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FAST FACTS

August 11, 2009

Cities within Cities

Money Sense Magazine recently released the results of its 2009 survey of “Canada’s Best Places to Live.” In last year’s report, Manitoba placed three cities in the top 25 of the 154 cities surveyed, namely, Winnipeg at 7, Brandon at 18, and Thompson at 19. This year, both Brandon and Winnipeg are in the top 10, Winnipeg at 8, Brandon at 10. Thompson, on the other hand, has fallen from 19 to 88.

In our review of the 2008 *Money Sense Magazine* survey we cautioned readers to beware of the pitfalls inherent in reading too much into non-comprehensive and aggregate survey data that purport to depict conditions in particular cities. In particular, we noted that the survey gives little weight to quality of life variables like access to health services and the incidence of violent crime. As well, we observed that the conditions that matter to segments of the population who are marginalized and trapped at the bottom of the income distribution are given short shrift in both the questions and the analysis. Our conclusion was that these surveys should include questions allowing us “to measure progress on poverty and homelessness as an additional indicator of progress in Canadian cities.”

According to the *Brandon Sun* report (Colleen Cosgrove and Geoff Kirbyson, “Brandon cracks top 10 list of best places to live,” April 28, 2009), “affordable housing and boasting the country’s

ninth lowest unemployment rate bumped the Wheat City into the top 10.” Rob Gerlsbeck, magazine features editor, said that “cities like Brandon...do well because thanks to their stable economies and low crime rates...we look at what matters to people when they live in a city.”

The detailed data show that Brandon’s ranking with respect to the unemployment rate improved to 9 from 52. The crime rate ranking also improved, to 107 from 119. At the same time, however, there was some slippage for other key variables, most notably household income and discretionary income.

What the survey doesn’t tell us

Surveys like ‘best cities’ neglect to reveal the social and economic diversity that exists within cities. Brandon for example, is divided into two provincial constituencies for election purposes, namely, Brandon West and Brandon East. Census data for 2006 confirm that Brandon West is relatively affluent, Brandon East, relatively poor. Moreover, when the two ridings are divided into sub regions, it is evident that the disparities between the two ridings are pervasive. The table on page 2 provides data on key social and economic indicators for Brandon West, Brandon East and two sub regions with the highest (in Brandon East) and lowest incidence (Brandon West) of low income economic families.



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TABLE: Selected Social and Economic Indicators for Specified Geographical Areas

Indicator	Manitoba	Brandon East	Brandon West	Core Area Bdn East	Mortgage Hgts Bdn West
Population	1,148,400	19,870	21,641	6,338	6,055
Incidence of low income (econ. families)	12.3%	15.8%	8.0%	20.8%	3.5%
Incidence of low income (unattached 15+)	37.9%	43.9%	31.4%	56.1%	22.1%
Lone parent families	17.0%	19.5%	12.9%	20.2%	8.4%
Tenant households	29.7%	44.1%	31.7%	66.8%	28.0%
Avg employment income (15+)	\$31,318	\$25,560	\$34,472	\$23,173	\$39,839
Income Economic Families					
Under \$20,000.00	7.7%	9.8%	4.4%	14.0%	1.4%
Over \$100,000.00	20.0%	11.2%	24.9%	10.0%	34.6%
Median Income	\$60,754	\$53,161	\$68,987	\$48,759	\$83,073

SOURCE: Manitoba Bureau of Statistics *Brandon East & Brandon West Provincial Electoral Constituency Area Statistical Profiles, April 2009*

These data show that there are significant disparities between Brandon West and Brandon East as well as major sub regions in the city. A survey of people who live in Brandon East would reveal a very different reality than that of Brandon West residents. And this would be true of most cities. Further gaps would be revealed between many living in the core compared with those living in other parts of the city.

Shortly after the *Money Sense* survey results were published in April, a 24-year old Aboriginal male was stabbed to death in the core area (the second fatal stabbing of an Aboriginal youth in the city in a three-week period). And this spring the Samaritan House food bank reported that the number of households registered with the food bank increased by more than 200 since February. Executive Director Marla Somersall was quoted in the *Brandon Sun* as stating that “the economy and the housing situation in Brandon are in a real crisis, and that’s having a huge impact on low-income households. When people are paying \$600 and \$700 a month rent and are only making a little over a thousand, then obviously their budget is going

to be stretched further than they can possibly budget.”

Brandon has had a zero-vacancy rate for rental accommodation for more than two years. This has created serious problems for people in modest and low-income groups, a situation exacerbated in the current year as many landlords have been permitted to increase their rents by greater than 10 per cent.

So while *Money Sense Magazine’s* annual survey of Canadian cities has some merit, it is important to recognize that the information generated is incomplete and the questions that are reported often obscure serious socio-economic problems that exist in cities, including those ranked in the top 10. Moreover, as this focus on Brandon has shown, local governments need to acknowledge that persistent and pervasive poverty continues to exist and they need to take serious action to address it.

Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of CCPA-MB and Errol Black is a Brandon City Councillor and a CCPA-MB board member.



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