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Quality of Life in Saskatoon

Institution	Community University Institute of Social Research
Researchers	Dr. Nazeem Muhajarine, Bill Holden, Jesse Macrosky, Jethro Cheng, Nicola Chopin, James Popham, <i>et al.</i>
Location	Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Dates	2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013
Partners	City of Saskatoon, Saskatoon community-based organizations, University of Saskatchewan, Social Sciences Research Laboratory, University of Saskatchewan
Funders	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, City of Saskatoon, United Way of Saskatoon, Saskatoon Foundation
Methods	Mixed methods: quantitative survey, qualitative focus groups, key informant interviews, one on one interviews, community events

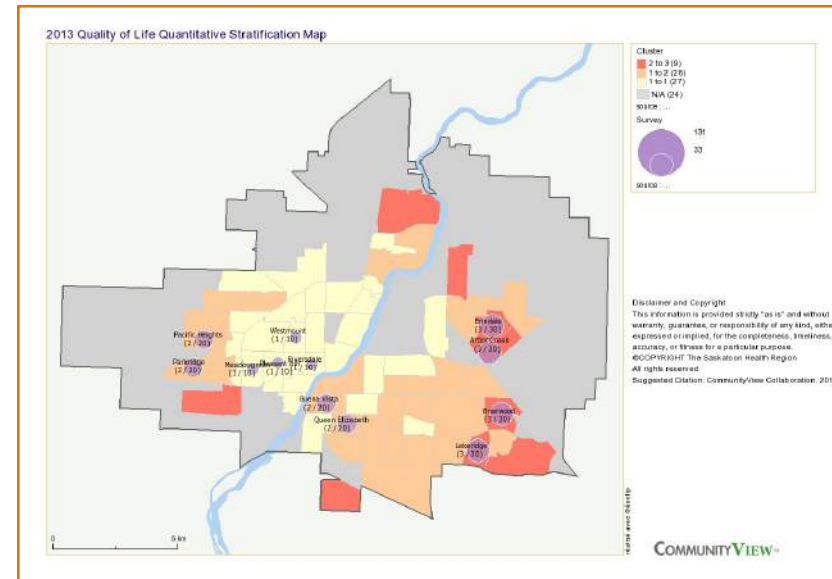
Introduction and history

The Community University Institute of Social Research (CUISR) has conducted a research program focusing on quality of life in Saskatoon over a thirteen-year period. The research started in 2001 and has been repeated five times on a three-year cycle. This program was conceptualized out of informal meetings of a quality of life roundtable group of academics and community practitioners that met several times in 1999 to discuss the community-academic dynamic. The group recognized the community's need for evidence based research and their mandate to develop community policy and the academy's ownership of research expertise and their need for community relevant research.

This group formed the membership for a successful application to then new SSHRC Community University Research Alliance (CURA). The application detailed a collaborative research project in which governance

would be shared equally among university researchers and community practitioners and would conduct community relevant, action and change-oriented research in three modules or areas of focus: health determinants and health policy, community economic development and quality of life indicators. This case focuses on the evolution and history of the quality of life module.

The initial CURA grant was the basis for establishing CUIISR. CUIISR and the quality of life module subsequently benefited from a CURA completion grant and a third SSHRC grant. The City of Saskatoon has consistently supported CUIISR's quality of life work through in-kind and monetary contributions.



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Purpose of the research

The quality of life research program was envisioned as a project to develop a research instrument that would provide a deep and balanced understanding of the community and could be used to guide real world change to improve quality of life for all. To accomplish this purpose the program was envisioned as participatory to include the knowledge and mandate of the community, ethical and sound to produce reliable evidence and action oriented to take the research into real community change. The program was intended to be long-term and longitudinal to allow ongoing evaluation of community outcomes and continued guidance for improving quality of life.

Research design and methodology

A number of words have been used to describe the Saskatoon quality of life research: mixed methods, participatory, collaborative, community-based, multi-stakeholder and action oriented. Perhaps community-based, participatory action research best describes the research design developed to achieve the purpose of the project. The program was always intended to combine the experience of community and mandate of community agencies with the expertise of the academy to produce and evidence-based platform for change. To this end, the project employed extensive community collaboration in developing the research design, in analyzing the results, and in developing strategies to improve quality of life on the basis of the evidence.

The methodology is typically referred to as a mixed-methods approach. Since its inception the program has employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection along with qualitative, community based approach to developing community action based on that evidence. The data collection consists of using a quantitative telephone survey of 1000 residents with the sample stratified onto high, medium and low socio-economic neighbourhood groups. A stratified sample of 333 allows analysis of the survey results to be analyzed for the city as a whole, for the neighbourhoods comprising the sample frame in each socio-economic cluster and imputed to neighbourhoods outside the sample neighbourhoods that share their socio-economic characteristics. In

addition, the research gathers qualitative data by employing focus groups and one-on-one discussions with citizens.

The quantitative survey has three distinct components: an evaluation of how respondents rate their quality of life, an evaluation of how respondents rate the elements of quality of life in the city and their thoughts on how to improve quality of life in the city.

The qualitative data collection consisted of two phases. First, respondents to the telephone survey were asked if they would be interested in doing a face-to-face follow up. From those interviews, a sample of about 90 was drawn and engaged in one-on-one interviews with additional questions about quality of life. Second, focus groups were conducted to discuss quality of life issues from the perspective of group participants. Participants were drawn from communities that typically are harder to reach than the general population and represent smaller, non-mainstream populations. Over the years of the Quality of Life program, focus groups have engaged senior, youth, Aboriginal, low income, recent immigrant, and the LGBTQ communities. The data collected from the mixed methods approach has been analyzed separately and then combined and analyzed to produce technical, research oriented papers and briefing papers for use in community fora.

The final pillar of the research design and methodology is the use of community gatherings to fulfill the participatory action mandate of the research program. In the first few years of the program, the process employed a quality of life advisory committee to guide both the research and action elements of the program. The committee was made up of academics, community agents and community activists. The most important tool however was, what in the CUISR Quality of Life lexicon is referred to as, a community forum. These events are community gatherings employed to access knowledge and experience in research design, deliver, and interact with regard to research results and to develop strategies for community action.

Finally, the quality of life research program was designed and has been executed as a longitudinal study. The Quality of Life program was an instrument to guide community change and as such the program needed to produce comparable information over time in order to inform an ongoing dialogue on and implementation of change. We have managed to

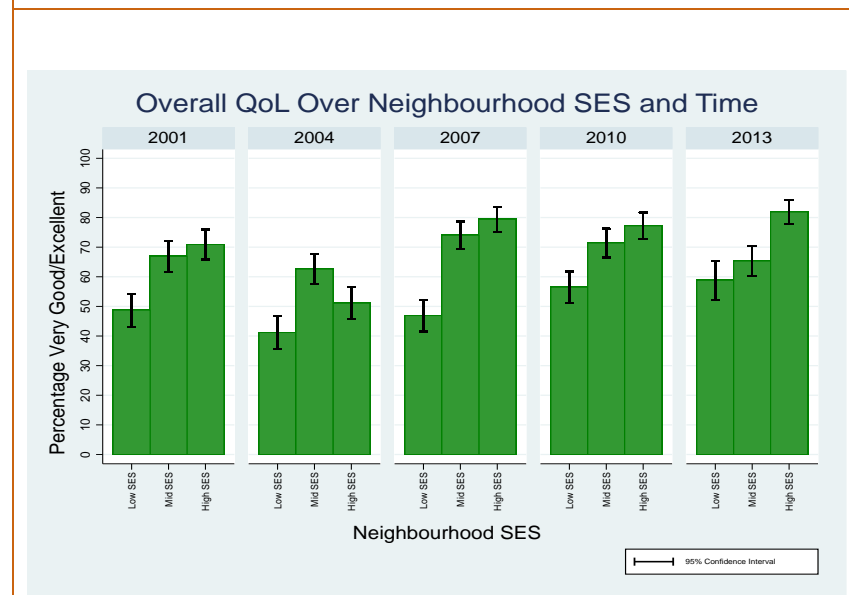
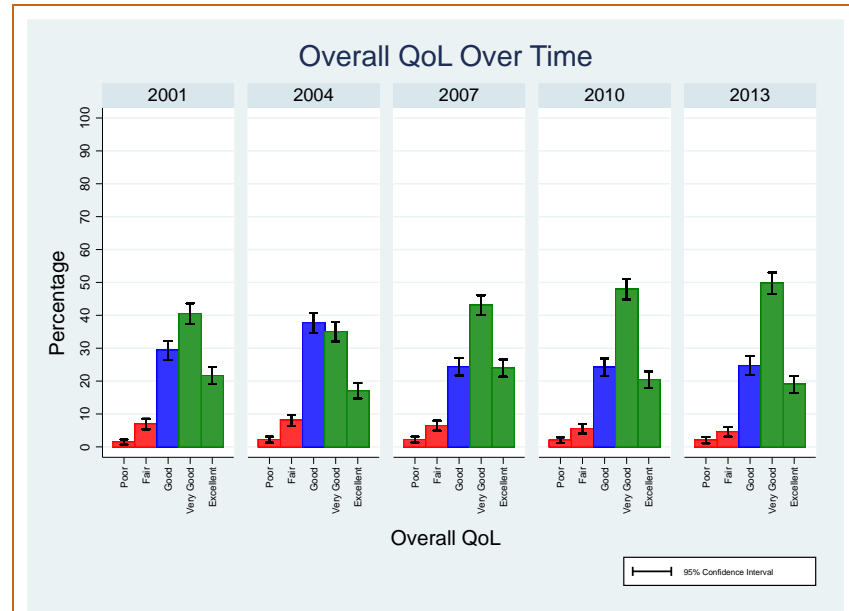
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complete five iterations of the research on a three-year schedule, resulting in a picture of the quality of life in one community spanning half a generation.

Summary of results

The research has consistently shown that people in Saskatoon rate their quality of life highly (13 years of Quality of Life in Saskatoon, a Summary of Research 2013 Iteration). Further, this evaluation has been trending upward over time. Similarly, respondents have said that Saskatoon is headed in the right direction that is as a community we are creating the conditions for improving quality of life. Having said that, the research has consistently found that evaluating quality of life is tied to socio-economic status and shown that respondents from low socio-economic status neighbourhoods have a lower overall rating of their quality of life.

The research results have led to analysis of the data across three themes: the growing income gap, social inclusion and responsibility for change. Analysis around themes continue to show that income inequality is related to quality of life and that the physical and social characteristics of your neighbourhood impact quality of life. This has produced a list of things that can be addressed to improve quality of life for all.



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Government spending priorities					
#	2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
1	Health services	Health services	Roads	Roads	Roads
2	Protection services	Schools	Housing	Health services	Traffic conditions
3	Social programs	Roads	Caregiver services	Protection services	Health services
4	Recreational programs	Protection services	Neighbourhood organizations	Social programs	Schools
5	Schools	Social programs	Protection services	Schools	Social programs
6	Caregiver services	Housing	Safety from violent crime	Housing	Public transportation
7	Safety-property crime	Safety-property crime	Religious/spiritual activities	Snow removal	Protection services
8	Roads	Recreational programs	Schools	Safety from violent crime	Housing
9	Safety from violent crime	Safety from violent crime	Safety-property crime	Safety-property crime	Recreational programs
10	Environment	Environment	Shops and services	Recreational programs	Safety from violent crime

Domains of research excellence

Community relevance

Community relevance is a founding principle of both CUISR and the *Quality of Life* project. Community relevance was the underlying theme of discussion of the quality of life roundtable and a founding principle of CUISR. The community members had a mandate for community building and a need for rigorous knowledge development in order to make the most of that mandate. Members of the academy had the skills to build good evidence and the desire to apply those skills to create a better community. The concept of quality of life seems to resonate with a broad audience. It is a positive label and does not suggest a deficit. Quality of life is understood as something that everyone strives to achieve and as such is inclusive, not divisive. Most importantly, however, was the project's engagement of the community through community fora, which brought a broad range of people and agencies into the discussion about how to measure the community and how to create positive change. By including stakeholders in the development of the research, the discussion of the results and the organization of strategies for change, the research attained relevance in the community.

Equitable participation

The *Quality of Life* project strove to be equitable and inclusive. Methodologically, the process was always vetted through the University of Saskatchewan's research ethics process to ensure that the research respected the rights of research subjects. The stratification of the quantitative sample meant that we heard about quality of life from across the socio-economic spectrum of the city. The qualitative work tried to be inclusive of all aspects of the community, a goal that served both our desire to develop a complete picture of quality of life and a desire to include the voices of those often not heard. The community work aimed to be as open and inclusive as possible. Community events were promoted widely, invitations were extended broadly through the community based organization network, and reimbursement for transportation and child care costs was available. Most community events were held in locations easily accessible to all. First voice was a priority of the project and was heard at all stages of the program. Finally, the stakeholders that

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participated in the process represented a broad and inclusive representation of the city. These included government agencies and community based organizations; business organizations and anti poverty activists; individuals and faith based congregations; at some point in the quality of life research program people from all of these areas were involved in the process.

Research design

The research design of the *Quality of Life* project started from a desire to be relevant to the community. Such a goal requires the application of mixed methods and diligent community participation. Employing sample stratification and qualitative methods ensured that the broadest possible community voice was recorded. Building community participation throughout the community forum model went a long way to ensuring the research itself respected the community at large and engaged the community in a meaningful way in working on solutions to community issues as a community. The research design broke a mold of community as research subjects and recipients of solutions by facilitating the community to be the researcher and to be the creator of solutions.

Action and change

This project pursued new understanding of the community with the express intent of making the community better. Community based research needs to incorporate the concept of applied knowledge in order to succeed within its other domain of community relevance. The *Quality of Life* program uses the production and dissemination of knowledge hand in hand with community engagement around the question of how to use the information to drive change.

Final reflections

Certainly the *Quality of Life* program explicitly set out to create evidence-based change to improve the quality of life in the community. Simply put the plan was: a) undertake a participatory, inclusive, action oriented research program that identifies what needs to be accomplished to improve quality of life, to create a community based action plan for accomplishing these goals, to have all the responsible agencies in the community adopt the action plan and implement the recommendations. Of course, community building is neither that simple or that easy. Which isn't to say that the program has failed to accomplish its goals. On the contrary, the *Quality of Life* program has succeeded in producing a stream of community relevant information in a community relevant framework; it has succeeded in engaging a meaningful segment of the community in doing research and working on solutions to identified issues. But the program was neither the first nor the last to point out that lack of income and income inequality impacts individuals' ability to realize a good quality of life. It is neither first nor the last to identify safety, housing and transportation as important elements of quality of life. And while the *Quality of Life* program did not produce the Comprehensive Community Action Plan the project started out to create, it did ignite and foster community wide collaboration on local issues. The community has subsequently developed a number of collaborative action strategies including a poverty reduction strategy, and a Housing First program.

Links

[http://www.usask.ca/cuisr/sites/default/files/Achieving%20a%20Healthy,%20Sustainable%20Community%20\(2001\)_o.pdf](http://www.usask.ca/cuisr/sites/default/files/Achieving%20a%20Healthy,%20Sustainable%20Community%20(2001)_o.pdf)

<http://www.usask.ca/cuisr/sites/default/files/DunningQOL.pdf>

<http://www.usask.ca/cuisr/sites/default/files/Announcement%20-%20Quality%20of%20Life%20Conference%20May%2015-16,%202014.pdf>