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## Daily Activities and Self-Perceptions about Productivity among Saskatchewan Welfare Recipients

Angela Leski and Luc Thériault

June 2004

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# **Daily Activities and Self-Perceptions about Productivity among Saskatchewan Welfare Recipients**

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June 2004



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## **Abstract**

The history of social welfare shows long standing public antipathy against those who rely on social assistance to meet their needs (Wardhaugh, 2003; Swanson, 2001; Burman, 1996). With welfare comes the stigma of irresponsibility and laziness, labels that have persisted to this day. The concept of productivity – the measure of a person’s contribution to society – is firmly entrenched in the realm of paid economic activity, or how one earns their keep. To be on social assistance is a form of social exclusion and the stereotypical view is thus that people on welfare are completely unproductive.

As part of a SSHRC-funded project on “redefining productivity,” this paper challenges this view. The study uses a descriptive and exploratory approach in order to gain a clearer picture of the nature of social assistance recipient’s activities in the home, community and paid labour market. Knowledge of these areas will assist us in developing a better understanding of the actual contributions of welfare recipients to social productivity.

Current social assistance policy directions do not take into account the lived experiences of welfare recipients. This study seeks to address this gap. In all, 30 interviews with welfare recipients were conducted in two urban centres in Saskatchewan to form the empirical foundation of this work. The daily activities of welfare recipients are described from their perspective. The research findings suggest that the common perception of welfare recipients as unproductive and inactive falls short of the reality of their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, the research participant’s own perceptions of productivity, and of their role and place in the community and the larger society, are presented. The paper concludes by recommending that the contributions of welfare recipients, both paid and unpaid, be recognized and acknowledged in terms of their immediate and potential benefits to societal well-being.

## Contents

Introduction	1
Review of the Literature	1
Method	3
Profile of Respondents	5
Daily Activities	7
<i>Caring for Children</i>	7
<i>Elder Care and Care for Disabled Persons</i>	8
<i>Paid Work and Transportation to Work</i>	8
<i>Volunteering, Going to School, and Other Unpaid Activities</i>	9
Perceptions of Productivity: How Welfare Recipients View Their Place	10
Discussion	14
Policy Implications	15
References	17
<u>Tables</u>	
Table 1: Sample Characteristics	6
Table 2: Perceptions of Productivity	11

## **Introduction**

The history of social welfare shows long standing public antipathy against those who rely on social assistance to meet their needs (Swanson, 2001; Burman, 1996). With welfare comes the stigma of irresponsibility and laziness, labels that have persisted since the emergence of the welfare state. The concept of productivity – the measure of a person's contribution to society - is firmly entrenched in the realm of paid economic activity, or how one earns their keep. To be on social assistance then, is perceived as unproductive and therefore excludes one from society.

This descriptive and exploratory research seeks to gain a clearer picture of the nature of social assistance recipient's work in the home, community and paid labour market. Knowledge of these areas will assist in developing a better understanding of the welfare recipient's actual contributions to social productivity.

The paper is divided into four sections. Section one provides an overview of the literature on the shifting nature of societal attitudes toward welfare recipients, and the fundamental concepts that underpin popular perceptions of social assistance recipients, including dependency and productivity. In the second section, we outline the methodology and process of data collection used in carrying out the research. A demographic profile of research respondents is also provided. In the third section, we present the findings of the research. Daily activities of the welfare recipients and individual perceptions of productivity are described. In our final section we provide our discussion and recommendations.

## **Review of the Literature**

Popular attitudes toward social assistance recipients are closely tied to societal perceptions about the root causes of poverty and welfare dependence. Historical analysis of the development of the welfare state shows that part of the “folklore” of early Canadian life was that Canada was the land of plenty and jobs existed for all those who wanted to work (Guest, 2003). The absence of data on societal indicators, such as unemployment, income and housing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century masked the true extent of poverty, and contributed to public perception that poverty and joblessness did not exist. Societal appreciation for the need of a strong social welfare state came about mostly after the Great Depression, as a result of the growing realization of the unpredictability of the capitalist economic system and its effects, and the subsequent unremitting pressure by concerned citizens to challenge views toward the poor and redefine causes of poverty and unemployment (Guest, 2003).

The welfare state's greatest growth took place in the period after World War II through the early 1970's, during a time of unprecedented economic expansion. During this time, public acceptance for a strong social welfare state was high. In his account of the changing nature of public opinion toward welfare recipients, Wardhaugh (2003) states that in 1970, the Saskatchewan populace “viewed those on welfare as unable to work for a variety of reasons beyond their control and therefore in need of government aid”(p.41). However, as the provincial economic system worsened, the public's empathy for the poor

diminished, and welfare increasingly became seen as a burden to the effective functioning of the economy. Calls for a more “stream-lined” welfare system, with distinction made between the employable and unemployable, began to dominate public discourse (Wardhaugh, 2003).

The rationale for these changes was the belief that the welfare system fosters dependency and reduces individual initiative (Guest, 2003). In his federal review of social security in Canada, former Human Resources Development Minister Lloyd Axworthy argued that social programs should be overhauled to reward effort by the unemployed and welfare recipients (Swanson, 2001). Across Canada, provinces shifted to active welfare policies aimed at reducing reliance on welfare and increasing self-sufficiency, with paid employment the primary vehicle to achieve this transition.

Implicit in arguments for welfare reform is the belief that welfare recipients are “unproductive”, that is by nature of their exclusion from the paid labour market, they contribute nothing to the functioning of society. Welfare reform literature is replete with arguments that “old left” models of social welfare did not demand social responsibility from welfare recipients (Hunter and Miazdyk, 2003). In his report calling for changes in welfare programming, former Saskatchewan Justice Minister Chris Axworthy stated welfare recipients feel “no responsibility to prepare for old age, look for work, seek the skills needed for the workplace, relocate to a job, provide for our children, etc” (Axworthy, 1999: 279). The public policy response shifted from one which acknowledged the role the economic system had in contributing toward the need for social assistance, to one which focused on changing the behaviour of the poor to make them “active and contributing” citizens (Swanson, 2001).

Across Canada, local press and business communities further perpetuated the image of the “welfare bum” by issuing remarks that suggested that welfare promoted values of dependency, irresponsibility and idleness. Wardhaugh (2003) traces how public attitudes in Saskatchewan, as reflected in two of the largest newspapers published in the province, shifted from one of empathy toward welfare recipients to that of disdain, and notes that deteriorating economic circumstances and rising debt made welfare recipients an easy target for criticism. In Newfoundland, O’Grady (1994) states that the press and the business community were instrumental in swaying public opinion to believe that mass youth unemployment was the result of the normalization of government dependency and a loss of the work ethic. Yet, his research found no evidence that young Newfoundlanders have developed a value system responsible for their unemployment.

Nonetheless, the view that the welfare system promotes entitlement without responsibilities has prevailed. Productivity is traditionally measured in economic terms as total production divided by the number of paid labour hours expended (Daly and Cobb, 1994). Understood in this way, productive work includes only that which is economically measurable. The unpaid work and activities of welfare recipients are difficult to measure in economic terms, and thus are not counted in measures of economic productivity.

The need for a broader conceptualisation of work and productivity has been advanced by many (Waring, 1999; Hayden, 1999; Kovel, 2002; Mulvale, 2001; Nichols-Caseboldt, Krysik, and Hermann-Currie, 1994). At the heart of the debate around reconceptualizing productivity is the question of what is being produced and why, and who benefits. The capitalist system alienates labour by creating boundaries between paid and unpaid work (Kovel, 2002). By binding productivity to paid work, other forms of human activity that are life sustaining, or contribute to well-being, are subordinated to those that create economic surplus. Trade-offs to increased “productivity” – displacement of workers, weakened social relationships, a degraded environment, etc., are not accounted for (Waring, 1999; Daly and Cobb, 1994; Quarter, Mook, and Jane, 2002).

An alternative conceptualization of productivity considers how work in all its forms is related to economic security, and values opportunities to contribute to society both inside and outside of the formal labour market (Mulvale, 2001). According to Waring (1999: 231), recognition of unpaid work would provide a more reliable indicator of the actual well-being of community and society by making “all caring services, subsistence production, and the vast range of life-enhancing work visible and counted.” Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2000) point out that valuing such contributions is essential in given the “mixed economy of welfare” that emerged following the cuts to public services in 1990s (ie care is now provided by a number of sources, including the state, the private sector, informal sector, family and community organizations).

### **Method**

Much of what is written about social assistance recipients is not based on systematic, empirical information obtained from them. The view that was taken in this study is that the researchers needed to hear from the recipients themselves before attempting to say something about their lives. Yet, gaining access to people on welfare for the purpose of a research interview (and doing so in an ethical way) is not a simple endeavour. The researchers turned to local community agencies to identify research participants, after failing to secure the active cooperation of the Saskatchewan Department of Community Resources and Employment (formerly Social Services) for this study.

University of Regina Ethics approval for this study was obtained in August 2002. Once this approval was in place, the researchers approached two community-based organizations working with low-income individuals in Regina in September 2002, to seek their collaboration with the project. The participating community agencies were the Welfare Rights Centre (WRC) and the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (RAPM). After discussion regarding the ethical treatment of the study participants, both organizations agreed to collaborate with the project. These organizations were instrumental in helping the researcher identify and contact social assistance recipients willing to participate in the study. The general clientele of the two organizations are slightly different - the WRC administers trusteeships to assist welfare recipients manage their finances, while the RAPM advocates for and with the poor and disadvantaged toward the eradication of poverty.



Each organization approached potential interviewees and explained to them the general purpose and process of the interview. Only potential participants who agreed to volunteer for the interview were referred to the researchers. The data collection phase (interviews) began in November 2002 and was completed in April 2003. Most of the nineteen interviews conducted in Regina took place in a room kindly provided to the project by the RAPM.

A similar process was followed in Prince Albert. In November 2002, the researchers contacted three Prince Albert-based organizations to request their participation in the research project. These agencies included Riverbank Development Corporation, the West Flat Citizen's Group, and Family Futures. Riverbank Development Corporation, a community economic development agency, declined participation in the study, as it was determined that while the majority of their clientele were low-income, most leave welfare in order to participate in work opportunities offered through this organization. The West Flat Citizen's Group and the YWCA Family Futures program both agreed to participate in the study.

The West Flat Citizen's group is located in the north-west part of Prince Albert. Average family income in the West-Flat is below the national average (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). YWCA Family Futures supports low-income individuals in successful parenting and personal development. Both agencies agreed to the study and offered space for the interviews to take place. Data collection for the Prince Albert site occurred in December 2002 and May 2003. Eleven interviews were conducted: six through the West Flat Citizen's Group, and five through Family Futures.

The questionnaire used in the study is divided into two main parts<sup>1</sup>. The first part focuses on questions regarding daily activities. It is subdivided into six sub-sections covering demographics, daily activities, care to children and the elderly (with or without disability), labour market activities, and non-domestic unpaid work activities such as volunteering. The second part asks questions about how "productive" the respondents perceive themselves to be.

The interviews generally lasted about 45 minutes and the participants were given a \$20 token of appreciation for their time. A written consent form was presented and explained by the researcher and signed by the participants at the start of the interview.

The interview instrument used both open-ended, qualitative and close-ended, quantitative questions. Questions were transcribed verbatim from the tapes of the interviews with crosschecks made to the notes taken by the interviewers. For the close-ended questions, we used the SPSS program to perform a descriptive univariate analysis, as well as an exploratory bivariate analysis using contingency tables, correlations, and/or comparison of means to describe relationships. For the open-ended questions, we performed a

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<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire is available from the authors.

thematic analysis, examining answers of respondents to extract common themes and identify trends.

### **Limitations**

As in any social science research, this study has its limitations. The most evident limitation is using purposive, non-random sample with some self-selection bias. For example, the individuals who agreed to speak to us may have been more active in the community than the average welfare recipients. Even so, the thirty in-depth interviews provide a valuable window of observation into the lives of social assistance recipients. Furthermore, this is a purposive sample that was never intended to be statistically representative of a larger population. The findings that follow demonstrate the usefulness of the study and the importance of taking action toward developing a better understanding of the lived experiences of welfare recipients.

### **Profile of Respondents**

Personal face-to-face interviews were conducted with thirty social assistance recipients residing in two Saskatchewan urban centres. Nineteen participants were interviewed in Regina, Saskatchewan's capital city with a population of close to 200,000 people. An additional eleven participants were interviewed in Prince Albert<sup>2</sup>. Located approximately 400 km north of Regina, Prince Albert is the largest city in the northern half of the province, with a population of just over 41,000 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003). In sum, about two thirds of our sample is from Regina and one third from Prince Albert (see Table 1).

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<sup>2</sup> Note that according to the 2001 Census, Prince Albert has the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in Canada (29.2%) among cities with a population under 100,000 (Tkach, 2003).

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N=30)**

<b>City</b>		
	Regina	63%
	Prince Albert	37%
<b>Age</b>		
	<40	67%
	40+	33%
<b>Sex</b>	Female	80%
	Male	20%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Aboriginal	73%
	Non-aboriginal	27%
<b>Housing</b>	Rent	87%
	Own	13%
<b>Children at home</b>	Yes	70%
	No	30%

The demographic profile of respondents is as follows: In terms of age distribution, twenty respondents, or two thirds, are less than 40 years old and ten, or one third, are aged 40 and over. By comparison, available data on heads of families on social assistance show that, for the entire province, roughly 57% of the cases are led by individuals aged below 40, while 43% are led by those aged 40 and over. The younger individuals are therefore slightly over-represented in our sample. This is in part because the interviewees from Prince Albert were mostly younger respondents.

The majority (24/30 or four fifths) of respondents in the sample are women. While this is also the case in the provincial social assistance caseload, the proportion of women there is somewhat smaller at 57% (data provided by the Department of Community Resources and Employment, personal communications). Hence, women are over-represented, partly due to the fact that all interviewees from Prince Albert are women.

Overall, the age of respondents is weakly associated with their sex as two thirds of males (4 out of 6) are 40 years and over, while three quarters of women (18 out of 24) are less than 40 years old.

Twenty-two respondents (or about three quarters of the sample) identify themselves as Aboriginals (First Nations or Metis) and only eight or about a quarter of the respondents, identify themselves as White persons. In comparison, just above 40% of the entire

provincial social assistance caseload is composed of Aboriginals. Therefore, Aboriginal people are over-represented in the sample.

The large majority of the respondents (23/30 or three quarters) are housed in the private rental market. Only four respondents own their housing unit and another three are in public housing.

Twenty-one of the thirty respondents report having dependents; generally one or two. All those who have dependents report that at least one of these dependents is a child. In total, these 21 respondents are caring for 39 children, close to an average of two children per respondent with a dependent. Moreover, three Regina respondents who do not have dependent children at home state that they do things to support their older, more dependent child/children.

It is worth noting that all the 11 interviewees from Prince Albert reported having at least one dependent. Also, having dependents at home (including children) is, perhaps not surprisingly, strongly related to age. Almost all respondents below the age of forty (17 out of 20 individuals) have at least one dependent, while this is true for less than half of the respondents aged forty and over (4 out of 10 individuals).

### **Daily Activities**

Contrary to some stereotypical views, being out of the formal labour market does not mean a life of inactivity. For many welfare recipients, daily life includes caring for children or older adults, looking for work or volunteering.

#### *Caring for children*

As mentioned above, twenty-one out of thirty respondents (all women) are caring for children at home. In a majority of cases (twelve out of twenty-one), caring for children's needs occupies most of the day (i.e., 7 or more hours per day), while it takes less than 5 hours per day for eight out of twenty-one respondents.

Caring for children takes two basic forms: activities with child/children and household tasks. As could be expected, participants had little difficulty speaking about the wide range of activities they carry out on a daily basis in order to attend to their children's basic physical and emotional needs. These included feeding, bathing, and playing with children, taking them to the park, reading to them, walking them to and from school, etc. Furthermore, participants enumerated a range of household tasks that occupied their time, including cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, washing dishes, etc.

\* \* \*

The availability of affordable day care centres is a concern for many working parents, especially those working non-standard hours (Foster and Broad, 1998), and is a barrier to employment for many welfare recipients (Thériault, 2002). In terms of the use of local day care resources, availability is of greater concern for participants in Prince Albert than in Regina. Several respondents spoke of having to travel out of their neighbourhood,

sometimes across town, to bring their child/children to day care. The inflexibility of day care was also raised as a concern. For instance, the difficulties of finding day care for young children (0-18 months), for several children (3 or more), or day care that accommodated shift work were all raised as issues in Prince Albert. In Regina, the situation was less of a concern as several participants noted that they did not currently have a need for day care.

As is the case with many Canadian families, some respondents could count on family members or nearby relatives to assist them with caring for their children, but other respondents stated that they did not have family close by, or they were close but did not assist. Hence, informal help with care for children is not always available and this can more significantly affect low-income families (such as those on welfare) because of their financial incapacity to compensate for this by purchasing support services on the market.

#### *Elder Care and Care for Disabled Persons*

While no respondent reported caring for an elderly person at home, two respondents spoke of relatives that they spent time caring for who lived outside their home. This elder care included not only home support help such as shovelling walks, but extended also as far as personal hygiene care (giving showers).

As for caring for a person with a disability living in the home, we find five out of thirty respondents in this situation. Two of these five respondents are caring for more than one disabled person. In addition, we know that three respondents are themselves persons living with a disability. In a majority of cases (four out of five) the respondents say that they are caring for their disabled dependent(s) for 7 or more hours per day (i.e., full time). The type of disability reported is varied, ranging from degenerative arthritis and fibromyalgia to Crohn's disease, epilepsy and cerebral palsy. Care for these individuals includes administering medications, cooking meals and, in some cases, providing constant supervision. While friends or a babysitter can sometime help with these tasks, they are generally assumed solely by the respondents. Not only is there little informal help available, but respondents also spoke of respite services being severely curtailed, especially when a disabled child reaches 18 years of age.

#### *Paid Work and Transportation to Work*

Given that we are studying social assistance recipients, very few respondents in this study report working for pay. Three respondents work as salaried employees and two report self-employment activities (but one of these two is also among those reporting working for pay). Hence, only four different individuals claim labour market-based income<sup>3</sup>. In three out of four cases, these respondents report working less than 25 hours per week.

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<sup>3</sup> By comparison, information provided by an official from the Department of Community Resources and Employment shows that at any given time in Saskatchewan 5% to 6% percent of heads of social assistance cases are employed, another 7% to 8% are in some kind of training programs (where they can receive some kind of allowance), and an additional 4% to 5% are in sheltered workshops for the disabled where they receive a small wage.

We were also interested in learning how respondents travel to work and whether they consider themselves to have a transportation problem. Transportation has been cited as an issue in American studies on welfare recipients (Thériault, 2002). Driving private vehicles, taking the bus and walking were the transportation methods cited by the four respondents involved who travel to work in 30 minutes or less (Regina and Prince Albert are not large cities). While three of the four respondents found their transportation arrangements to be convenient, the one respondent who had to walk to work (between 20 to 30 minutes) found this inconvenient. Obviously, these results are only anecdotal, but they tend to support the view expressed in the literature on social assistance stating that access to a private vehicle, or to an efficient public transit system, is a key factor in enabling the start of a transition from welfare-to-work.

#### *Volunteering, Going to School, and Other Unpaid Activities*

About two thirds of respondents (19 out of 30) volunteer with a formal organization. There is no notable difference in this proportion according to age, sex, ethnicity (aboriginal vs. white) or location (Regina vs. Prince Albert). Half the respondents (16 out of 30) report providing informal assistance to other people, such as neighbours or friends. In one third of cases (10 out of 30), respondents are involved in the community by serving on the board of a non-profit organization. Again, these proportions are not affected by the main demographic variables mentioned above.

Volunteering takes many forms in the community and, interestingly, are often centred on food security. Volunteering activities also have an important socialization aspect for participants. For example, they describe their volunteer work at food banks as a social activity, an opportunity to meet a community need, and a way to stretch their own food budget: “It helps me out with a little bit of food because if I volunteer my time, I can go there and have a meal or send food home, which has helped me...” Other participants are involved as volunteer in their children’s school.

While few respondents are working for pay, twelve out of thirty say that they are currently looking for work. However, Aboriginal respondents are less likely to report this (six out of sixteen) than are non-aboriginal respondents (six out of eight). As for education, about one fifth of respondents (six out of twenty-eight) are attending school on a full-time basis, except for one respondent who is attending part time.

Eighteen out of thirty respondents also report “other” regular unpaid activities outside the home, such as helping out family and friends with chores, babysitting, and other forms of informal support. Respondents are more likely to report these unpaid activities if they are older (40 and over), from Regina, male, and if they have no dependents. It therefore seems that younger women with children, especially those from Prince Albert, have less time or opportunity to get involved in such activities.

The majority of respondents report spending 5 hours or more a week on unpaid activities outside the home. Age is a factor here, as older respondents (40 and over) tend to spend more time during a week on unpaid activities than younger respondents. Walking and

taking the bus are cited as the most often used means of transportation to get to unpaid activities outside the home.

### **Perceptions of Productivity: How Welfare Recipients View Their Place in Society**

In the previous section we briefly documented some of the daily activities performed by persons on social assistance, many of which are not very different from those occupying the “average citizen”. In this section, we move to a more subjective question: how welfare recipients perceive themselves, particularly in relation to various dimensions of productivity. In Part II of the questionnaire, we had offered eight statements relating to how “productive” the respondent felt about their lives. The statements were as follow:

1. I feel that most of my everyday activities are meaningful;
2. I feel that I have much to offer my family;
3. I see myself as someone who has something to contribute to society;
4. I wish that my contributions to society were more acknowledged;
5. Although I am on social assistance, I feel I am a productive citizen;
6. I see myself as a person of worth and deserving of respect;
7. I feel a sense of purpose in my life;
8. I feel that I am a successful person.

For each statement, the answer categories were “Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, and “Strongly disagree”. In turn, this could be transformed into a 1 to 4 scale where 1 is “Strongly disagree” and 4 is “Strongly agree”. Except for question 4 (on the issue of acknowledgement) a higher score (towards agreement with the statement) on these questions indicates that the respondent felt that his or her life is meaningful, productive and purposeful, etc.

Perhaps due to self-selection bias, we find that respondents revealed quite positive perceptions of their life. Overall in terms of scores, the statements about deserving respect, and having a sense of purpose in life, are those that generate the highest levels of agreement. The statements about having much to offer to the family, and wishing to have one’s contributions more acknowledged generate the lowest levels of agreement. Differences between the statements can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: Perceptions of Productivity: Average Scores by Statements**

Statement	Average Score (x/4)	N	Rank
1. I feel that most of my everyday activities are meaningful	3.34	30	4
2. I feel that I have much to offer my family	3.21	29	7
3. I see myself as someone who has something to contribute to society	3.33	30	5
4. I wish that my contributions to society were more acknowledged	2.85	26	8
5. Although I am on social assistance, I feel I am a productive citizen	3.41	29	3
6. I see myself as a person of worth and deserving of respect	3.54	28	1
7. I feel a sense of purpose in my life	3.43	30	2
8. I feel that I am a successful person	3.23	30	6

Respondents largely agree or strongly agree with the statement *I feel like my everyday activities are meaningful*. A consistent theme that emerged is the respondent's commitment to family and looking after their children. Respondents described their family responsibilities as a full-time job and emphasised the importance of "being there" for their children: "I want them to be looked after and that's what I do" stated one respondent. Other meaningful everyday activities described by respondents include helping out with grandchildren, community and advocacy work, and helping out neighbours and friends with day-to-day errands and childcare.

There was perhaps also a degree of defensiveness in participant's comments, in that several respondents made a point of speaking about the busyness of their lives and the grind of day-to-day tasks that they are responsible for, including laundry and housework. Four of the respondents interviewed described how they sometimes felt they were unable to accomplish much during the day, that their success depended on how they were feeling, how much they had been working and health concerns. Another participant expressed concern about the perceptions of other people toward her - whether she is "taken seriously" because she is on welfare and lacks formal credentials to work in the workplace.

Interestingly, the respondents' opinions are somewhat mixed regarding what they feel they can offer to their family and how their contribution to society is acknowledged. Participants who strongly agreed with this statement readily identified the many contributions they make in their family life, including providing support, guidance and attending to the day-to-day tasks of raising a family. Participants spoke of their role as mentors and role models, and a sense of pride was evident in many of the respondent's answers with respect to giving their children a good start to their lives. There also appears to be a relationship between the sex of respondent and the feeling of *having much to offer to [my] family*. Women (average score of 3.35/4) are more likely to strongly agree with



that statement than are men (average score of 2.67/4). In fact, eleven out of twenty-three women report strongly agreeing, compared to one of six men.

On the other hand, four of twenty-nine respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they have much to offer their family. They feel that what they can offer is closely tied to their financial circumstances, and being poor and on welfare means they are not able to offer as much as they feel they should: “I don’t feel like I have the financial means...I just don’t feel like I’m doing enough.”

Respondents spoke of their *contributions to society* in largely positive statements, describing their role as social activists, community volunteers and providing support to friends and neighbours, as well as to their future career goals and aspirations. Participants spoke of having “insider” knowledge of the struggles that low-income people face, and how this knowledge was an asset in terms of helping other people and making a contribution to society. In the words of one respondent: “when you’ve lived the life and walked the talk, you can understand where people are coming from.”

The interpretation of the question on whether society acknowledges the participant’s contributions is more difficult to make. Seventeen of twenty-six respondents (two-thirds) say that they do wish to see their contributions more acknowledged, suggesting that they are unsatisfied with the recognition they receive for their contributions to society. A commonly expressed sentiment was the belief that “other people” do not understand how they spent their time, and that the perception is that they are “watching TV or sitting reading a book”.

Several respondents also remarked that the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services think that welfare recipients have nothing to do. As one respondent put it:

People like social workers, and, well, not social workers in general, but financial workers, when you go to see them, they question you: “Well, what did you do during the day, are you contributing anything to society, why aren’t you looking for a job”. And they give you the third degree, and I don’t know if they even realize what goes on during someone’s normal routine day. Most of it, you know, is just surviving.

Even amongst those who agree with the statement, there was a certain degree of humility and modesty expressed. It was noted by one respondent that everyone likes to feel his or her contributions are noticed. Yet, as another respondent commented, unpaid work “doesn’t count” in the eyes of many. At the same time, several respondents indicated that the approval of others was not an important issue for them, or that they were not comfortable being in the spotlight. As one respondent commented: “I’m not comfortable taking credit for things...but I contribute.”

Through a bi-variate analysis<sup>4</sup> we find that views on the need to receive more acknowledgement are related to age. Older respondents (respondents over forty years of age) tend to agree more with the statement (average score of 3.33/4) than younger respondents (average score of 2.59/4). Therefore, older interviewees would like greater recognition for their contribution to society than younger interviewees.

When asked if they feel like a productive citizen even though they are on social assistance, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Many participant's responses suggest strong feelings and defensiveness regarding how the general public perceives people who are on welfare. Participants are well aware of the stigma and stereotypes attached to being on welfare, noting: "I think a lot of people look at those on welfare as people that don't want to do anything with their lives and that is not always the case. A lot of us are trying to get work and trying to get off [assistance]".

One participant who volunteered time at the local school noted that people come down hard on welfare recipients, yet people like herself play an important role in the community, like helping out at the local schools. Some spoke of welfare as temporary, transitional phase while working through other things in their lives, and were eager to give explanations of their situation with respect to what contributed toward them being on assistance. They note that being on social assistance "doesn't mean I'm any different than anybody else."

Participants were also eager to counter the notion of welfare recipients as "freeloaders" by describing their paid and unpaid work activities, schooling, and other community activities, or noting that their family commitments took precedence over employment:

Being on social assistance doesn't mean that you can't be productive. I think even people that choose to be stay-at-home moms are definitely productive members of society. Not being a stay at home mom, you're looking at having your child raised by someone else.

The location of the respondents appears to be related to their perception of *being a productive citizen*. Respondents from Regina (average score of 3.67/4) tend to agree more with this statement than those from Prince Albert (average score of 3.0/4). Specifically, twelve out of eighteen respondents from Regina (two-thirds) "strongly agree" with the statement, as compared to only two out of eleven in Prince Albert.

All respondents agree or strongly agree that "everyone deserves respect", and that people should be respected for who they are. At the same time, several participants note the difficulty of living in a society that tolerates a great deal of disrespect toward welfare recipients. Participants stress that they are working at improving their life's circumstances, and are concerned about teaching values of respect to their own children.

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<sup>4</sup> In this study, this refers to the use of comparisons of means and/or contingency tables to explore the relationship between two variables.

Similarly, all respondents agree or strongly agree that they feel a sense of purpose in their lives, though some participants acknowledged that they have difficulty determining this purpose. Not surprisingly, family figures prominently as a focal point in the lives of participants. Respondents describe their role as a supporter and mentor to their children and grandchildren. As one respondent put it: “I feel that I’m going to have to be there for my son no matter what and back him up one hundred percent and look out for him because I’m probably the only one out there.” Other factors that contribute toward a sense of purpose include volunteer and advocacy work, getting an education, and giving back to the community and to other people.

Finally, respondents commented that their feelings of success are based on their own assessment of how far they have come. For some, this means leaving past circumstances that were harmful. For others, it means focusing on family life. Getting sober, upgrading their education, or attending career planning workshops were also described. Respondents are acutely aware of the emphasis society places on paid employment and material wealth as a measure of success, and several respondents questioned whether society in general would also view them as successful.

Several others spoke of their desire to leave welfare. At the same time, many of the respondent’s comments show a strong belief in self-determination, and the need for strong connections with others. One participant stated: “I don’t think success is measured by material things, monetary things. It comes from within you...I try to show my children the best way I know how.” The perception of feeling successful is also related to age. The older respondents are, in this case, less likely than younger ones to “agree” or “strongly agree” that they feel successful (average scores of 2.9/4 vs. 3.4/4).

## **Discussion**

The research findings suggest that the popular perception of welfare recipients as unproductive and inactive fall short of the reality of their day-to-day lives. The individuals interviewed for this study spoke of the many ways they participate in society, including through parenting, volunteer work at schools and at local food banks, helping out with family and friends, and advocacy work, as well as some participation in the formal labour market. Their stories reveal a high degree of personal strength and resourcefulness, as they work to create the best life they can for themselves and their families. Furthermore, the participants share values very much consistent with those shared by the rest of society, including the importance of family, community, of helping others, and of self-improvement and personal growth.

While we did observe signs of low self-esteem on occasion, we did not find many indicators of a “culture of dependency” or very different values or beliefs than those promoted in the society at large. As has been observed with unemployed youth in Newfoundland (O’Grady, 1994), it does not seem that the problem of these Saskatchewan social recipients is one of “culture” or “value systems”. Rather, the research participants spoke of welfare being where they are, rather than who they are. They are acutely aware of the significance society places on paid employment, and the pressure put on them to

leave welfare. Despite this pressure, they continue to make choices that they feel have the best potential outcome for their families and for themselves, and their views of their own productivity in these realms were high.

Finally, this study reaffirms the importance of speaking directly with social assistance recipients in order to articulate an informed discourse about their lived experiences. There is a dearth of scholarly works that examine how individuals with low-income negotiate the demands that emerge from balancing the various areas of their lives (Neysmith and Reitsma-Street, 2000). Furthermore, the popular press contributes to building myths about the lives of welfare recipients by offering little distinction between what is believed about welfare recipients and the reality of their lived experience (Wardhaugh, 2003). The participants in this study spoke strongly against common societal misconceptions that paint welfare recipients as irresponsible freeloaders. It was clear that respondents wish to be acknowledged based on who they are, where they have come from, and their daily choices and actions, rather than on the basis of their source of income.

### **Policy Implications**

The findings of the study have several policy implications. Prevailing conceptualizations of productivity focus solely on activities that contribute directly to economic growth, leaving out the broad range of activities that contribute to an improved quality of life. The many contributions welfare recipients make to family, society and community, and the immediate and potential benefits of these contributions, support the argument that a broader definition of productivity is needed. Similarly, current directions in social assistance reform do not recognize unpaid work in the home and community, but rather equate social and economic contributions solely with participation in the paid labour market. This position risks altering our social priorities so that only programs that enhance employability are seen as legitimate (Lightman, 2003). It also raises questions about government commitment to labour market attachment as a means to address reliance on welfare, despite evidence of the growing numbers of working poor, and the increase in jobs in the low-paid, short-term, service economy (Broad, 2000). Further consideration must be given to how both paid and unpaid work contribute to societal well-being, and how contributions in both of these areas can be acknowledged and rewarded.

Second, the number of respondents who spoke of being on welfare as a way to stay home with their kids raises questions about the weight given by government to parental preferences to raise their own children. This is of particular concern given the potential for long-term detrimental effects of reduced parental involvement in early childhood years. There is considerable evidence of the importance of investments in early childhood years with respect to life-long emotional, physiological and cognitive outcomes (Hertzman and Wiens, 1996). It follows that policy initiatives that support parent's contributions to their children's upbringing may be a more appropriate focus for welfare policy than compelling welfare recipients to enter the (low) paid workforce.

Lastly, it should be noted that there is a paradoxical relationship between the funding requirements for non-profit agencies and the value that is placed on the work that is carried out in these agencies. Services previously provided by the state are increasingly provided by non-profits that often rely on volunteers to deliver them. This can be observed in a variety of fields of activity, from homecare to labour market integration services. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2000) note that a volunteer component is typically written into the proposals of non-profit organizations to meet the funding criteria of government agencies. The findings of our research suggest that many welfare recipients are actively involved as volunteers in a wide range of community agencies. Yet this work is not widely recognized, nor valued by government social assistance agencies, as much as the most menial paid job, further pointing to the need to challenge societal definitions of who are “contributing” members of society.

Unremunerated work such as caring work, work within the home, community, and other forms of volunteerism must be recognized based on their link to social well-being. Failure to recognize productivity in all its forms trivializes the importance of unpaid caring and volunteer work to the well-being of family and community. Any serious assessment of productivity must take into account contributions made in all spheres of one’s life, rather than simply those that directly impact economic growth.

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