

*the***way**forward

**THE WAY FORWARD
COMMUNITY DIALOGUE FINDINGS**

JANUARY 2004



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of an ongoing effort to stay in touch with the needs and priorities of Calgarians, United Way of Calgary and Area conducted significant research in 2003 to determine the social issues people consider the most pressing. A wide range of people were consulted, and Calgarians had the opportunity to be heard.

The Way Forward Community Dialogue was a comprehensive community consultation. It involved a random telephone survey; a written/online public survey; focus groups with at-risk populations, ethnic groups, agency executive directors, and corporate community investment professionals; and interviews with major donors.

Findings from the research were remarkably consistent. Concerns about economic issues dominated the responses. Results suggested that although Calgary is a good city for many people to live in, economic barriers prevent others from sharing in Calgary's high quality of life.

Top Concerns

Public survey respondents were asked to choose the most pressing social problems in Calgary out of a list of 23 issues. The top-chosen concerns all related to economic issues:

- Homelessness
- Stressed families
- Lack of support for the working poor
- Lack of affordable housing
- Poverty

Populations at Risk

Public survey respondents indicated concerns regarding specific vulnerable populations:

- Economically-stressed families and individuals
- At-risk children and youth
- People with a physical or mental disability or illness
- Seniors trying to live independently

Quality of Life

Phone survey respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of life in Calgary as well as their own social well-being. Researchers noted that:

- Six per cent of participants rated their own quality of life as poor or very poor. This could represent 43,525 adults living in Calgary and area.
- Lower quality of life ratings were usually expressed by low-income people, renters, single people, members of a visible minority, and people for whom English is a second language.
- For those who rated their own social well-being lower than the overall quality of life in Calgary, the reasons given related to economic stress in 38% of the cases.

Public survey respondents were asked how United Way could make a difference in our community. Their comments generally related to investing for maximum impact, taking a leadership role on social issues, and leveraging United Way's resources to improve social conditions in Calgary.

Implications for United Way of Calgary and Area

Findings from The Way Forward Community Dialogue validate United Way's current areas of focus and build the foundation of knowledge that guides the organization as it moves forward in 2004.

Many of the issues Calgarians listed as being of greatest concern have long been priorities for United Way of Calgary and Area. In particular, respondents highlighted the need to address economic problems and difficulties facing vulnerable populations (including economically stressed families and individuals, at-risk children and youth, people living with a physical or mental disability or illness, and seniors trying to live independently). Respondents recommended that United Way continue the work it is already doing to address these important community issues.

The Way Forward Community Dialogue findings also point to the need for increased leadership on current and emerging social issues and community investment tied to long-term change. In fact, many respondents suggested that United Way is in a unique position to play a pivotal role in this work.

Respondents were clear in their expectations of United Way to continue to make sound investments in high-quality programs. They called for the continuation of responsible, relevant, and transparent funding practices. In addition, participants said that building a strong social infrastructure must continue to be a high priority for United Way.

Finally, respondents said United Way is in a position to leverage its resources and influence to improve social conditions through collaboration and partnerships, community development, and capacity building.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Way Forward Community Dialogue was designed to gather information about:

- Calgarians' views of current social problems and the quality of life in the city
- Calgarians' views on how well the community of Calgary takes care of certain social issues
- Calgarians' predictions regarding community priorities in the next three to five years

For six months in 2003, a number of research methods were used to gather this information. United Way staff managed the process, with the support of a professional research manager from GPC International.

The research began with 11 community-based **focus groups** with at-risk and hard-to-reach populations, executive directors of United Way-funded agencies, and corporate community investment professionals. Individual **interviews** were also held with ten individuals who donated \$10,000 or more to United Way last year.

The information gathered helped form the research framework for two surveys conducted in May and June of 2003.

The first was a random **telephone survey** of 400 adult Calgarians. Ipsos-Reid conducted the survey, which asked respondents about quality of life, major social problems, and the success of Calgary's efforts in a number of social areas.

The final stage of research was a written/online **public survey** managed by GPC International. Open to all Calgarians, the survey asked respondents about the current social issues in Calgary, the issues likely to be of greatest concern in the next three to five years, and the ways United Way could make a difference in the community.

Together, the research methods identified some of the social needs and issues affecting Calgarians.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Findings from The Way Forward Community Dialogue were grouped by research method. Within each method, respondents were asked about their own experience living in Calgary and/or their perceptions about the social issues and needs in the city. United Way's mission and broad funding areas formed the basis for the questions.

Telephone Survey Findings

In May 2003, Ipsos-Reid conducted a random telephone survey of 400 adults living in Calgary and surrounding areas. The survey results are considered accurate to within ± 4.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had all adults in the area been polled.

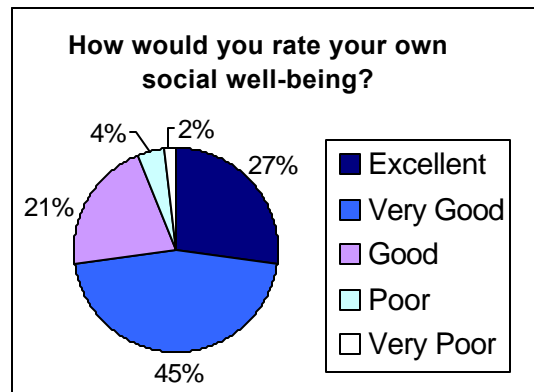
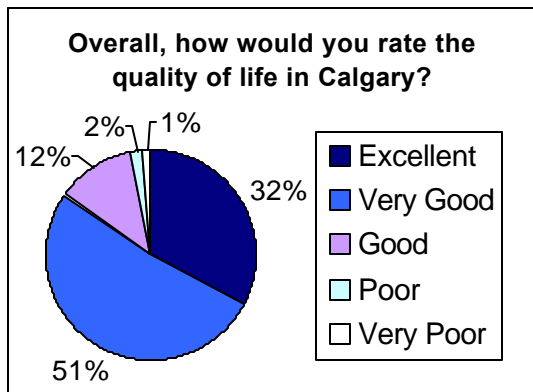
The survey asked respondents about quality of life, major social problems, and the success of Calgary's efforts in a number of social areas. To help prevent response bias, participants were not informed that United Way commissioned the survey.

Quality of Life

When participants were asked to rate the overall quality of life in Calgary, 83% said it was very good or excellent.

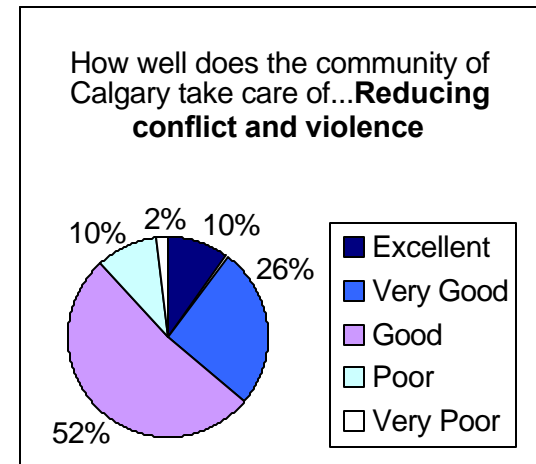
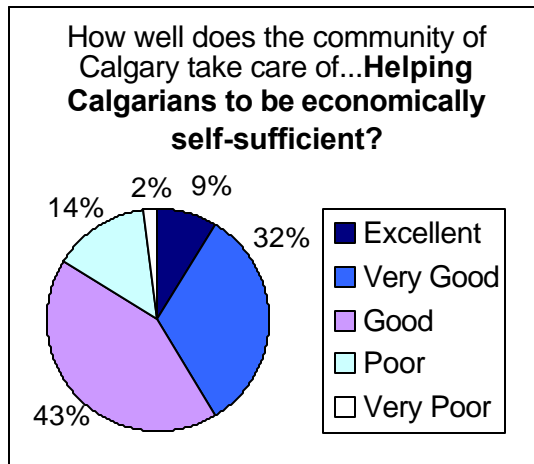
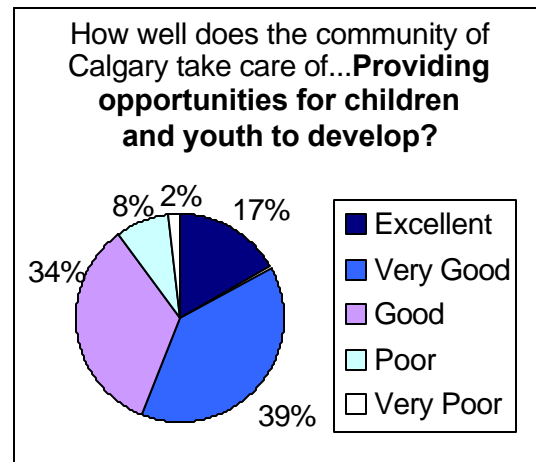
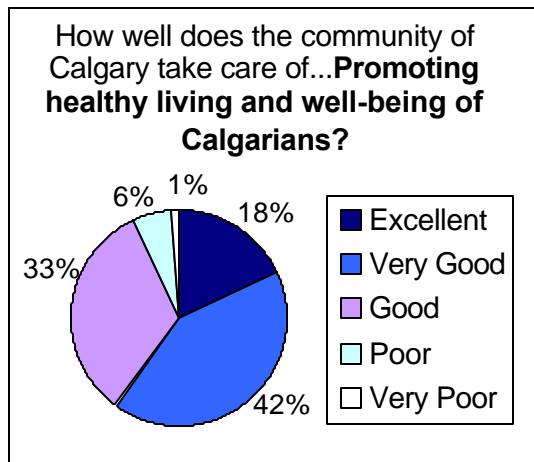
When respondents were asked to rate their own quality of life, the researchers found:

- 72% of participants rated their own quality of life as very good or excellent.
- For those who described their personal quality of life as lower than that of Calgarians in general, the reasons given related to economic stress in 38% of the cases.
- Lower quality of life ratings were usually expressed by low-income people, renters, single people, members of a visible minority, and people for whom English is a second language.
- 6% of participants rated their own quality of life as poor or very poor. This statistic could represent 43,525 adults living in Calgary and surrounding areas (out of a total population of 725,455 adults).



Performance on Social Issues

Respondents were asked how well the community of Calgary takes care of certain social issues. The charts below show their responses.



Major Social Problems

Respondents were asked to name the social problems they considered most important in Calgary. The top responses related to:

- Poverty and homelessness (41%)
- Social services such as education and health (38%)
- Crime and justice (31%)
- Transportation and infrastructure (23%)

Suggestions for Improvement

Respondents were asked to think of one way to make Calgary a better place to live. As with all phone survey questions, the respondents did not know the question was related to United Way or human services. Without prompting, their responses related to:

- Transportation and infrastructure (27%)
- Poverty and homelessness (11%)
- Social services (8%)
- Crime and justice (6%)
- Community and lifestyle (5%)

Public Survey Findings

The public survey, managed by GPC International, was circulated through the Calgary Herald, the Sing Tao and the Calgary Public Library system. It was identified as a United Way initiative, and could be filled in online through the United Way of Calgary and Area Web site. The survey asked respondents about the current social issues in Calgary, the issues likely to be of greatest concern in the next three to five years, and the ways United Way could make a difference in the community.

The survey was open to all Calgarians and was promoted heavily within Calgary social services, health and education networks. It likely attracted people with strong interests in the social welfare in Calgary. There were 827 respondents.

As well, 23 executive directors of United Way-funded agencies completed the survey as part of a separate mail-out. Their responses are included in the focus group findings on page 9.

Major Social Problems

The survey provided a list of 23 social problems and asked respondents to choose their top ten priorities (they could also add their own listings). The top five issues were identified as:

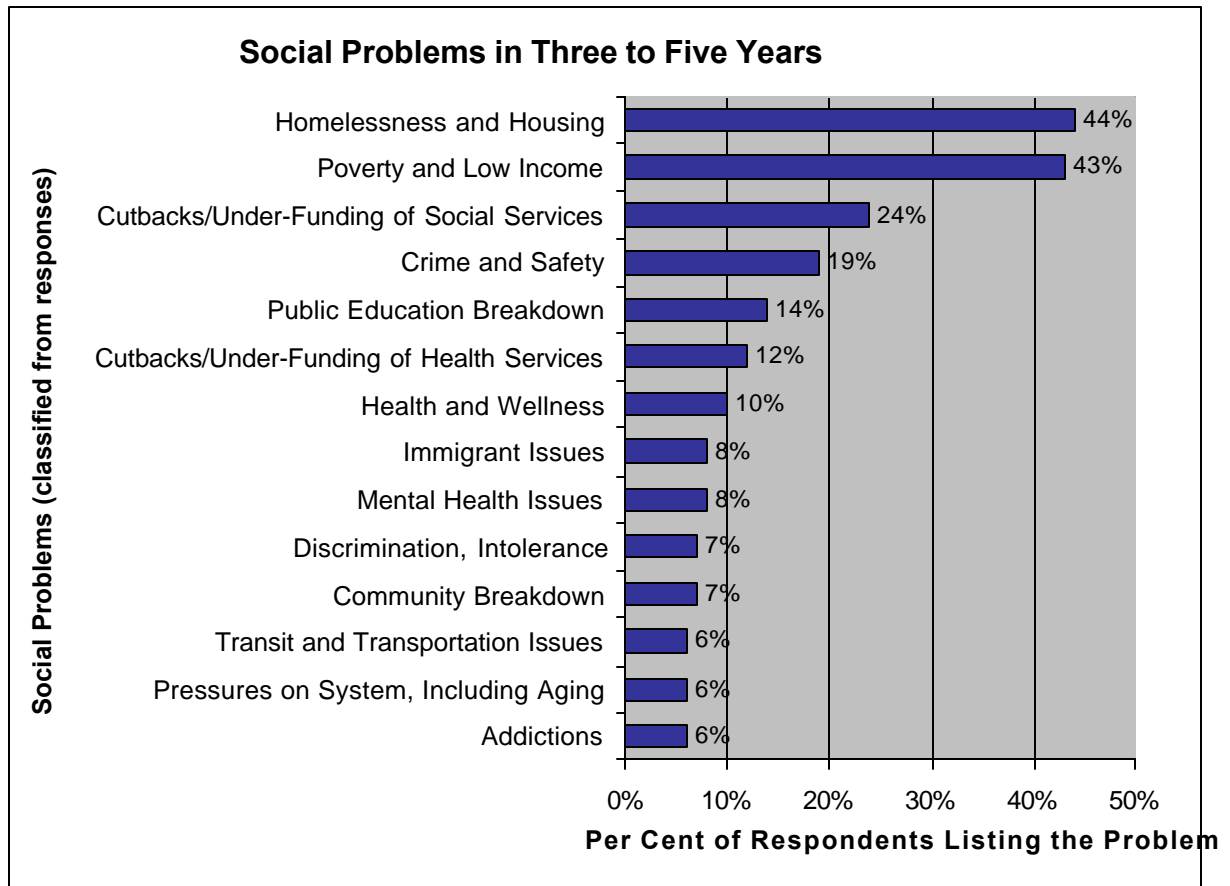
- Homelessness and near-homelessness (73%)
- Stressed families experiencing family breakdown, emotional problems and economic uncertainty (71%)
- Lack of supports for low-income people, “working poor” (71%)
- Lack of affordable or subsidized housing (70%)
- Poverty and the poverty cycle (66%)

Interestingly, the next top-chosen issues all related to specific populations. The issues were:

- Teens and youth with high-risk lifestyles and behaviours (53%)
- Lack of financial and community support for people with mental illness (53%)
- Lack of prevention and intervention for children experiencing abuse, neglect or other risk factors (48%)
- Lack of financial and community supports for people with physical or developmental disabilities or living with chronic illness (47%)
- Problems faced by seniors trying to live independently (43%)

Major Social Problems in Three to Five Years

Looking to the future, respondents were asked to list the social problems they think will be most pressing in three to five years. Their written comments were classified into the categories shown in the chart below.



Suggestions for United Way

Respondents were asked to suggest how United Way could make a difference in our community. About 70% of survey respondents (575 people) provided their thoughts. Their comments appeared to fall into the following three themes:

- **Investment for Impact**
Respondents suggested specific programs to fund, called for a focus on root causes and prevention, and praised United Way’s funding practices and policies.
- **Leadership**
Respondents asked United Way to get involved in public awareness and education, to advocate and lobby for social change and to work to increase civic engagement.
- **Leverage**
Respondents said United Way could leverage its resources and influence to improve social conditions in Calgary and area. They discussed the need for collaboration and partnerships, community development, and capacity building.

Focus Group Findings

Eleven community-based focus groups were conducted. Group members included:

- *At-risk populations: urban Aboriginal residents, members of working-poor families, youth at risk, young single mothers, and seniors*
- *Ethnic populations: people of Filipino, Chinese, South Asian and Mid-eastern background*
- *Executive directors at United Way-funded agencies*
- *Corporate community investment professionals*

The findings below also encompass the responses from 23 executive directors of United Way-funded agencies who completed the public survey described previously (as part of a separate mail-out), and findings from interviews with ten individuals who donated \$10,000 or more to United Way last year.

During a discussion of current and emerging social problems, participant comments generally focused on economic and cultural issues. Recommended solutions were also discussed. These themes are described below.

Economic Barriers

Throughout the 11 focus groups, participant statements consistently indicated that Calgary is a good city to live in if you are financially stable, but a very difficult city if you are not.

The respondents stated that economic barriers prevent many people from sharing in the city's overall high quality of life. Some of the barriers mentioned include:

- High cost of living
- Lack of affordable housing
- Alberta's minimum wage
- Limited access to transportation
- Stressed family life
- Lack of recreation and other services for children and youth

Many at-risk participants indicated that these barriers ultimately impact people's health and well-being.

Agency executive directors emphasized that many social problems have economic problems at their root. They also noted that poverty often cycles through families.

Corporate community investment professionals said Calgary's rapid growth has placed demands on all resources and infrastructure, and that a lack of accessible transportation and affordable housing is causing problems for many people. A perceived reduction in government social supports was said to be affecting many people.

Cultural Challenges and Discrimination

New immigrants face unique challenges in Calgary, according to the community investment professionals and ethnically diverse participants. They said the generation gap between parents and children is often compounded by a cultural gap, and cultural differences are affecting their communities profoundly.

Discrimination is believed to affect many at-risk people. Tension and a lack of understanding were said to exist within many segments of the population. For example, senior participants said they feel at risk of harm from the younger generation; young single mothers said they are ridiculed by seniors; and urban Aboriginal youth said they feel ostracized.

Community investment professionals said they believe “community” in the traditional sense is lacking, and that people do not take care of one another as they once did.

Recommended Solutions

When asked to suggest solutions to Calgary’s social problems, the at-risk populations usually asked for resources that would alleviate their tight financial situations.

Participants from the ethnic and Aboriginal research groups often focused their suggestions towards opportunities or programs to help close the cultural gaps between themselves and mainstream society. They said this was particularly important for youth.

Participants from the ethnic focus groups also indicated that cultural gaps between parents and children could be narrowed with greater intervention for parents at the early stages of settlement in Calgary.

Agency executive directors, United Way donors, and corporate community investment professionals had much the same comments as the at-risk and ethnic populations. In addition, they indicated the following:

- Long-term solutions are needed for social problems.
- More citizen involvement is required in Calgary. To solve the city’s social problems, people must take responsibility for their own well-being and the well-being of those less fortunate.
- Prevention/education programs are needed to help at-risk populations. For example, children should be taught conflict resolution, and people living on a low income should be provided household economic advice.
- Calgarians require greater consensus on what makes a community healthy.

Among agency executive directors and corporate community investment professionals, there was general support for United Way’s current focus, with particular emphasis on economic well-being and opportunities for children and youth. These groups also indicated that United Way is well positioned to take a leadership role to bring Calgarians together to build a healthier community.

Guiding United Way's Future Direction

United Way of Calgary and Area's investment decisions are guided by the organization's mission and supported by a foundation of knowledge that ensures maximum impact in the community.

The Way Forward Community Dialogue is one component of that foundation. United Way has also reviewed research and best practices from other sources; had in-depth conversations with United Way employees who have a comprehensive understanding of the Calgary community; and consulted with a group of community experts including researchers, academics, and front-line service providers.

Together, this information guides decisions regarding United Way of Calgary and Area's program funding, public education, agency capacity building and collaborative community work. United Way will share its enhanced investment strategy in the spring of 2004.