# "URBAN ABORIGINALS' PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN REFUGEE NEIGHBOURS: A CASE STUDY OF WINNIPEG'S INNER CITY."

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on qualitative data gathered in the inner city of Winnipeg, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: What do urban Aboriginals think of African refugees? Do Aboriginals feel threatened by the arrival of refugee migrants in their neighbourhoods? If so, why and if not, why not? Findings from this exploratory study reveal a mixed picture of how Native[1] inner-city residents perceive newcomer refugees. Some Aboriginals have negative perceptions of refugees, largely caused by feelings of inter-group competition over jobs and subsidized housing. Other Aboriginals appear to have a sympathetic view of refugees, since they can identify with them as racialized minorities.

## INTRODUCTION

In Canada, the topic of immigrant integration has been biased towards examining how newcomers interact with the dominant mainstream population, and vice versa. However, we know little about immigrants' interaction with Aboriginal Peoples and how Aboriginals perceive and interact with immigrants. In 2010, Banting and Kymlicka published an article about multiculturalism in Canada, where they identified the need to examine multiculturalism through the interaction among immigrants and urban Aboriginals:

> *...[I]mportant issues are arising about the relationship between multiculturalism and urban Aboriginals in several Western [Canadian] cities. Immigrants and Aboriginals increasingly live in close proximity in various neighbourhoods, and while constitutionally speaking they may fall under different laws and regulations, the practical reality is that they often share public services and public space [...] More work needs to be done to explain how they interact (p. 64).*

The study presented in this article seeks to fill this knowledge gap by exploring how Aboriginals perceive African refugees who settle in the same inner-city neighbourhoods where they live. As the demographic make-up of urban Aboriginals and newcomers in Winnipeg is expected to rise, this study has future policy and research implications.

## ABORIGINALS AND AFRICAN REFUGEES LIVING IN WINNIPEG'S INNER CITY

The city of Winnipeg is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic. In order to stabilize a declining baby boomer population and strengthen the labour force, the Manitoba provincial government aims to increase the annual numbers of immigrants to the province to 20,000 by 2016 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008).

The inner city of Winnipeg can be thought of as one geographical entity, composed of 36 identifiable neighbourhoods; it covers 6.4 percent of the city's area at 30.5 km$^2$. The 2006 Census data for Winnipeg's inner city documents 121,615 residents (City of Winnipeg, no date, p. 2). This part of the city, where poverty and dependence on welfare assistance are widespread, is being transformed by the social, cultural, religious and economic diversity of the growing population of immigrants and Aboriginals. Since the early 2000s, an increasing number of African refugees have been settling into inner-city neighbourhoods heavily populated by Aboriginals. Most refugees arriving in Winnipeg settle in its core area because rent there is cheaper and settlement services are located downtown. A similar pattern holds true for low-income Aboriginals, who were either born in Winnipeg or migrated to the city from rural communities or northern reserves.

## METHODOLOGY

Face-to-face interviews were carried out with 27 adult respondents in 2008. The sample included 18 service providers working with Aboriginals and/or refugees in the inner city of Winnipeg, as well as two ethno-cultural community leaders. To supplement these key informant interviews, four Aboriginal and three African inner-city residents were interviewed. To recruit inner city residents, the author relied on the help of two research assistants, one who was Aboriginal and the other an African newcomer.

Among the questions posed to service providers and ethno-cultural leaders were those that focused on Aboriginals' perceptions of African refugees and the reasons for these perceptions. The questions for inner-city residents had a very similar focus, although instead of being asked to speak about clients or community members, inner-city residents were asked about their *personal* perceptions and experiences.

This project received formal research ethics approval from the University of Winnipeg. The findings from this qualitative study are drawn from a small sample and are not intended to be generalized. Since the findings are largely based on the experiences of service providers and ethno-cultural leaders, they do not represent the *direct* views of Aboriginal inner-city residents.[2] The results of this study therefore offer a preliminary snapshot of Aboriginal-refugee relations in a Canadian inner city.

## FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

### Perceptions of Competition

The inner city of Winnipeg is a resource-starved area, with a minimal supply of public housing, high unemployment rates and residents with low educational levels. According to the interview data, some Aboriginals have negative perceptions of refugee newcomers, largely caused by feelings of intergroup competition over jobs and subsidized housing. Some respondents talked about the perception among Aboriginal inner-city residents that refugees are using valuable and scarce resources. In this respect, refugees are seen as competitors. One Aboriginal inner-city resident, for instance, expressed his view that newcomers seemed to be getting better treatment from the government than Aboriginals:

> *I feel they're getting better treated than we are… especially the Native people; we've been here a long time. One day I went to the welfare office; how come I don't see them at the welfare lines? So they must be getting extra funding or somebody's looking after them. That's the way I look at it, 'cause you don't see them panhandling. You don't see them worried... they're being looked after... I get kind of… angry about that. I mean if I went to their country, I don't think I'd be treated like that... so I really can't say that if we all met at the airport [we'd say]: "OK, welcome!" [Laughs]*

A few participants noted that employment is one area where Aboriginals perceive they are competing with refugees. However, more important than the perception that newcomers are stealing jobs is the belief that refugees are taking away limited inner-city subsidized housing and, in doing so, displacing Aboriginal residents who have been residing in the area for decades. In Winnipeg, public subsidized housing, which is an affordable and stable option for low-income people, makes up a very small proportion of the overall housing stock. The comments of one service provider are illustrative:

> *Many of these Manitoba Housing [buildings] in the inner city would have been almost fairly Aboriginal… not exclusively, but pretty close. But now we have in the last few years more Africans coming in. So when the African families are large, often single moms, husband killed or disappeared, where are they moving? Into Manitoba [subsidized] Housing, which has almost been completely Aboriginal… So, right away [Aboriginals say:] "These are our places… This is my space… I don't have anything to start with and now you're pushing me out of here?"*

Another service provider working in a family support centre articulated the same pattern:

> *You know, feeling like they're [newcomers] taking their [Aboriginals'] spots and that sort of thing. And housing… and housing 'cause, you know, when the housing is not a lot of spots for people, people are on waiting lists and people [Aboriginals] want to stay in the inner city 'cause it's easier for them to live and this is where they've always lived.*

### Perceptions of Sympathy and Camaraderie

While perceptions of competition exist among Aboriginal inner-city residents, Aboriginals also see African refugees in a sympathetic light. Positive views of African refugees are not uncommon among Aboriginal inner-city residents. For example, one service provider

disclosed an incident in which an Aboriginal client who had led a difficult life in Manitoba compassionately acknowledged the hardship of Africans from war-affected countries. This Native client's words (as retold by a service provider) demonstrate sympathy and understanding:

> *[O]ne of the moms [a client] who is just bright and lovely, and she was part of the Scoop of the 60's and went through a lot, and also realized that she was Fetal Alcohol [Syndrome], which challenged her chances… she said: "we [Natives] always feel we never fit in; imagine how they [refugees] feel."*

During interviews, African inner-city residents confirmed this finding by discussing how Natives identify with them; they suggested that there is a sense of camaraderie with newcomers, particularly towards refugees who are dark skinned. This stands in contrast to the Euro-Canadian population and the state, towards which Natives appear to hold anger and resentment for past and current injustices (e.g., residential schools, the 60's Scoop and present discrimination). An African inner-city resident had this to say on the subject:

> *My impression [is] that they're very friendly to me, more so because I think they identify with… they understand that I'm a minority, and maybe that creates a level of: "OK, we're sort of one and the same. We're in the same box, type of thing."*

Another African resident of the inner city spoke about an encounter that he had with an Aboriginal person in a park. During this encounter the Aboriginal person communicated that, while he strongly disliked white people, he thought of Africans in a friendly and fraternal way:

> *There was one time, I was sitting with some friends… and then [these] Aboriginal guys… came and gave me a fist [similar to a "high five" gesture]… and [one] asked me: "do you like white people?" I said: "I've got no problem with them." I did not want to choose yes or no. And he [the Aboriginal man] says: "I hate them. But you are my brother." And he does the fist again. So that one is a signal that… there is nothing between them and the immigrants… they have no room to think of immigrants: they are carrying this thing [resentment] against the mainstream.*

Another inner-city resident, this time of Aboriginal descent, said:

> *I think the Aboriginals give the refugees and the immigrants a lot better chance than the mainstream. I think that in the meetings that I've had or sat in with different colours, I think that the Aboriginal has a tendency to feel for the newcomers and their racism. And I think they easily become friends with them faster than the mainstream.*

Repeatedly, study participants who were Aboriginal (i.e., service providers, community leaders and inner-city residents) showed frustration towards the dominant group in society regarding the unjust treatment they continue to receive from the Canadian public and its governing institutions. One Aboriginal community leader expressed how the white Canadian "settler population" was responsible for creating Aboriginal despair:

> *They're [members of the mainstream society] always trying to help the Indian in terms of… it's everywhere, it's inherent in Western superiority, this kind of need, this kind of freaking need: can't help themselves, but they need to change other people, eh?… They get to do the programming on Indigenous peoples and on refugee populations. They get to do their mojo on us and they get to study us, examine us, probe us, that kind of stuff. They get to be our saviours: [sarcastically] they're wonderful!*

A couple of respondents noted that it was too soon to tell how Aboriginals felt about African refugees, given the latter's relatively recent arrival to (and noticeable concentration in) Winnipeg's inner city. However, what this exploratory study revealed, which is not reflected in the literature, is that instead of fostering negative attitudes towards refugee minorities, the process of immigration appears to fortify Aboriginals' negative feelings towards the mainstream. Aboriginals realize that the dominant group holds the policy-making power which determines how many and which kinds of people enter Canada as immigrants. An Aboriginal service provider mentioned that as the First Nations of Canada, Natives feel it is their right to be informed and involved in shaping public policies, including ones related to immigration:

> *...Aboriginal People are not consulted... a lot of work has to be done... for Aboriginal People to understand Canada's immigration policy, and for Aboriginals to be a part of it cause...Aboriginal People are not a part of that process... Aboriginal People should be included in that process.*

In this respect, data from this study suggest that the Aboriginal community does not necessarily wish to halt immigration to the province. Rather, Aboriginals would wish to be better informed, consulted and included in policy-making processes.

## CONCLUSION

In general, interview data painted a mixed picture of how Aboriginals living in Winnipeg's inner city perceive African refugees. Some study respondents claimed that Aboriginals feel they are competing with refugee newcomers for scarce resources, particularly with respect to the limited supply of public housing. Other respondents revealed perceptions of camaraderie, empathy and compassion towards African newcomers. According to respondents, Aboriginals can identify with African refugees as racialized minorities *vis-a-vis* the mainstream population.

What is clear is that Native resentment is more directed towards the mainstream population and the state than towards newcomers. Because of socio-historical reasons, Natives in Canada have a tenuous relationship with the Euro-Canadian population and not with African refugees. The fact that Aboriginals have only recently come into contact with African newcomers and do not share a history of oppression with them may explain why they have fewer negative (and more mixed) feelings towards the newcomers.

As the numbers of Aboriginal and immigrant residents in Canadian cities grow, there is a need to broach the topic of Aboriginal-newcomer relations. How Aboriginals perceive and interact with immigrants to Canada is an important, yet understudied, aspect within the immigration integration field. An adequate examination of inter-minority relations lies not only in focusing on Aboriginals' perceptions and relations with newcomers, but perhaps, equally important, on Aboriginals' relations with members of the mainstream population.

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### NOTES

[1] In order to avoid redundancy, I use the words "Aboriginal" and "Native" interchangeably.

[2] Interviewing service providers may have proved more valuable than interviewing inner-city residents in one important respect. If one considers the sensitive topic of this project (that of negative and threatened attitudes) it may have been easier for people to talk about how *others* felt since admitting that they themselves espoused negative attitudes is nowadays socially unacceptable.

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