



Center for Urban Initiatives and Research



## Community Relations - Social Development Commission: Community Services Block Grant Needs Assessment

### *Summary of Findings*

June 2010

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#### **Acknowledgements**

The researchers at the UWM Center for Urban Initiatives and Research wish to express their sincere gratitude to the more than 1,000 Milwaukee County residents and nearly 200 key stakeholders who gave their time and input into this important project. In addition, the team would like to thank Community Partners – Safe and Sound and the many UWM students who helped complete the interviews in the community.

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## Summary

As part of a comprehensive needs assessment for the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), the Community Relations–Social Development Commission (CR-SDC) was interested in obtaining data from a broad sampling of Milwaukee County residents and key stakeholders in the community related to core areas related to poverty. The four overarching goals of this project are to:

- (1) Identify and quantify the incidence or prevalence of individual need;
- (2) Identify gaps in human service provision;
- (3) Identify barriers to self-sufficiency; and
- (4) Identify strategies for overcoming barriers to self-sufficiency.

Eight core poverty-related areas were explored throughout the project, which include employment, education, housing, food and nutrition, transportation, health and healthcare, use of available income, and family and relationships. This information will be used to advise and guide CR-SDC as they plan programming and develop advocacy efforts for and on behalf of low-income individuals.

The Center for Urban Initiatives and Research (CUIR), a local applied research center located at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, completed this major research project from August 2009 through May 2010. This project included six components, described below<sup>1</sup>:

Telephone Survey of Milwaukee County Residents. Telephone surveys of Milwaukee County residents were completed using random-digit telephone dialing. The final data set was adjusted according to the original research plan by gender and race/ethnicity in order to more closely match estimates as reported by the US Census Bureau. The final data set is comprised of 420 completed surveys. The telephone survey is representative of Milwaukee County.

Door-to-Door Interviews of Milwaukee County Residents. In-person interviews were completed of residents living in the eighteen Neighborhood Strategic Planning (NSP) areas located within the city of Milwaukee. Milwaukee’s NSP areas are designated by the local Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) agency, and are selected according to where there is a high incidence of poverty and/or need for community-based services. A total of 514 in-person surveys were completed. The door-to-door survey is more similar to the City of Milwaukee, specific to the NSP neighborhoods, than to Milwaukee County as a whole. However, it is not a representative sample.

Review of Existing Data and Research on Poverty. CR-SDC was interested in obtaining data from a number of indicators related to poverty, service gaps, barriers, and possible solutions for Milwaukee County. CUIR compiled a comprehensive report including numerous pertinent indicators related to poverty and the eight core areas of the project.

Key Community Stakeholders Interviews. The purpose of this component was to gather in-depth, open-ended input from local officials and other community stakeholders from a variety of sectors about poverty. The various sectors include: business/for-profit, education, faith-based, foundation/philanthropy, government, health, legal/judiciary, non-profit, and media. A stakeholder

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<sup>1</sup> Full reports for each of the components, including more in-depth analysis and reporting, are available from CR-SDC at <http://www.cr-sdc.org/About/PolicyResearch.htm>. Altogether, more than 1,000 individuals provided input for this project.

was considered to be someone who has an interest in or direct or indirect involvement with poverty, its causes, effects, and solutions. The survey was conducted using three different methods of collecting data: in-person (or telephone) interviews, an online survey, and a mail survey. A total of 514 stakeholders were identified by both CR-SDC and CUIR staff, and 182 interviews were completed.

CR-SDC Board of Commissioners Focus Group. CUIR facilitated a focus group in May 2010 with the current CR-SDC Board of Commissioners. This component is frequently cited in recent best practices research on community needs assessments for CSBG-related services and activities. The CR-SDC Board of Commissioners consists of a tripartite membership from the low-income community, public, and private sectors. This focus group focused in three of the project goals, specifically the gaps in services, barriers of low-income individuals, and suggestions for overcoming these barriers, both generally and specific to CR-SDC.

In-depth Consumer Interviews. Twenty consumers of CR-SDC services were interviewed in-person at the CR-SDC offices from February to March 2010. The interview template was similar to that used in the Door-to-Door Interviews, and was not in any way evaluative of CR-SDC programs.

**Notes about Summary Structure.** This summary report will be structured so that the four project goals are addressed across the two major respondents groups, Milwaukee County residents and Key Stakeholders. Because this is a summary, only the most prevalent results are presented.

Milwaukee County Residents: Only respondents who indicated that their annual household income is less than poverty from either the Telephone Survey or Door-to-Door Interviews are included in the discussion for Milwaukee County residents. This is because of the high number of respondents in each sample. In addition, the two sample groups are discussed separately for two reasons. First, the wording of questions often differs significantly between the Telephone Survey and Door-to-Door Interview. Second, respondents from the Telephone Survey reside throughout Milwaukee County in its entirety, whereas the interviewees for the Door-to-Door Interview are concentrated within the city of Milwaukee, specifically within the NSP neighborhoods. For these reasons, the researchers assumed that these two respondent samples are distinct from one another and a combination of the two into one data set for comparison was not appropriate. Each of the four project goals are addressed with input from Milwaukee County residents.

Key Stakeholders: As a reminder, a stakeholder for this research is defined as an individual – including local officials and leaders of other community-based organizations - who has an interest in or direct or indirect involvement with poverty, its causes, effects, and solutions. Results from two components are included in the discussion of Key Stakeholders: Community Stakeholder Interviews and CR-SDC Board of Commissioners Focus Group. The respondents from the Community Stakeholder Interviews include individuals across a variety of sectors, including business/for-profit, education, faith-based, foundation/philanthropy, government, health, legal/judiciary, non-profit, and media. The CR-SDC Board of Commissioners is a tripartite membership from the low-income community, public, and private sectors. Although similar to the other stakeholder respondents, these individuals are the leaders of CR-SDC, and their decisions will affect the future actions of the organization more directly. For the purpose of this summary, the results for these two groups are reported separately. Three of the four project goals are addressed with input from stakeholders; only incidence and prevalence is excluded as it is inappropriate.

## **Project Goal 1: Prevalence and Incidence of Poverty**

**Selected Poverty-Related Indicators for Milwaukee County.** Using information compiled by CUIR, the following are selected indicators that provide a snapshot of poverty for Milwaukee County.<sup>2</sup>

- **Poverty.** In terms of poverty, Milwaukee ranks 11<sup>th</sup> highest among U.S. cities of 250,000 people or more. Residents in the County and City of Milwaukee experience higher rates of poverty at 17% and 23%, respectively, than the statewide average of 10%. Women are slightly more likely than men to have incomes below the poverty level, and single female households account for 72% of all families in poverty. Poverty rates vary by race/ethnicity in Milwaukee County, with 33% of African-Americans, 20% of Hispanics/Latinos, 19% of Asians, and 10% of Caucasians experiencing poverty.
- **Employment.** Employment significantly affects personal and household income. The unemployment rates in the County (9%) and City of Milwaukee (11%) are higher than the statewide average (8%). Unemployment rates vary by race/ethnicity in Milwaukee County, with 12% of African-Americans, 8% of Hispanic/Latinos, 7% of Caucasians, and 4% of Asians experiencing unemployment. Median annual incomes vary by race/ethnicity in Milwaukee County, with Caucasians having the largest median income, followed by Asians, Native Americans/Alaskan Natives, African-Americans, and then Hispanic/Latinos. Income varies by gender, as well, with men making nearly 30% more than women in Milwaukee County.
- **Education.** Milwaukee County education indicators generally fall below statewide averages. The Milwaukee Public Schools District (MPS) is the largest school district in the state. The MPS graduation rate is 68%, compared to 89% statewide, and MPS's dropout rate is 32%, compared to 10% statewide. The percentages of MPS students who meet "proficiency" standards as measured by the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination are below statewide averages in every subject, and significantly below the statewide averages in mathematics and language (more than 20 points below). As of April 2008, 46% of 2005-07 MPS graduates had enrolled in post-secondary education, with 45% of those enrolling in a two-year program and 55% in a four-year program.
- **Food and Nutrition.** Access to and affordability of nutritious food can be a challenge to individuals and families with low incomes in Milwaukee County. While enrollment of Milwaukee County residents in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) has remained relatively stable since 2002, participation in the Foodshare program has increased by 16% from 2002 to 2008, and the Hunger Task Force reported a 23.4% increase in monthly food pantry participation from 2008-2009. The percentage of MPS students qualified to participate in the free or reduced lunch program has similarly increased, from 71% in 2002 to 79% in 2008.

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<sup>2</sup> For specific sources of all indicators, please refer to *CR-SDC CSBG Community Needs Assessment Chapter I.3: Existing Data on Various Poverty-Related Indicators for Milwaukee County* (CUIR, 2010) at <http://www.cr-sdc.org/About/PolicyResearch.htm>.

- Transportation. Access to reliable transportation can present a challenge to low-income individuals and families. The vast majority of Milwaukee County residents drive to work alone. About one-in-twelve Milwaukeeans use the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) every day, and residents in poverty make up the highest percentage of those who use public transportation. Ninety-one percent of inner-city Milwaukee residents aged 16-17 do not have a driver's license and are not seeking one, compared with 41% of 16-17 year olds in neighboring suburbs. Furthermore, adults in the City of Milwaukee have lower licensing rates than adults in other parts of the County, making job location outside of MCTS-served areas an issue.
- Housing. Almost half of the housing units in Milwaukee County are single unit, detached, with duplexes being the next most common type of housing. Over the past few years, foreclosures and vacant housing units have increased in Milwaukee County. About 18% of Milwaukee County renter households experienced a “severe housing burden” during 2000, defined as spending more than 50% of income on housing. Furthermore, while there are 47,200 “extremely low income households” in Milwaukee County, only 30,700 housing units are affordable to those making less than 30% of the area’s median income. A point-in-time survey conducted of Milwaukee’s homeless revealed that 61% of those surveyed were males, 61% were African-American, 21% had a full-time or part-time job, and the most common reasons for homelessness were loss or lack of work, substance abuse, eviction/foreclosure, and high housing costs.
- Health and Healthcare. An estimated 12% of Milwaukee County residents lack health insurance, compared with 9% statewide. It has been reported that the poor are more than five times likely than those not to be uninsured for an entire year. Life expectancy for those in poverty is lower than those with more stable incomes and in Milwaukee County, life expectancy is also tied to race/ethnicity. Low birth weights and infant deaths occurred most among African-American births. Residents in the lowest socioeconomic areas of the City were more likely to forego medical and dental care, and also were twice as likely to report that they had always or nearly always felt “sad or blue” in the past 30 days. Rates of suicide and illicit substance, tobacco, and alcohol use in Milwaukee County are similar to rates in other areas of the state.

**A Profile of People Living in Poverty – Respondents.** For this project, Milwaukee County residents were asked whether their annual household income was less than or more than poverty using standards set forth by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Some differences exist in responses between respondents to the telephone survey and the door-to-door interviews. For example, door-to-door interviewees are more likely than their telephone survey counterparts to report annual household income as less than poverty (54% versus 20%, respectively). Across demographic variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, education level, and employment status within the respondent samples, differences exist in terms of overall percentages, but not in terms of statistical significance (except for gender).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cross-table analysis using Pearson’s chi-square was used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed within groups for selected demographic items ( $p < .05$ ).

Telephone Survey Respondents. According to US Census Bureau figures for 2008, Milwaukee County has the highest rate of poverty among all counties in the state of Wisconsin. Of all telephone survey respondents, 20% indicated that their annual household income was less than the USDHHS poverty standards. This is slightly higher than the reported 2008 poverty rate of 17% for Milwaukee County, and nearly twice the poverty rate for the state of Wisconsin (11%) as reported by the US Census Bureau.

Looking at selected demographics, of all telephone respondents:

- There was no statistically significant difference in gender for those who indicate annual household income as less than poverty (22% of all females compared to 18% of all males).
- Persons of color were more likely than Whites to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (39% of all persons of color compared to 8% of all Whites).
- The less educated were more likely to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (36% of all with a high school diploma, GED, or less compared to 14% of all with some college or more education).
- The unemployed were more likely to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (42% of all the unemployed compared to 12% of all the employed).
- Households with children were more likely to indicate annual household income as less than poverty than those without children (28% of all households with children compared to 16% of all households without children). Moreover, 48% of all single-mother households from this sample reported annual household income as less than poverty.

Door-to-Door Interviewees. High levels of poverty inside the City of Milwaukee drive up the poverty rate for the entire county, counteracting the lower poverty rates in surrounding cities and villages. Of all door-to-door interviewees, 54% indicated that their annual household income was less than the USDHHS poverty standards. This is more than twice the 2008 poverty rate of 21% for City of Milwaukee residents, more than three times the 2008 poverty rate for Milwaukee County (17%), and nearly five times the 2008 poverty rate for the state of Wisconsin (11%), as reported by the US Census Bureau.

Looking at selected demographics, of all residents interviewed during the door-to-door component:

- Females were more likely than males to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (61% of all females compared to 43% of all males). This differs from the telephone survey results.
- Persons of color were more likely than Whites to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (58% of all persons of color compared to 36% of all Whites).

- The less educated were more likely to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (66% of all with a high school diploma, GED, or less compared to 44% of all with some college or more education).
- The unemployed were more likely to indicate annual household income as less than poverty (78% of all the unemployed compared to 38% of all the employed).
- Households with children were more likely to indicate annual household income as less than poverty than those without children (67% of all households with children compared to 42% of all households without children). Moreover, 71% of all single-mother households from this sample reported annual household income as less than poverty.

**Perceived Seriousness of the Problem of Poverty in Milwaukee County.** Respondents were asked their perceptions about the seriousness of the problem of poverty in Milwaukee County.<sup>4</sup> Of all the Milwaukee County residents and key stakeholders surveyed or interviewed for this project, virtually all agreed that poverty is a serious problem in Milwaukee County (93% each for telephone survey respondents and door-to-door interviewees, and 97% for key stakeholders).

**Perceptions of Poverty Trends in Milwaukee County.** In terms of poverty trends, two different questions were asked.

Telephone survey respondents and stakeholders were asked whether poverty in Milwaukee County over the past three years has increased, decreased, or stayed the same. Seventy-six percent of Milwaukee County residents surveyed via telephone reported that poverty has increased, compared to 87% of key stakeholders. Nineteen percent of telephone survey respondents and 7% of key stakeholders indicated that they perceived poverty to have remained the same. Two percent of telephone survey respondents and 1% of stakeholders reported the perception that poverty has decreased over the past three years.

A slightly different question was asked of residents who participated in the door-to-door interviews. These respondents were asked whether their family's quality of life has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same over the past three years. Slightly more than a third (34%) of door-to-door interviewees reported that their family's quality of life had gotten worse. Forty-seven percent reported that their quality of life has stayed the same, while 17% reported that their quality of life has gotten better.

If one were to assume that a decrease in quality of life and an increase in poverty are essentially the same, then these measures combined suggest that 53% of residents and 87% of key stakeholders surveyed for this project perceive that poverty has increased in Milwaukee County over the past three years.

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<sup>4</sup> The Telephone and Key Stakeholder surveys asked respondents whether their level of agreement with a statement that poverty is a serious problem in Milwaukee County, and strongly agree and agree responses are included as affirmative. Door-to-Door Interviewees were asked whether or not poverty is a serious problem in Milwaukee County, with "yes" responses included as affirmative.

## Project Goal 2: Gaps in Human Service Provision

There was no single question asked across all components that addressed gaps in human service provision. Methods used by the research team are described in each section.

**Milwaukee County Residents – Respondents Living in Poverty.** The researchers sought to identify the incidence and prevalence of problems experienced by Milwaukee County residents across each of the eight poverty-related “needs” areas: employment, education, family and relationships, food and nutrition, transportation, housing, health and healthcare, and income. Although telephone survey and door-to-door interview respondents were asked about service gaps differently, the results are generally similar.

Telephone Survey Respondents. The telephone survey asked Milwaukee County residents whether or not enough was being done in each of the eight core areas. Those who replied “no,” that enough was NOT being done, are assumed to suggest a service gap. Using this definition, the four areas with the most need for services for the 79 telephone survey respondents who reported annual household income less than poverty –

- Income-related service needs (84%),
- Housing-related service needs (80%),
- Family and relationship-related service needs (78%), and
- Health and healthcare-related service needs (77%).

Door-to-Door Interviewees. For the door-to-door and consumer interviews, respondents were asked several questions related to specific problems in each of the eight core poverty areas. A total of 87 problems were possible from this measure, and for those in poverty, the average number of problems being faced is 30, while for those who are not in poverty the average number of problems is 20. The four areas with the most need for services<sup>5</sup> for the 240 door-to-door interviewees in poverty are –

- Food and nutrition-related service needs (77%),
- Income-related service needs (68%),
- Housing-related service needs (67%), and
- Transportation-related service needs (63%).

**Key Stakeholders.** Stakeholders were asked to identify the gaps in human service provision with the following open-ended question: “*What is the area / problem that people in poverty are affected by most?*” A common theme across responses to this question was that people in poverty suffer multiple, serious problems, and that there is not one single problem that affects them most, but rather a list of interconnected problems. As shown below, both stakeholder groups were very similar in perception of the problems that most affect people in poverty.

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<sup>5</sup> It was determined that all respondents, regardless of poverty status, face a large number of issues. Therefore, in order to identify gaps for services, it was decided to determine the median (average) number of problems for each core area for all respondents. Each respondent was categorized as having either more or less than the median number of problems. Those with more than the median were determined to show a service gap.

Community Stakeholders. The three most frequently mentioned problems facing people in poverty identified by community stakeholders are related to employment, education, and health and healthcare, with further detail below.

- Employment-related issues were cited in 44% of responses as the biggest problem facing people in poverty. Respondents also gave more specific employment-related responses, such as a lack of jobs, low wages, and more general responses of “employment.”
- Education-related problems were identified in 29% of responses as a serious problem facing people in poverty. These responses included a lack of education, as well as low “quality” education and a lack of access to educational opportunities.
- Health and healthcare-related problems were the third most frequently identified problem, which was offered by nearly a quarter of all respondents (24%). Most of these responses focused on general health and healthcare. Others were more specific, with citations related to a lack of healthcare, poor health and wellness, and mental health problems.

CR-SDC Board of Commissioners. Although specific counts of responses were not recorded for the focus group of SDC Board of Commissioners, the most frequently mentioned problems facing people in poverty identified by community stakeholders are related to employment and education, with specifics as follows.

- Employment-related issues were cited as a significant problem facing people in poverty in Milwaukee County. This included a lack of education and a lack of job readiness (e.g. soft skills). In addition, Commissioners reported another problem is that jobs that are often inappropriate for particular skill sets, and more specifically that not all jobs require a college education.
- Education-related problems were also identified as a serious problem facing people in poverty. Specific responses included insufficient education, and a lack of vocational educational opportunities at MPS. The lack of alternative educational options for those who are not college-bound was also mentioned.
- A third issue that arose from the focus group was the issue of racism and discrimination. Commissioners reported that the pervasive nature of racism affects those in poverty.

### **Project Goal 3: Barriers to Self Sufficiency**

Both Milwaukee County Residents and Key Stakeholders were asked about potential barriers that may keep people in poverty.

**Milwaukee County Residents – Respondents Living in Poverty.** Telephone survey and door-to-door interview respondents were asked in different ways about the barriers that keep people in poverty differently, the results are generally similar.

Telephone Survey Respondents. Telephone respondents were provided nine pre-identified barriers and asked to indicate the likelihood that each was a barrier that keeps people in poverty. For each of the nine barriers, a majority of telephone survey respondents in poverty reported that the barrier is either very or somewhat likely to keep people in poverty. The barriers most frequently reported as somewhat or very likely to keep people in poverty are –

- Economic ups and downs (96%),
- Alcohol and other drug abuse (91%), and
- Ineffective poverty-reducing programs, a lack of poverty-reducing programs, and unhealthy family environments (each tied at 89%).

Door-to-Door and Consumer Interviewees. An open-ended question was asked for the door-to-door interviews regarding barriers. The three most frequently identified barriers that keep people in poverty were related to employment, education, and personal or character issues.

- Employment-related barriers were reported by 61% of respondents in poverty in the door-to-door interviews. The most commonly cited employment barriers were the lack of jobs, lack of job skills or training, and a lack of “opportunities.” In addition, low or inadequate pay / wages were frequently identified barriers.
- Education-related barriers were cited by 18% of door-to-door interviewees in poverty. Issues included a lack of education and a need for more education and opportunities. Others cited a poor quality of education and the public school system.
- Personal or character-related issues were indicated by 12% of these respondents. Responses ranged from laziness to a lack of motivation or a criminal history.

**Key Stakeholders.** For both key stakeholder groups, an open-ended question was asked regarding barriers. As shown below, differences exist between the stakeholder groups.

Community Stakeholders. The three barriers that keep people in poverty most frequently identified by community stakeholders were related to families and relationships, education, and employment.

- Family and relationship-related barriers were the most frequently identified category by stakeholders (27%). Among this theme were responses like unhealthy families and relationships in general, poor parenting, lack of role models, and poor family supports (e.g. child care). The inference made by respondents is that people in poverty grew up in poor family environments, in which they were not taught the necessary skills to escape poverty.
- Education-related barriers were reported by 23% of key stakeholders. The majority specifically stated that a lack of education or educational opportunities was a barrier to escaping poverty. Fewer respondents mentioned that the barrier to escaping poverty was a lack of a quality education, or poor education.

- Employment-related barriers were mentioned by 14% of key stakeholders as keeping people in poverty. The majority of responses in this category centered on a lack of available jobs or employment opportunities. The availability of jobs with a fair or family-sustaining wage was another factor mentioned by several respondents. A lack of job skills or training was another specific barrier cited by stakeholders.

CR-SDC Board of Commissioners. During the focus group, the CR-SDC Board of Commissioners' most frequently reported barrier perceived to keep people in poverty is related to education. The comments were related to education in general and the public school system specifically.

- Related to education in general, Commissioners stated it is a lack of soft skills, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Other specifics included a need for basic communication skills and anger management. Without positive "life skills," individuals are not able to navigate their way successfully out of poverty, but through life in general.
- Regarding the public school system, the Commissioners identified one major barrier. There is a lack of supportive, caring adults in the school system for children. In the past, teachers were that resource, but now due to a lack of funding and too high of expectations, this does not exist. Students lack a person to go to for assistance. According to one Commissioner, the public school system has lost sight of its mission and become too politicized.

#### **Project Goal 4: Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Self Sufficiency**

For this project goal, one open-ended question was asked of both Milwaukee County Residents and Key Stakeholders: "What do you see as the two or three most important things that could be done to reduce poverty in Milwaukee?"

**Milwaukee County Residents – Respondents Living in Poverty.** For the Telephone Survey respondents and the Door-to-Door interviewees, the three most frequently identified strategies to overcoming poverty by respondents living in poverty were employment-related strategies, education-related strategies, and changes to programs or resources.

- Employment-related strategies were identified by 56% of telephone survey respondents and 54% of door-to-door interviewees. Specific strategies included not only more jobs, but also better pay. More job-related training was also included in this response.
- Education-related strategies were identified by 35% of telephone survey respondents and 16% of door-to-door interviewees. In terms of specific solutions, respondents referred mostly to more or additional education or education-related opportunities. Some respondents offered more specific ways to improve the existing school system, such as increased funding, "better teachers," encouraging more parental involvement, and decreasing drop-out rates.
- Changes to programs or resources were identified by 20% of telephone survey respondents and 12% of door-to-door interviewees. A specific strategy commonly cited in this category was to increase community awareness of available programs and resources. Other respondents suggested more programs and resources for those in need or more federal aid or government support.

**Key Stakeholders.** There were similarities between community stakeholders and the CR-SDC Board of Commissioners regarding the most important strategies for reducing poverty in Milwaukee County.

Community Stakeholders. The most frequently identified strategies to overcoming poverty identified by community stakeholders were nearly identical to Milwaukee County residents in poverty from this study. These were education-related strategies, employment-related strategies, job-training, and additions to programs or resources. The major difference between community stakeholders and residents in poverty was simply the rank order of each.

- Education-related solutions were identified in 58% of responses provided by key stakeholders as the most important thing that can be done to reduce poverty. Specific responses in this category include education in general, improving public schools, and creating better educational opportunities and/or access.
- Employment and related strategies were the next most frequently mentioned solution for reducing poverty, with 39% of responses. Generally, strategies called for more jobs and employment, both generally and the creation of new jobs. In addition, higher wages was another common reference. Others suggested that the government should be directly involved in creating new jobs (e.g. public works projects during the New Deal).
- Job training as a distinct strategy was identified in 22% of responses from stakeholders. This includes elements related to both education and employment. Job training or job skills in general were specific solutions identified for reducing poverty. Many also referenced how providing soft skills (e.g. interviewing skills, training about employee interactions, and resume writing) is an important solution. Lastly, vocational or technical training was another common response.
- Additional resources and programs was another highly cited strategy, with 20% of responses. Responses included not only additional resources and programs for people in poverty, but also better access to programs and/or resources. Other responses included very specific programs or resources; while others had more general strategies suggesting the use of best practices or proven methods of poverty reduction.

CR-SDC Board of Commissioners. Generally speaking, the strategies and solutions suggested were related to employment. The three major themes reported are access to sustainable employment, the need to keep businesses in Milwaukee, and discrimination within the business sector.

- The first theme is not only about the availability of jobs, but also the need for adequate, family-sustaining wages.
- Regarding the second strategy, it is about more than just keeping businesses in Milwaukee, but increasing economic development within the inner city. According to one Commissioner, businesses have moved right through – and out – of the city. Local government must revisit and revise policies and practices that drive businesses away.

- The third major theme was regarding institutional racism. Many indicated that businesses and trades are discriminatory, and these are persistent attitudes. Commissioners recommended that the business sector be challenged to take positive efforts to reduce this issue, and that it was the role of SDC and organizations like it to provide assistance to businesses in doing so.

**The Perceived Role of CR-SDC in Reducing Poverty.** Stakeholders were also asked: “*What else do you think CR-SDC could do to help reduce poverty in Milwaukee County?*” As shown below, both stakeholder groups responded essentially identical to one another.

Community Stakeholders. The three themes from community stakeholders most cited for the perceived role of CR-SDC in reducing poverty are improving education, increasing advocacy/leadership, and improving coordination of services.

- Improving education as a way to help reduce poverty was identified in 21% of responses by key stakeholders as a focus for CR-SDC. Responses in this theme include continuing/expanding the Head Start program and other early childhood education, focusing on education in general, and focusing on MPS educational outcomes such as high school graduation rates. Many noted that even though CR-SDC’s role was not education *per se*, CR-SDC’s role in promoting (quality) education would help reduce poverty.
- Increasing the advocacy and leadership of CR-SDC was identified by 17% of responses by key stakeholders. In particular, respondents mentioned that CR-SDC could increase its advocacy of anti-poverty causes or become a “stronger leader” in anti-poverty policies. Several people expressed disappointment that CR-SDC used to be, but is no longer a vocal advocate of anti-poverty issues. Several respondents also suggested that CR-SDC could do more direct lobbying of state government officials, and that CR-SDC should be more visible in the public’s eye.
- Coordination of services was the third most frequently cited recommendation for CR-SDC related to offering coordinated services. Sixteen percent of responses were identified in this category, and includes recommendations as encouraging CR-SDC to “coordinate” service delivery with other organizations (since people in poverty often receive other kinds of assistance), and offering “comprehensive” assistance to people in poverty (i.e. services which address the entire spectrum of problems facing people in poverty). Respondents mentioned that people in poverty need a wide spectrum of personalized programming to escape poverty, including everything from educational help to better healthcare and family counseling.

CR-SDC Board of Commissioners. The themes reported by the CR-SDC Board of Commissioners echo those of the community stakeholders. For this stakeholder group, the role of CR-SDC is as an active advocate and leader in the community, as well as a service provider.

- On a macro-level, the Commissioners reported that CR-SDC should take the role as a strong advocate and leader in the community regarding issues of poverty. According to one, it is incumbent upon CR-SDC to advocate for those in poverty with the entire community and across all sectors. CR-SDC should be actively engaging and challenging sectors such as the business community and political entities in not only the dialogue regarding poverty, but actively working toward the solutions. Not only should CR-SDC provide education and awareness to various sectors, but also provide clear direction on what can and should be done. This includes

clearly identifying the key issues and specific courses of action to take, such as best practice models. It is also about holding parties accountable.

- On a micro-level, the Commissioners identified the need for CR-SDC to continue its role as a provider of services that meet the basic needs of those in poverty. These include food, shelter, and housing, among others. Related to this concept, the Commissioners indicated that CR-SDC should be actively coordinating services for those in poverty, helping individuals get the various resources necessary for self-sufficiency. It was stated that only through close coordination and collaboration between organizations, services, and resources will poverty be adequately addressed.

## Conclusions

In sum, the results of this research clearly show that poverty is perceived as a serious problem by both Milwaukee County residents and key stakeholders, with many inter-connected needs. The barriers that keep people in poverty are different, depending upon who is being asked, but the suggested solutions are consistent - the key strategies to reducing poverty are related to employment and education. CR-SDC as an agency should take a more active role in advocacy and leadership related to reducing poverty, working on the macro-level with all sectors, while continuing to provide the necessary services and resources for those in need.

The key findings of this research with more detail are as follows:

### **The Perception is that Poverty is a Serious and Growing Problem in Milwaukee County.**

Across all groups, virtually all respondents think poverty is a serious problem in Milwaukee County. Furthermore, combined measures suggest that most perceive that poverty has increased in Milwaukee County over the past three years.

**Employment and Education are the Major Factors Related to Poverty.** Overall, responses related to employment and education were the most common when asked about the various aspects of poverty. These two themes were consistently found among the most frequently cited responses for each research question, including the problems, barriers, and solutions associated with poverty.

**Many Service Needs and Gaps Exist in Milwaukee County.** A common theme was that people in poverty suffer multiple, serious problems, and that there is not one single problem that affects them most, but rather a list of interconnected problems. Most respondents think that problems related to all eight core needs areas are serious and that not enough is being done for each.

**Lack of Employment and Education are Major Barriers that Keep People in Poverty.** Across all groups, a lack of education and employment (e.g. jobs) were found to be the major barriers keeping people in poverty. People in poverty were more likely to offer structural or systemic barriers (such as lack of educational and employment opportunities, and crime/racism), compared to the personal/family barriers offered by people who are not in poverty.

**More and Better Employment and Educational Opportunities are Recommended Strategies for Reducing Poverty.** The most frequently cited strategies to reduce poverty in Milwaukee County are related to employment and education. More specifically, respondents across all groups suggested more jobs, better pay, more and better education, and additional educational opportunities.

**CR-SDC is Thought to Have an Important Role in Reducing Poverty in Milwaukee County.** The three most frequently identified roles for CR-SDC in the reduction of poverty by key stakeholders were improving education, increasing advocacy/leadership, and improving coordination of services. This is echoed from the perspective of the CR-SDC Board of Commissioners. The role of CR-SDC is both at the macro level as a more active advocate and leader, and at the micro level as a service provider that fulfill basic human needs.