

Institute for **Community** Engaged **Scholarship** (ICES)

The **Research Shop**



Economic Hardship in Wellington County

A Follow-up Report to *The Community Researcher Project: Exploring Economic Hardship in Guelph and Wellington*

April 2011



This follow-up document was prepared by Patricia D. Altass (PhD Candidate, University of Guelph) in collaboration with community researcher and lead interviewer Beth Leith. Other community researchers who contributed to the original project were Marlene Bolton, Tina Brophey, Emily Gagnon, Cynthia McCall, Margaret Shaver, Katherine Thuell, Barb Vigneau and 3 additional contributors. This document was also prepared in consultation with Belinda Leach (Associate Professor, Sociology and Anthropology, University of Guelph) and Linda Hawkins (Director, Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship/Research Shop). Assistance and support for this project were provided by Sonia Singh-Waraich (Community Development Worker, Family & Children's Services of Guelph & Wellington County), Alicia Brame (Community Development Worker, Family & Children's Services of Guelph & Wellington County), Naomi Melnick (Manager of Outreach and Support Services, Community Resource Centre of North and Centre Wellington), Randalin Ellery (The United Way, Guelph and Wellington County) and Bethany Wagler-Mantle (The United Way, Guelph) and the Research, Learning and Evaluation Group of The Guelph and Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination.

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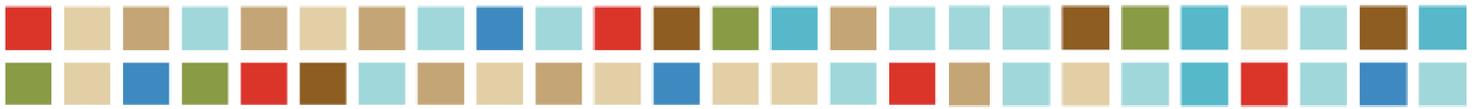


This report is available at <http://theresearchshop.ca/resources>



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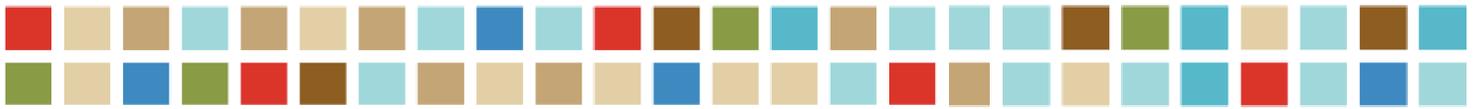


1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the planning stages of “The Community Researcher Project: Exploring Economic Hardship in Guelph and Wellington”, it was decided that four focus groups would be conducted, one in North Wellington (Mount Forest), one in Center Wellington (Fergus), one in East Guelph and one in West Guelph. Unfortunately, due to low participant numbers in Fergus, this focus group did not take place. As was discussed in the final report¹, some reasons for this may have been difficulty finding transportation, the fact that the focus groups were scheduled in the evening, and difficulty distributing information throughout the county which is particularly large in size.

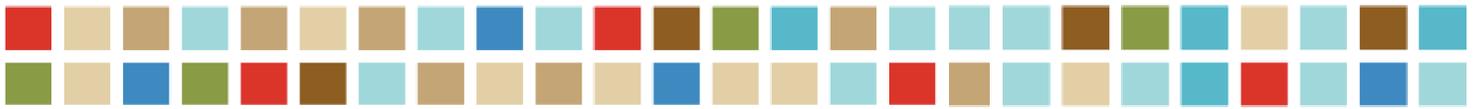
In order to gain more information about the experiences and challenges of those facing economic hardship in the county of Wellington, four additional interviews were conducted. After outlining the methods used and discussing ethical considerations, this follow up report, “Revisiting Economic hardship in Wellington County”, summarizes the information provided in the additional interviews that is either different from or not included in the original community researcher report. The findings of this follow-up report are organized into two sections: one focusing on issues relevant to economic hardship in Ontario, and the second highlighting issues and topics specific to Wellington County. The contents of this report reflect the statements and opinions of the interviewees and community researchers who were involved with this project. All of the quotes present in this report were made during the follow-up interviews by either the participants or by the community researcher.

¹ Altass, P., et al. (2010). The Community Researcher Project: Exploring Economic Hardship in Guelph and Wellington. Available at theresearchshop.ca/resources.



2.0 METHODS, ETHICS and CONFIDENTIALITY

Beth Leith, a community researcher from the original project, conducted four semi-structured interviews with women identified members of the Centre Wellington community. The interviewees were informed of the project by community outreach workers. These interviews were supported by Patricia Altass, the project coordinator. The questions found in the original focus group guide were asked in each individual interview, allowing for some flexibility within this framework depending on responses and direction provided by each respondent. This follow-up project attended to the same ethical guidelines and clearance from the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board as the original community researcher project. Participants were asked to sign a consent form that informed them that any personal information shared during the interview must remain confidential and should not be discussed by participants outside of the research setting. Participants were also notified that they could discontinue participation at any time without penalty, and that personal access to programs and services would not be impacted by this research. Any identifying information has been removed from all current reports and will be removed from all future reports and discussions.



3.0 ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IN ONTARIO

3.1 Income

In some cases, individuals facing economic hardship may be unable to access needed financial support that they feel they should have been entitled to. One participant shared that she had experienced a serious workplace injury, which resulted in her being physically unable to work. Though she received financial compensation from the company for a short time, this support was discontinued, resulting in complicated and unsuccessful legal action:

I got compensation and kept my house up until that point and kept going because I made good money so I was getting good money from compensation and then they decided to cut me off in May and they explained all this stuff that made no sense to me so with help from my family I hired a paralegal in London Ontario and they tried to help me and we have not been very successful...this is 7 years later and I've lost everything.

Another interviewee reported not being able to access the full government income support to which she would normally be entitled, due to an inability to provide information about the biological father of her child:

Since I can't find the father, they're taking \$362 off the paycheque that they deem support. I'm supposed to pay support to them...all summer they were trying, they said I didn't give enough information about the father which I don't really know the father and I don't know any information from him because it was basically like a one night stand type of thing.

For women working part time in low income, primarily service sector jobs, accruing enough hours to be eligible for maternity benefits through Ontario Works can be difficult and can result in personal hardship. This woman describes her work experience during her pregnancy:

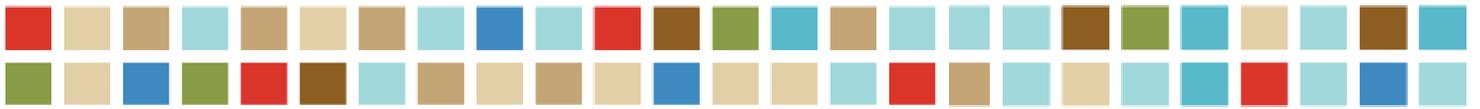
I left her father when I was 4 months pregnant and I wasn't working then because I didn't figure, I just I couldn't and so once I left him I had 4 months left before I was due. I worked at



(restaurant) for a month and then I had to take a month off because I ended up having to have surgery and they were like well you have to take a full 6 weeks off, and I was kind of like well I kind of need my maternity leave, so then I had 3 more months but then I worked day and night. I was doing 6 days a week, some days I'd work extra hours and I worked my butt off so I could get my maternity leave. I worked right up until 4 days before I had my daughter. Well I needed the money...I had to buy everything that I needed for my daughter because we didn't have anything.

Government funding for education can be an essential tool to build capacity and help individuals overcome economic hardship. This mother was able to access government funded debt relief, which helped her attain a diploma and expand her employment opportunities:

There is a grant available for single parents or families of low income to go back to school, where upon graduation of the program, the government forgives \$10,000 of your student debt per year. So my student debt is minimal and right now with my income being what it is and even when I was working full time I still was able to access interest relief, so I haven't been having to make those payments just yet, so I can pay down the debt that I do pay interest on.



4.0 ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IN WELLINGTON COUNTY

4.1 Transportation

Though being able to access programs and services was the most common transportation challenge discussed, lack of affordable transportation can also be a barrier in one's personal life. This woman describes how her relationship with her family has suffered as a result of economic hardship:

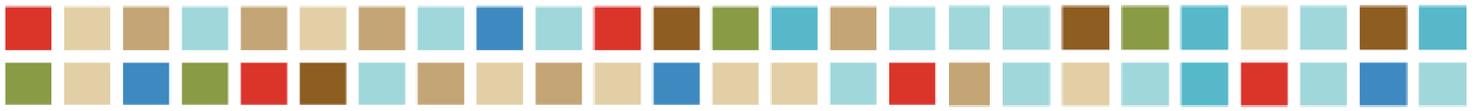
I hardly made it to Guelph and sometimes I had excuses because you know my sisters have done so much for me and stuff and I didn't want to tell them the reason why it was because I had no money for gas so I'd tell them I was sick and so that I didn't worry them.

4.2 Recreation

All of the women interviewed shared they had been able to access recreation activities for their children through various agencies and programs. Affordable recreation activities for adults were less common and difficult to access, as this participant expressed:

Well, there's stuff that you can pay for your children like you can get your kids put into programs ... but there isn't really anything like that for adults. There's all these programs you can go to as an adult but they're really expensive and you can't, there's no resources for us.

An additional barrier to recreation for adults is access to on-site affordable childcare services. For single mothers in particular, a lack of available childcare options can make attending recreational activities difficult if not impossible. This young mother shared her frustrations with lack of access to affordable childcare:



Like the arena has lots of programs and stuff like that but there's no daycare. If I wanted to sign up for say YOGA or something like that it's like \$100 or something which I don't have and there's no daycare so I'd have to pay for that too and it's just not something that is accessible for anyone on a limited income or children.

Providing more opportunities for individuals with similar interests or facing similar challenges to get together to share stories and to listen and support each other was highlighted as being an important resource that could be improved in centre Wellington:

It's sort of the ongoing support as a single parent. For example, my kids have access to what they need to keep themselves spiritually and physically and intellectually motivated. They have school and they have extracurricular activities at school. They have their sports and they're theater and they're drama, and my job as their parent is to run them around all over God's creation making sure they have what they need...The gaps that I identify are like, where is the group where single moms can go and say "Holy Crap my counter's covered with dishes and..." like those kind of (opportunities to), vent, drop it, know that its confidential and leave.

4.3 Income

The choice to live outside of a major city is sometimes a result of economic limitations. This can lead to an increase in the number of people facing economic hardship in certain areas of the county:

Where I lived, that's the only place you can afford to live because the rent is cheap and that's how there's so many poor people in our little town because everybody goes there and so we are the forgotten people.

Programs available in Wellington County that help individuals cover essential costs during times of need were described as being an asset. The interviewee below took part in an energy reduction program that not only benefited the environment, but helped with her family during a time of economic difficulty:



I know that there is available funding for hydro bills, I'm not sure about gas, but I know there is energy funds. I signed up actually to do a program with hydro. They wanted to do sort of a study of, take your hydro bill monthly and they wanted somebody that was going to stay in their residence and the family composition was going to be the same so that they can compare last year's bills to this year's bills, so they came in and then they replaced my fridge because it wasn't energy efficient, they replaced the bulbs with those funny bulbs and they gave me sort of an energy efficient kitchen. I got a slow cooker and a convection oven type of thing, with the agreement that I would use these more than I would use the stove.

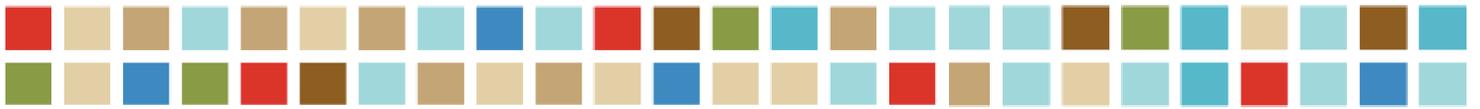
4.4 Health/Mental Health

For those who require specialized medical care, access to service in the county is limited. One interviewee reported going as far as London, Ontario, at least monthly, to receive care for her medical condition. During a debrief meeting following the release of the original community researcher report, one of the community researchers shared her concerns about the limited availability of Trellis Mental Health counselling support staff and practitioners located in the county. She reported there was only one Trellis Mental Health counsellor available in her area, resulting in long waitlists for appointments and no opportunity to see an alternate counsellor should a personality conflict arise:

It's important to have that relationship with a Dr. that you can trust and you feel that he's helping you.

“Healthy Babies, Healthy Children” was listed as having been an extremely effective program and important support for new mothers. This woman shared that the nurse she accessed through “Healthy Babies, Healthy Children” first identified her post-partum depression and was instrumental in helping her gain access to support services in her area:

I had after the last one really severe post-partum depression... I don't know what it's called but the health unit, I think it's in Guelph, they have somebody that comes to your house to check on you...she came often, once a week and then we went to every two weeks, and when we went to every two weeks and I wasn't feeling better, I had disclosed some of how I was feeling to her



and she got the public health nurse in right away. They got me into the hospital right away and you know what I mean like they pushed so that was really helpful but I can't remember, it's called healthy babies healthy children or something.

4.5 The Community Resource Centre

The Community Resource Centre (CRC) was listed by all the interviewees as being an essential resource in the community. Information on the CRC can be found at <http://www.communityresourcecentre.org>.

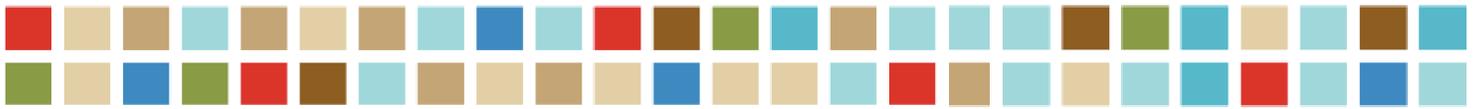
All the access to the stuff that I had during any kind of hardship or difficulty in my life, the referral originated at The Resource Centre.

The CRC was described as a place where programs and services hardship could be accessed directly or if the service needed was not available, the outreach workers would make referrals to other programs and help facilitate access to services. This interviewee talked about her experiences with the “Young and Parenting” program at the Community Resource Centre in Fergus:

The Community Resource does a lot of stuff. They have a group for young parents and we meet once a week and we get a free dinner...you get dinner and then the children go downstairs and then volunteers at the early years center and the kids all get to play there and then we have different types of things, it's like sometimes we have a nutritionist come in or people from the health clinic will come in or we'll just go for a walk or something like that but yeah the community resource does a lot.

The only concern brought up about the CRC was that some individuals in the community may not know about it and may be missing out on needed help and support, as this interviewee highlighted:

I found out through the community resource center but if people don't know about the community resource center and they don't have someone who tells them then they miss out on



it because I know a lot of people who are struggling financially and they don't know about these resources and stuff.

5.0 Conclusion

This report has provided additional information on the experiences and challenges of four women facing economic hardship in Wellington County. Individuals, organizations and collaborations are encouraged to consider the information contained in this report, as well as in the original community researcher report, when working toward making positive changes with and for those facing economic hardship in the Guelph and Wellington community.