The Community Researcher Project:
Exploring Economic Hardship in Guelph and Wellington County

Patricia Altass[1], Anne Bergen[2], Community Researchers[3]

(1) Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Guelph; (2) Department of Psychology, University of Guelph;

(3) Community Researchers: Marlene Bolton, Tina Brophey, Emily Gagnon, Beth Leith, Cynthia McCall, Margaret Shaver, Katherine Thuell, Barb Vigneau and 3 additional contributors

POVERTY
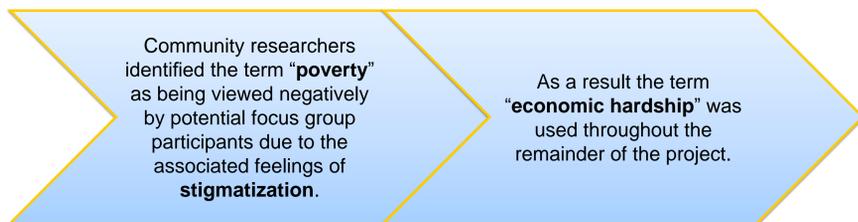**GUELPH & WELLINGTON TASK FORCE FOR**
ELIMINATION

Overview

- Community based research involves a **collaborative approach**, in which all participants are active contributors to the research process.
- Here we report on a community based research project that took place in Guelph and Wellington County during the winter, spring and summer of 2010.
- For this project, **community members with lived experience of poverty were trained as community researchers** in order to identify gaps in services and programs and issues with accessing services and programs for those living in poverty.

The Community Researcher Team

- With the goal of empowering members of the community to be active participants in the research process, **key informants** who either self identified as living in poverty or as having lived experience of poverty within the Guelph and Wellington area were trained as community researchers.
- In addition, individuals who were **identified as leaders within their community** by community development workers and those working front line in a variety of community programs and services were offered the opportunity to attend the community researcher training.
- A **total of eleven community researchers** were trained with six from the city of Guelph and five from Wellington County. All of the community researchers were women, with ages ranging from mid 20s to senior citizens.

Learning through Collaboration

Community researchers identified the term "**poverty**" as being viewed negatively by potential focus group participants due to the associated feelings of **stigmatization**.

As a result the term "**economic hardship**" was used throughout the remainder of the project.

1

Community Researcher Training

- The community researchers attended a **two day training session** during which they learned research skills such as conducting **focus groups** and/or **interviews** and **confidentiality**.
- The training was facilitated by Sarah Flicker who is a faculty member at York University and has **facilitated multiple peer research training sessions** and research projects as well as implemented many community based research initiatives. She also designed the peer researcher program for the Wellesley Institute (www.wellesleyinstitute.com).
- Sarah Flicker and the primary academic researcher (Patricia Altass) **worked collaboratively** with the community researchers to **develop the research design and methods** of the community based research project.

Collaborative Research: Focus Groups

- A total of **three focus groups** were conducted with 4 to 12 participants in each. All of the focus group participants identified as female.
- For each of the focus groups **two community researchers** acted as the **co-focus group facilitator**s.
  - In two of the focus groups an additional community researcher was also present as an active participant and note taker.
  - The academic researcher was present at each focus group to assist in the organization and facilitation of the focus groups.
- The community researchers followed the **focus group guide developed collaboratively** during the community researcher training.
  - Each focus group was audio recorded with responses transcribed verbatim.
  - General observations and themes were also noted by the community researchers as well as the academic researcher during each focus group.

2

3

Collaborative Analysis

- After the focus groups were completed and transcribed, five of the community researchers and the primary academic researcher met to **analyze** the focus group transcripts, discuss **themes** and identify **impactful quotes** and **shared experiences**.
- All three of the focus group **transcripts were given to the community researchers** a week before the meeting. Each community researcher was assigned one transcript to focus on and identify important themes and highlight impactful quotes to bring to the discussion.
- At the **one day analysis meeting** the group discussed the themes and outlined the subject areas to be covered in the report. Using a **concrete, hands on approach**, quotes were then cut from coloured print outs of the transcripts and glued to poster sized pages distributed around the room, each outlining a different identified theme area.
- The final report for this project was written by the primary academic researcher and was based on the theme pages created as well as notes taken during the analysis discussion.

Feedback from Community Researchers

"It was a little overwhelming but at the same time it was a life lesson and it felt good letting people know what it was like that don't know what it was like"

"We're making strides and having an impact on the community…why wouldn't you want to do this? I can't see why others wouldn't want to join"

"Hard to believe there are people that don't get these things – hard to believe people don't have a clue, and good to get out an awareness"

4

Lessons Learned

Successes	Challenges
• Positive aspects, areas for improvement and gaps in current services and programs were Identified	• Limited diversity of both community researchers and focus group participants
• Common challenges faced within services and programs were outlined	• Limited funding and resources
• Collected stories and experiences highlighting the grounded experience of those facing economic hardship	• Difficulties recruiting participants for focus groups in the county
• Community members shared creative feedback and ideas	• Communication challenges and personality conflicts between some of the community researchers
• Increased awareness in the Guelph and Wellington community through poverty briefings and community level presentations.	• Time restrictions impacted training, analysis and the scope of the project
• Community members facing economic hardship have joined the Poverty Elimination Task Force and formed a "Community Voices" action group.	
• The Poverty Elimination Task Force, as well as other community organizations and collaborations, have accessed this report to make positive change within the community.	
• Community researchers reported feeling listened to, empowered and Important as part of the research team.	

Future Actions

- Plans are underway to train a new group of community researchers in Guelph and Wellington.
- The current community researchers from this project will have the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience and be a part of the new community researcher team and subsequent research project.