Exploring food and healthy eating with Newcomers in Winnipeg’s North End

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Supported by:
Introduction

Newcomers and Food Security
Winnipeg has experienced a large influx of Newcomers over the past few years and many of these Newcomers face food security challenges when they arrive in Canada. These can include barriers to accessing healthy, culturally-acceptable food such as low-incomes and limited employment opportunities, living in neighbourhoods with few grocery stores, and language or cultural barriers. According to the results from the Canadian Community Health Survey (2011), recent Newcomers (who have been in Canada for less than five years) are nearly twice as likely to be food insecure as Canadian-born citizens (12.6% vs 7.5%)\(^1\). It is likely, however, that this is an underestimate, since the survey was only conducted in English and French\(^2\) meaning that those most vulnerable to food insecurity were less likely to respond. Food insecurity increases risk of poor health outcomes, including chronic disease and mental health issues.\(^3\)

Food insecurity can be compounded by other challenges faced by Newcomers. When Newcomers arrive in Canada, many are in search of a better life but quickly realize that there are many obstacles to overcome. Some Newcomers, especially refugees, have not had an opportunity to learn English before they arrive, so they must do this while also learning new cultural norms, Canadian laws, and how to navigate the social services available to them. All of these challenges can contribute to difficulties with housing, employment and food security.

While food security status does tend to improve for Newcomers who have been in Canada for more than five years, health often begins to decline due to dietary changes. When Newcomers arrive, they are typically healthier than the average Canadian - this is referred to as the “Healthy Immigrant Effect”. The subsequent health decline is partly a result of diet acculturation, that includes a shift to a more Western diet – a diet high in fat, sugar and salt. These dietary changes put Newcomers at an increased risk for chronic diseases, such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease\(^4,5,6\).

Newcomers in North End Winnipeg
Nearly one-third of inner city Winnipeg residents and one-quarter of North End residents were born outside of Canada (compared with 18.7% in the city as a whole)\(^7\). Increasingly, Newcomers are settling in the North End. Over a five-year period between 2006 and 2011, the recent Newcomer population in the North End more than doubled (see Table 1). As shown in Figure 1, this growth has occurred throughout the neighbourhood, with some census tracts now reporting recent immigrant populations higher than 15%. While more recent data is not available, community workers interviewed in this project indicated that immigration numbers in the North End have remained high and it is likely that the Newcomer population is even larger than reported in the 2011 National Household Survey.

The North End is a culturally diverse community and is becoming increasingly so. The vast majority of recent Newcomers in the North End are from Asia, particularly the Philippines. The number of African immigrants to the North End has also risen quickly, while the
number of immigrants from Europe or the Americas has declined. Figure 2 shows the change in the population of recent Newcomers in the North End according to continent of origin.

Given the food security challenges facing Newcomers and the demographic shifts experienced in the North End, new programming and supports are required to address the food security and nutrition needs of Newcomers. While Winnipeg does have some programs to support Newcomers with food-related issues, these programs are usually located downtown and some have extensive waiting lists. Many of the existing food and nutrition programs in place in the North End benefit the community but are not focused on the unique challenges experienced by Newcomers and see little Newcomer participation. Newcomers are often not aware that these programs exist or do not feel welcome at them. This means that many of the Newcomers who need and want nutrition education are not getting it and for some, the only food-related resources being used are food banks.

Not addressing this gap has significant consequences, both for the Newcomers in the North End and for society at large. For Newcomers, food security programming has been demonstrated to increase access to food while providing other physical and mental health benefits, reducing social isolation, and strengthening community. And for society as a whole, failure to address food security challenges will ultimately result in increased healthcare and social service costs to manage consequences such as chronic disease.

In order to develop a greater understanding of the food and nutrition challenges facing newcomers in Winnipeg’s North End community, and identify opportunities to address those challenges, a study was conducted by Food Matters Manitoba. This project was funded by the Winnipeg Foundation and supported by Dr. Joyce Slater at the University of Manitoba as well as the William Whyte Residents Association.
Table 1: Recent Newcomer Population in North End

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Recent Newcomer Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Population</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1,450</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3,555</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Total Newcomer Population in North End

Figure 2: Recent Newcomer Population in North End
By Continent of Origin

![Map of North End showing recent newcomer population by continent of origin](image)
**Methods**
This research provided an opportunity to explore the changing North End community and identify opportunities to better meet the needs of the growing Newcomer population. Through this process, we determined opportunities and barriers to healthy eating faced by Newcomers in the North End of Winnipeg and develop recommendations for future Newcomer programs. Below, are the questions that guided the project:

1. What are the opportunities for, and facilitators of healthy eating for participants?
2. What are the barriers and challenges to healthy eating for participants?
3. What strategies would reduce barriers and increase opportunities to healthy eating for participants?
4. What are the major health concerns of participants?
5. What is the food security status of participants?

In this mixed-methods study, qualitative interviews were conducted with community workers (N=4) and Newcomers (N=8) who have been living in the North End between four months and four years time. Participants were from Iraq, Afghanistan, Congo, Philippines, Burma and Bhutan. For the Newcomer interviews, photovoice, a method of participatory research using photographs taken by participants, was used as part of the interview method to visually capture the food practices and eating habits of participants. Single-use cameras were given to each participating Newcomer and they were instructed to take photographs of their food and food environment.

**Participants**
Newcomer participants were purposively recruited through the William Whyte Residents Association, community workers and word of mouth. Participants were from 27 to 59 years old, both male and female and from various countries of origin to ensure a diverse group was included in the study. Community workers were purposively recruited as well, based on the nature of their programs and their work with Newcomers. Informed consent was obtained by all participants and they were each offered an honorarium of $25 for their time.

**Data Collection**
Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with both groups. The food photographs were used as the focal point for the Newcomer interviews, which served to enhance the richness of the data obtained. A sample of the Newcomer interview questions are provided in Table 2. Interpreters were recruited to help with five of the interviews and all interviews were digitally recorded.

**Table 2 - Sample Newcomer Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Do you always eat the kinds of foods you would like to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) What foods do you like to serve your family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Are you able to easily get foods that you want to eat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Do you feel the way you and your family eats affects your health?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis
Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcriptions were reviewed for initial codes and these were later collapsed into the more general themes discussed in this report.
1) Cultural Practices

- Most Newcomers who were interviewed have a healthy traditional diet filled with vegetables, fruits and fish, which they refer to as their favourite foods.
- They are committed to maintaining this diet despite the many challenges they face, although many of their children do not appear to share this commitment and are more likely to eat a more Western diet when eating outside the home.
- Cultivating and cooking their traditional food is an important part of their cultural identity and a source of pride for many.
- Newcomers from the Middle East appear to have an easier time finding their traditional foods, as their staples are similar to those of many Canadians.

“I see Newcomers as almost like food role models. Like, they have a better understanding than a lot of Canadians do.” – Community Worker
2) Food-Related Skills and Knowledge
Many Newcomers arrive with food related skills and knowledge about:

- **Cooking** – All Newcomer participants did a majority of the cooking in their household and all maintained their traditional food preparation methods as much as possible.
- **Food production** – Farming is not only a skill many participants brought with them from their countries, but was a way of life for some before coming to Canada – especially in the Karen and Congolese communities.
- **Food preservation** – Participants from some parts of the world, such as the Middle East, are accustomed to preserving certain foods by drying and pickling.

“The pumpkin, ground melon, and bok choy, cilantro, we plant all by ourselves so we don’t spend money to go shopping for vegetables.”
- Newcomer
3) Increasing Availability of Ethnic Food
- The number of ‘ethnic’ specialty grocery stores in Winnipeg has increased over recent years.
- Stores such as Superstore and Safeway have a greater selection of ethnic foods than in the past.

4) Existing Programs
- There are some excellent nutrition, gardening and food security-related programs available to help Newcomers. However, there are many barriers preventing their use. These will be discussed in the Challenges section.
- Research has begun in order to determine which ethnic vegetables grow well in Manitoba. Researchers at Assiniboine Community College and the Crop Diversification Centre in Portage La Prairie have projects underway.

“...in the beginning when we first came here we struggle with pumpkin leaves because everybody eats pumpkin leaves and flowers but we cannot find anywhere until now.”
- Newcomer

Newcomers from the Karen community planting their new garden on McPhillips Street as part of the William Whyte Residents Association Gardening Program.
Researcher Babatunde Olusegun Nuga is conducting a preliminary study in Portage La Prairie, on the adaptability of some African vegetables.

- Photo courtesy of B. Nuga
Barriers to Healthy Eating

Many Newcomers living in the North End experience barriers to food security and healthy eating. Below is a summary of the barriers commonly experienced by Newcomers, according to study participants.

1) Cultural Differences
According to study participants, the most significant challenges revolve around cultural differences.

- The main barriers to healthy eating that were identified were the availability, affordability and quality of culturally acceptable food in the North End.

  “So it's the availability of the food that they know, and it's the affordability as well, that become the first challenges they encounter.” – Community Worker

- There are many kinds of vegetables, fruits and fish that are not available in Canada.
- Most participants mentioned shopping at Asian grocery stores in the North End for many of their vegetables but stated the taste and quality are often poor, due to long transit times.
Many Newcomers buy the remainder of their food from specialty stores and must travel downtown to do so.

Many are not familiar with how to prepare healthy Canadian food and when asked what they consider to be Canadian food, they refer to fast food and other unhealthy foods.

Newcomers are bombarded with an array of food choices in Canada, many of which are processed and nutritionally-poor. Many of these Newcomers lack the language skills and nutrition knowledge to make healthy choices.

Adults at work and children at school sometimes feel uncomfortable eating their traditional food due to its strong odour and different appearance. This can discourage Newcomers from eating their traditional diet.

Social exclusion is a major barrier preventing Newcomers from participating in food and nutrition programs. Some simply do not feel welcome at these programs, but others have experienced discrimination, and will not return as a result.

For some, culture shock and the process of adapting to their new culture makes healthy eating less of a priority.

“A lot of similar but something that maybe back home we eat the same thing but here sometime when they ship it, it take a little bit longer so some vegetable are not so good.” - Newcomer

“My money, my income is small...not enough money. I try, I try to do budget but not enough. Yeah, because I am social assistance.” - Newcomer
2) Income
- Many Newcomers are working in low-paying jobs or are on social assistance until their English skills improve enough to find work.
- Some are living in poverty and are forced to use food banks, where the food is often not culturally acceptable, familiar, or even nutritious.
- Some participants stated that late social assistance payments sometimes resulted in running out of food.

3) Nutrition Knowledge
- Although most participants in the study eat healthy traditional diets, when asked, some were not aware that their diet was in fact healthy.
- In many countries, reading labels is not common practice or, at times, even possible. This is a skill that is necessary in order for them to make healthy choices in Canada, especially when attempting to eat healthy on a budget.
- There is a great deal of interest from the Newcomer community in gaining this knowledge, but there are long waiting lists for existing programs (of which there are few).

4) Education
- Some Newcomers arrive in Canada with post-secondary education, but some, especially refugees, have not had an opportunity to go to school, even as children. This affects literacy, which in turn affects their ability to gain nutrition knowledge and find suitable employment to support their families.

“I lost my parents before and I grow up some people help to take care of me. She said we don't have enough money, we can't afford to keep in school.”
- Newcomer

5) Gardening Challenges
- All Newcomer participants attempt to grow their own food in Canada but are met with some obstacles:
  - Unfamiliarity with the Canadian climate and growing conditions
  - Lack of access to seeds for their traditional vegetables and fruits
  - Lack of space to grow
  - Climate not favourable for cultivation of certain produce

- There is a lack of research on ethnic vegetable cultivation in Manitoba in order to support them in many of their challenges.

“He said, he would like to plant it, but because of they are renting house they can't have the opportunity to put the box in front of house or behind. But he wish to have it.” – Interpreter
6) Transportation

- Many Newcomers in the North End must travel downtown to find their traditional foods. Taking the bus downtown, especially in the winter, to access these foods is a struggle for some.
- Newcomers who wish to take part in Newcomer nutrition programs must travel downtown to do so. This means similar transportation barriers as those who travel downtown to access grocery store.

“(Accessing food is) not too easy because I live in North End and we have to go shopping downtown and Superstore a little bit far, got to take bus, not easy.”
- Newcomer

7) Time Constraints

- English classes, finding employment and adjusting to their new lives can make it very difficult to find time for cooking healthy meals, gardening and attending nutrition programs.
- Once they find employment, they often work very long hours and/or shift work and some feel they don’t have time to cook healthy meals during the week.

“In the weekend always I cook a good meal but in the week day...cause we all work at my house we all work and my son go to school so we meet just in the evening so we don’t actually cook a good meal.”
- Newcomer

8) Lack of Resources

- There is no nutrition program for Newcomers in the North End.
- The demand for Newcomer nutrition education in Winnipeg exceeds the available resources – one nutrition program downtown has an extensive waiting list and relies on volunteers to facilitate the program.
- Neighbourhood settlement programs sometimes run gardening programs but lack the resources to provide sufficient support to Newcomer growers.

“Supervision of having 50 families growing all around the North End everywhere, it’s just really hard to make sure that everybody’s ok unless they come to me.”
- Community Worker
Health Concerns

- Some participants were concerned about the cultivation methods used in Canada, including use of chemicals and soil quality.
- Some Newcomers were concerned about not knowing the origin of foods bought from the grocery stores.
- The amount of fat in Western foods was a concern for some.
- Community workers stated that they had witnessed a decline in the health status of some of the Newcomers they work with, due to their changing diets.
- When asked if they felt that their diet was healthy, many were not sure, or they stated that their diet did not affect their health in any way.

Food Security Status of Participants

The Household Food Security Questionnaire\(^a\) was administered during the Newcomer interviews. The results showed that five of eight Newcomer participants live in food insecure households, which confirms that food insecurity is a concern for some Newcomers in the North End. However, because this is a small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to the rest of the Newcomer population. Nevertheless, it points to a need for further research to determine the prevalence of food insecurity for Newcomers living in the North End.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Security Status</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Secure</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not determined</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Conclusion
Newcomers moving to Winnipeg's North End bring with them many skills and traditions that contribute to a healthy diet and lifestyle. Participants' traditional diets are not only consistently healthier than a Western diet, but they are also an important part of cultural identity for many. Unfortunately, Newcomers face many adversities that make it difficult for them to maintain these food traditions. Newcomers are also concerned for their health, but many lack the nutrition knowledge to realize how a changing diet could impact their health in the long-term. This is why it is imperative that government and community organizations take action. As the Newcomer population continues to grow, we must help them to adapt to Canadian society while maintaining their health, well-being and cultural identity.

There are many opportunities that have been identified through this research project which have the potential to improve food security and healthy eating for Newcomers in the North End. With collaboration between community and government organizations and by engaging Newcomers in the solutions, the lives and health outcomes of these members of our community can be changed for the better. The following section provides recommendations for possible strategies and partnerships.
Recommendations
These recommendations were derived from an analysis of the interviews conducted as well as an environmental scan of resources in Winnipeg and across the country.

Recommendations for Food Matters Manitoba:

1) Develop a Newcomer Nutrition program in the North End
   a. Hire a Newcomer Program Coordinator.
   b. Recruit a volunteer working group of Nutritional Sciences Students from the University of Manitoba.
   c. Develop tools and resources for Newcomer nutrition education.
   d. Share these tools with Newcomer organizations to enhance the basic nutrition education that recent Newcomers receive.
   e. Partner with other nutrition/cooking classes in the North End to foster cross-cultural relationships and understanding.

   **Possible partners:** William Whyte Residents Association (WWRA), Human Nutritional Sciences Students – University of Manitoba, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA), North End Food Security Network, The Immigrant Centre and other Newcomer organizations.

2) Increase availability and accessibility of fresh ethnic vegetables
   a. Support ethnic vegetable research in Manitoba and be the link between researchers and the Newcomer community.
   b. Educate Newcomers on how to grow these vegetables in Canadian conditions.
   c. Encourage farmers to grow and sell ethnic vegetables in Farmers’ Markets and other locations convenient for Newcomers.
   d. Create resources to teach Canadians about how to cultivate and cook ethnic vegetables in order to increase demand and consumption of these healthy foods.
   e. Engage Newcomers in teaching others about their ethnic food traditions to enhance cross-cultural understanding and relationship building.

   **Possible partners:** Ethnic vegetable researchers (eg. Assiniboine Community College), North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC), WWRA, local farmers and the newcomer community.

3) Support and enhance Newcomer gardening/farming initiatives
   a. Help Newcomers find space to grow food to feed their families
   b. Enable Newcomers to grow enough food to sell at the North End Farmers’ Market
   c. Allow Newcomers the opportunity to participate in activities that help them to maintain their cultural identity while also facilitating their integration into Canadian society

   **Possible partners:** WWRA, NECRC, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM), Rainbow Community Garden, SEED Winnipeg and the City of Winnipeg.
4) **Support the development of a Farmer’s Market Nutrition Coupon Program**
   a. Partner with the North End Farmers’ Markets in order to make local produce more affordable for Newcomers and other low-income families.
   b. Encourage participation in nutrition education programs by giving participants Farmers’ Market incentives for participating.

   **Possible partners:** WWRA, NECRC, and the Farmers’ Markets Association of Manitoba.

5) **Involve Newcomers in the creation, facilitation and evaluation of programs**
   a. Elicit feedback from Newcomers to ensure programs are culturally appropriate and relevant
   b. Increase program sustainability and fill the gap in available human resources by getting Newcomers involved

6) **Create a Newcomer Food Security Network**
   a. Share limited resources and reduce redundancy amongst organizations working with Newcomers
   b. Increase awareness of existing programs available to Newcomers

   **Possible members:** Food Matters Manitoba, WWRA, NECRC, Immigrant Centre Nutrition Manager, IRCOM, Lord Abbey – Assiniboine Community College, Welcome Place, Manitoba START, etc.
**Recommendations for Newcomer program design:**

The recommendations in this section are a compilation of suggestions from community workers who participated in this study, comments from Newcomer participants, as well as observations noted by the researchers throughout the study.

1. **Make programs inclusive by design**
   a. Newcomers are more likely to use a program if they feel welcomed and comfortable.
   b. For a program to be interesting to Newcomers, it must meet their needs and priorities; teach them skills they value.
   c. It is important to build relationships with Newcomers. This will take time but will help participants feel welcome.
   d. Social exclusion is a factor in the lives of many Newcomers, so just because a program is open to everyone, does not mean that Newcomers feel welcome to participate.

2. **Teach them skills they value**
   a. Newcomers are very busy and are likely not to participate in a program that they feel is unnecessary.
   b. Teach them ways to adapt their existing skills to their new environment.

3. **Approach is key**
   a. Wording of the program title and details are important.
   b. Attempt not to deter some groups of people from wanting to participate by the wording that is used. Be conscious of gender role narratives.
      a. **For Example:** In many cultures, the women do much of the cooking and are skilled in this area. If you advertise a “Cooking Class” many of the women will not attend because they already know how to cook, and the men will not attend because cooking is not normally their role. Instead, it could be worded, “Eating Healthy Food in Canada on a Budget”. This may be considered more gender neutral and applicable to both groups.

4. **Use appropriate communication methods**
   a. Some Newcomers have email addresses, but many don't. If all information about a program is being sent out by email, many will not receive it.

5. **Provide childcare or include children in the program**
   a. Many Newcomers have large families so childcare can sometimes be an issue.

6. **Recognize their accomplishments**
   a. Many Newcomers will value a certificate that recognizes completion of a program.
7. **Use visual aids and translation, when possible**
   a. For many Newcomers language is a barrier.
   b. If important resources/concepts can be translated, this is ideal.
   c. The use of visual aids can help to mitigate language barriers and allow them to gain more from the program.

8. **Embrace cultural diversity!**
   a. The North End is a vibrant and culturally diverse community. By engaging community members to teach others about their cultural traditions we can help to bridge the gaps between cultural groups.

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**A Filipino dish called menudo. It is a combination of meat, tomato sauce, carrots and potatoes.**

**Salad, vegetable soup and flatbread – a common meal for one family from Afghanistan.**

**A typical Kurdish breakfast of egg, flatbread, homemade yogurt and berries.**

**Tilapia and vegetables served with ugali, a Congolese staple made of corn flour and used as a utensil.**
References


