comments included:

There is an assumption that if you are brown and do not have enough money you must be drinking or getting high.

This [experiencing greater food insecurity] is because of racism and being brown. How come straight white men are the smallest group in our society, but everything is tailored to them?

I think it’s very unfair to all women or families to say it’s their own 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. The majority of low wage earners do not vote because all there is is evil [party] number one and evil [party] number two [to choose from]. Who do we vote for? I have lost hope in our government.
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], “Hell yes!”, “Damn straight!”, “We try hard because asking for help affects your pride a lot”, “You do whatever it takes to take care of your family”, “Doing this [being a young single mother] alone takes a lot of discipline.”

However, most of the research participants also saw their strength as a downfall at times because they have a lot of pride, 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 centred on dealing with the system such as OW. According to these 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 contributions towards improvements over time.

Research participants also spoke about their survival skills and how they help one another. They talked about grocery shopping mostly at No Frills because there is usually one of
those within walking distance of where they live and it is up to 50% cheaper than other grocery stores. Women said that they also access wholesale shopping stores, such as Cosco, together and share both what they purchase and a taxi home. Another way in which participants help each other is by sharing meals with friends and their children, 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 an art mural “a food secure Aboriginal community in Toronto”, all but one of the research participants along with some of their children, painted a picture of what they believed this would look like. Some of the themes that emerged from their painting included:

- A woman nursing her baby: representing the nurturer
- An Aboriginal grocery store: a place where Toronto's community could buy traditional foods such as wild meat, fish and wild rice to keep them healthy and strong
- 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
- A woman/bear: represents a cook and one of the clans which is a protector
and a healer

The artist who facilitated the painting of the mural is a young Ojibway woman who had this to say about a food secure Aboriginal community in Toronto and her contributions to the mural:

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 hunted and produced in a way that is respectful for the animals and the earth. ‘We eat fear’ is what has been said about the way cows, pigs, etc. are raised and butchered which influences how people feel from eating these animals. Accessibility to our own stores, restaurants, centres, housing, gardens, greenhouses, etc. in Toronto would create a stronger, closer, 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.

Analysis and 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 only 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 and addressed.

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 downtown Toronto and that they offer a food delivery service to the homes of young mothers.

Since some of the young mothers complained about the high cost of baby formula, it is clear that they are not breast-feeding their babies and young children. We recommend that research be conducted on why some young Aboriginal mothers are not breast-feeding their children and that food banks and other services ensure access to baby formula at all times.

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 pre-natal vitamins, iron tablets and fresh fruits and vegetables
- Including a baby formula allowance in OW
- 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 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 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 & Lapointe, 2007). According to recent reports on the 2006 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 along with more funding.

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 Aboriginal Family Services Act which addresses the impacts of colonization and Aboriginal world views about the family, and changing the focus of child welfare 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, not only young Aboriginal mothers, so we suggest that there be public education, including within the educational system, on colonization, structural issues, 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 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, limited to 16 participants, it is not generalizable to the population of young Aboriginal mothers living in Toronto. The challenge for the project came as a time delay due to unforeseeable circumstances within the community agency we partnered with. Because the agency faced situations out of its control, our project had to be put aside for some time and this impacted upon the number of research participants that could be
recruited.

Despite the limitations and challenges to this research project, it was rewarding for all involved. Valuable information about food security and its related concerns for young Aboriginal women emerged from the project which can be beneficial to both policy analysts 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; one was a single mother; lived an hour’s travel away by public transportation from downtown where the research took place; and had never been involved in research before. Such circumstances meant that at times it was difficult for these research assistants to meet the expectations of the project. For example, they did not have money for transportation to make it to a meeting, a babysitter did not show up, a child was sick or they were stressed out by all the school work they needed to get finished on top of all their other responsibilities. The other team members needed to be patient, understanding and flexible when the younger ones faced such challenges. Having such 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 challenges that came their way, bravely 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 the city which will 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" (5). It will "work with community agencies, residents' groups, businesses and other levels of government to achieve" the goals of the Toronto Food Charter (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, hopes to contribute to the development of a Toronto Food Strategy, which will begin to meet the needs of these mothers and their children in Toronto.

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 deny the findings from this project.

Furthermore, the project supports the appropriateness of implementing Aboriginal research methodologies, such as the storytelling circle and the use of symbols, traditional knowledges and creativity, in conducting research with this population. Although there is some literature available on storytelling circles as a research methodology, only one article by an Aboriginal author was located on using visual arts as a methodology (Lavallee, 2007). Thus, this
project provides a small example of furthering the area of Aboriginal research methodologies to include a method of gathering information not based on talking. Further trials of this methodology in research projects are also warranted.

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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# Appendix

## Demographics of Research Participants

### Demographics of the sixteen mothers/participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th># of Children</th>
<th>Ages of Children</th>
<th>Residence of Children</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Aboriginal Status</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-20</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>8 moms 21-25 have 1 child</td>
<td>7 children under 1 year</td>
<td>2 moms 25+25 have children in care</td>
<td>11 single moms</td>
<td>14 registered Indians</td>
<td>1 woman has gr 9</td>
<td>12 families on OW</td>
<td>12 women rent apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-21</td>
<td>Two Spirited</td>
<td>5 moms 20-21 have 2 children</td>
<td>1 child 1 year 2 yrs</td>
<td>3 moms 20-25 children live with someone else</td>
<td>2 women live common law</td>
<td>1 non-status</td>
<td>3 women have gr 11</td>
<td>1 family on ODSP</td>
<td>2 women share apartment or house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-22</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 moms 25-30 have 3 children</td>
<td>4 children 3-4 yrs</td>
<td>2 moms 21-30 have one child with them one child with someone else</td>
<td>3 women are divorced or separated</td>
<td>1 Inuit</td>
<td>4 have completed high school/GE D</td>
<td>1 on Band education funding</td>
<td>1 woman staying with someone else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-24</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 children 4 yrs</td>
<td>6 moms 21-27 have children with them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 woman is working on GED</td>
<td>2 work part-time</td>
<td>1 woman in a shelter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-25</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 child 5 yrs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 women have some college in nursing, 1 in film</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 women without children on OW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-27</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 children 6 yrs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 are currently attending (1 in esthetics, 3 in child and youth work)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-30</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 children 7 yrs</td>
<td>1 child 8 yrs 1 child 12 yrs 1 child 13 yrs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 college graduate (culinary arts)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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