

***The Economy & Crime — Qualitative Findings
October 2008***



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Executive Summary

Economic Perceptions

- The economy was regarded as being a significant issue for virtually all Manitobans participating in this qualitative research project. This issue has speedily risen up the public agenda, only becoming a major concern within the six weeks prior to the focus group sessions.
- In the minds of research participants, blame for the current economic difficulties is laid squarely at the feet of U.S. banks and investors, as well as the regulatory policies of the American government. To a lesser extent consumers, including Canadian consumers, were seen as having overextended themselves and contributing to their own economic hardship.
- Canada, and especially Manitoba, was regarded as being particularly well-positioned to weather the anticipated economic storm. Participants refer to experiences with past economic downturns, a strong banking sector, as well as a relatively stable economy as being assurances against future difficulties.
- Despite the general mood of confidence, it was anticipated that Canada and Manitoba will not be immune to economic challenges as a result of the recent crisis in the United States. The impact, however, has yet to be felt and remains on the horizon for participants.
- Focus group participants, aged 25-55 years, stated that they were not significantly concerned about their pension holdings. The same confidence does not exist when participants were asked about the security of pensions for older Manitobans, whom are thought to be in a more difficult situation.

Economic Resolutions

- Participants were almost universally of the opinion that the current economic difficulties cannot be solely corrected by government action. This being said, however, there was a widespread consensus that government efforts could help offset some of the hardships that may be encountered by citizens. In these instances, participants wish to see government investing in revenue generating capital projects and the protection of core services such as healthcare and education.
- In order to ensure that services are protected and that employment is maintained, participants would be willing to see the provincial government run a budgetary deficit. A significant proviso was attached to this view in that participants wish to see the deficit at a minimal level and operating for a set number of no more than approximately five years.
- There was wholehearted support for the notion of using Manitoba's little known "rainy day fund" to both finance core services, as well as undertake revenue generating initiatives that are likely to increase employment. Here, people specifically refer to Hydro projects with a view to the income that is anticipated from these efforts.

Crime Perceptions

- Focus group participants in all sessions indicated that their fear of crime has increased in the last several years.
- Although organized crime, or gang activity, was recognized as being dominant within the media, participants have a much greater fear of encountering a random act of crime perpetrated by youth.
- To the extent that there was fear of organized crime, participants were concerned that they may become the victims of identity theft or an Internet scam. Violent organized crime was regarded as being limited to a particular segment of society with which virtually all participants have little or no contact.
- Although drug trafficking was recognized as the primary financial underpinning of organized crime, participants feel that enforcement efforts against soft drugs should take a backseat to pursuing harder drugs. The general perception was that manufactured drugs represent a much greater threat to the individual user and society at large.

Crime Resolutions

- Research participants feel that crime ought to be a major priority for all levels of government.
- Focus group participants were fairly equally divided on the question of whether emphasis should be placed on the punishment or prevention of crime. Participants appear to be largely unaware that punitive aspects of law largely reside within the federal domain and hold all levels of government accountable for crime issues.
- Introducing or enhancing preventative measures received considerable support from focus group participants. Education, recreation and restorative justice were seen as the most efficacious means of addressing the roots of crime.

Policing Police

- Participants roundly rejected the notion of police forces investigating one another. There was considerable support for the notion that a special investigative unit be established to deal with criminal investigations concerning police officers.

Methodology

Probe Research Inc. was commissioned by Communications Services Manitoba to conduct qualitative research concerning issues pertaining to the economy and crime in Manitoba. Focus group participants were Winnipeg, Portage la Prairie and Brandon residents of both genders and were recruited and segmented on the basis of age, gender and region of residence. The following table describes the composition of each of the focus group sessions.

October 28th, 2008 Brandon: Victoria Inn 3550 Victoria Avenue
6:00 pm General Population Women Aged 25-55 Years (10 participants)
8:00 pm General Population Men Aged 25-55 Years (9 participants)
October 29th, 2008 Portage la Prairie: CanadInns 2401 Saskatchewan Avenue
6:00 pm General Population Women Aged 25-55 Years (9 participants)
8:00 pm General Population Men Aged 25-55 Years (9 participants)
October 30th, 2008 Winnipeg: Probe Research Inc., Suite 850, 125 Garry Street
6:00 pm Core Area: General Population Women Aged 25-55 Years (9 participants)
8:00 pm General Population Men Aged 25-55 Years, with representation from the Core Area and Southwest Winnipeg (9 participants)

Individuals recruited to these focus group sessions constitute a sample of convenience, the findings of which cannot be considered statistically representative of the larger population of Manitobans. Employees and immediate family of personnel of media outlets, marketing and research organizations and the provincial government were excluded from the research. Individuals and family members of individuals who have been the victim of a major crime were also specifically excluded. Participants were paid \$60.00 for their contribution. Discussion members were recruited by telephone, using a custom-designed screening questionnaire developed by Probe Research (see Appendix I).

The sessions followed a moderator's guide that was prepared by Probe Research Inc. (see Appendix II). All focus group sessions were moderated by Lloyd Fridfinnson, Vice-President, Probe Research Inc., who is a member in good standing of the Qualitative Division of the MRIA of Canada.

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Economic Perceptions

Module Synopsis: This module took inventory of opinions concerning the status of the current economic situation in Manitoba, Canada and the rest of the world.

Top Issue

- In each session, a significant proportion of participants volunteered that the economy currently ranks among the top issues confronting Manitobans. Invariably, these individuals stated that their concern for the economy would have been lower or nonexistent had they given the issue consideration only a few short weeks earlier, prior to the U.S. economic crisis.
- Healthcare, education, the environment and crime were also mentioned by a significant proportion of research participants as being among their primary concerns for Manitoba and its people. Unlike the economy, however, these concerns appear to be relatively static on the agenda of top-of-mind issues confronting Manitobans.
- The only significant 'area of residence' based variation as to the most significant issues facing Manitobans and the communities in which they live pertained to farm economies and crime. Rural participants attending the sessions in both Brandon and Portage stated that they had longstanding concerns over the farm economy and rural life in general. Core area residents in Winnipeg were inclined to highlight the significance of crime as an issue they confront on a regular basis.

Current Economic Climate

- There was a widespread consensus that Canada is comparatively well-positioned to weather a potentially significant worldwide economic downturn. Although several participants stated that a negative impact on Canada as a result of economic hardships in the United States would be inevitable, there was a shared sense that Canada will fare considerably better than our southern neighbors. This confidence was based, in part, upon the quality of regulations surrounding the Canadian banking system.
- Placing Manitoba within the Canadian context, there was also a strong consensus that Manitoba is well-positioned to deal with economic difficulty relative to the other provinces. A majority of participants state that Ontario, Alberta and, to a somewhat lesser extent, British Columbia are likely to feel the brunt of worldwide economic difficulties.
- Most participants stated that Saskatchewan was on an equal footing with Manitoba in facing a potential widespread economic downturn. Saskatchewan's recent oil industry growth is seen as providing the province with a solid economic base. Participants were disinclined, however, to suggest that they would prefer to reside in Saskatchewan from an economic point of view. Again, the consensus was that Manitoba's diverse economy is favourably positioned to face economic challenges.
- In assessing their current economic fortunes against the backdrop of economic events in the United States, participants state that they have yet to feel the negative impact of the events of recent weeks. While a modest negative impact is anticipated by a significant majority of participants, an equal proportion of those participating in the discussion sessions suggested that the immediate impact has been a positive one. Here, participants referred to the falling price of oil and the declining exchange rate of the Canadian dollar, with the attendant potential positive influence on exports. The perception was that these circumstances are likely to provide economic strengths that may offset the adverse effects of the global economic crisis.

- When asked as to whom responsibility should be assigned for the current economic situation, focus group participants in each session pointed to a combination of American financial institutions, investor “greed” and, to a lesser extent, the complacency of the American government in monitoring the economic situation. Participants did not assign blame for the current economic situation to the Canadian or Manitoba governments.

Pension Concerns

- There appear to be limited fears concerning the safety and value of pension investments held by research participants. Virtually all participants recognize that there has been an impact upon their own financial situation. A significant majority of the 25-55 year olds participating in the discussions, however, believe that they are far enough away from retirement age to recover the losses their portfolios might have suffered in the preceding weeks.
- Participants were less confident that their fellow Manitobans who are nearer to retirement are in a comfortable position. Here, it was suggested that the current economic situation is likely to already have had a negative impact on older workers.
- In a related finding, one participant suggested that the Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) he undertook for his teenage son is likely to provide a lower return than previously anticipated, as his son is currently poised to begin his post-secondary education.

Economic Resolutions

Module Synopsis: This module examined the potential means of addressing the current economic situation.

Anticipated Provincial Government Response

- There did not appear to be an expectation among participants in any of the focus group sessions that the Canadian or Manitoba governments would be taking corrective measures to rectify the current or evolving economic situation. Indeed, participants stated that significant corrective action was not realistically possible.
- This being said, however, there does appear to be some expectation that various levels of government in Canada and elsewhere can implement policies and economic stimulus measures intended to alleviate economic difficulties. Importantly, within the Canadian context, the onus of responsibility to soften the impact of an economic downturn was seen to reside with the federal government.
- The general consensus among those participating in this qualitative research was that various levels of government in Canada should continue to invest in social programs and projects in order to ensure continued employment and the delivery of services.

Potential Provincial Government Actions

Focus group participants in each session were provided with a brief list of options that the Manitoba government might utilize in order to address the negative impacts of the evolving global economic situation.

Incur Debt

- Participants almost invariably support the notion of the provincial government running a deficit during periods of economic hardship. A significant caveat was almost universally attached to this position. There was support for budgetary deficits, so long as they occur for a predetermined and manageable period of time. In stipulating this proviso, participants frequently referred to a desire to avoid the prolonged negative economic circumstances created by government budgetary practices of earlier decades.

Reduce Taxes

- The suggestion that difficult economic circumstances might be dealt with through tax reduction was met with mixed reaction. Although the notion of tax reduction was generally welcomed, several participants wondered aloud as to how this might be achieved while maintaining desired service standards. In short, this option simply did not make sense to many participants. The overriding consensus among research participants was that this option should not be pursued if it were to lead to a significant deterioration of governmental services.

Reduction of Programs and Services

- Participants generally rejected the notion that government programs and services should be cut in order to deal with an economic downturn. This option was typically regarded as a last resort by citizens in each of the three Manitoba cities.

Spend to Stimulate Economy

- Virtually all participants felt that this should be undertaken if it could be demonstrated that there would be an economic payback. Some participants, however, felt that this approach represented something of a gamble and were less confident in this potential course of action. Importantly, participants were supportive of spending initiatives that would either address critical issue areas, such as the construction of hospitals, or would generate income for the province. In this latter instance focus group participants displayed considerable support for the construction of Hydro projects.

Rainy Day Fund

- Focus group participants in all sessions were either ignorant of or dubious towards the existence of a 'rainy day fund' in Manitoba. A sole male participant in Winnipeg stated that the fund existed and correctly identified its value based on a recent news report.
- There was universal support for the notion of utilizing Manitoba's rainy day fund to offset negative impacts of an economic downturn. Participants were of the opinion, however, that the economic downturn had not yet arrived. In the words of more than one participant: "it's only spitting."

Spending Reprioritization versus Across the Board Reductions

Focus group participants were asked what their preference would be if the provincial government had to choose between making cuts to selected government financial obligations or imposing government-wide spending reductions.

- Many participants in each session stated a preference for there to be a mixed approach to cost reduction. This sentiment did not appear to stem so much from a preference for either option as much as it did from an evident aversion to endorsing either approach wholeheartedly.
- On balance, however, there was general support for the option of re-prioritizing in order to ensure that core services do not suffer. This position was evident in all focus group sessions.
- Healthcare, education and less clearly specified "core services" were most frequently identified as areas that should not be subject to service reduction. Arts, sports teams and seemingly lesser well-known government services were mentioned as being likely candidates for fiscal restraint.
- In assessing the areas that might potentially receive additional provincial government financial support during times of economic difficulty, participants regularly highlighted the importance of education, job training and financial incentives to businesses that are likely to contribute to economic growth.

Infrastructure Spending

- There was considerable discussion in each focus group session concerning the merits and potential pitfalls of undertaking significant infrastructure spending during a period of widespread economic hardship.
- The prevailing opinion of participants was that infrastructure spending, by its very nature, constitutes an economic stimulus and that all but discretionary projects should proceed as planned. The operative term used by proponents of this view was that government should “prioritize” its infrastructure commitments.
- Although they were in the minority, opponents to infrastructure spending argued that this type of investment should be delayed until more favourable economic circumstance exist. In the absence of this, it was felt that government should at the very least only direct revenue towards projects that are guaranteed to ensure an economic stimulus. In essence, these individuals felt that Manitoba will be unable to spend its way out of economic hardship.

Taxation

- Although tax cuts were generally welcomed, there was broad recognition that such a move would be antithetical within a recessionary climate. An exception to this view existed among a minority of participants who felt that tax reduction would stave off the potential departure of some segments of the labour force for greener pastures elsewhere.

Municipal Tax Assessments

- The theme of tax aversion continued in this segment of the discussion, whereby participants generally stated that they do not look forward to the municipal property reassessment process. This sentiment appears to exist amid a weak understanding of the municipal taxation purpose and process.
- Those supporting an ongoing municipal tax process irrespective of the economic climate supported the notion that residents of a given area “float in the same boat” and that relative property values are unlikely to be affected by larger economic circumstances.
- The prevailing view, however, appears to have been opposition to adhering to a regularly scheduled municipal tax assessment. Significantly, the primary basis for this opposition appears to stem from an ingrained disdain for municipal property reassessment. This regularized property valuation procedure was predominantly seen to be a “tax grab” rather than a redistribution of tax obligation.

Rainy Day Fund

- There was widespread ignorance as to the size or even the existence of a “rainy day fund” in Manitoba.
- There was widespread support for this fund to be used to offset the impact of an economic downturn. In the collective opinion of research participants, however, the effects of this economic downturn have yet to be felt in Manitoba.
- When asked as to whether Manitoba’s rainy day fund should be devoted towards maintaining ongoing programming or utilized to undertake infrastructure projects, participants almost invariably suggested that a balance should be struck whereby funds are allocated to both. With respect to existing social services, the fund should be used to safeguard core programs. In referring to possible infrastructure projects, participant stated that the rainy day fund should be allocated to revenue generating ventures.

Economic Priorities Hindsight

- In assessing the economic performance of the province during the past decade, participants invariably state that Manitoba’s economy has performed well. There were no instances of participants stating that Manitoba had significantly underperformed economically.

Crime Perceptions

Module Synopsis: This module examined perceptions of the levels of crime, as well as the extent to which crime is seen to effect participants personally as opposed to being something that is an issue for others.

Personal Safety

- Although there were exceptions, participants generally feel safe in their homes and communities. Regardless of whether research participants reside in Winnipeg, Brandon or Portage there was a lessening of a sense of security once individuals ventured into the central area of their city.

Initial Crime Perceptions

- Concerns about crime were not confined to the communities in which research participants reside. Crime was regarded as being a nationwide issue and the circumstances in Manitoba were not seen to be significantly different than elsewhere in Canada.
- Several participants also share the perception that crime has been a growing problem over the past couple of decades. Even though a handful of participants recognize that statistics do not generally bear out this opinion, there continues to be the perception of crime growth. Participants attribute the heightened awareness of crime to media coverage of this issue and more specifically gang related activity.
- While several participants acknowledge that their concern about crime is largely “a perception” which is influenced by media and other third-hand reports, a significant minority of those participating in the research stated that they had personally experienced or felt threatened by crime in their community.
- Participants who reside near the core area of their respective cities report having a heightened awareness of safety and were more likely to identify this as an issue in need of attention. In short, the nearer one is to the downtown district the more likely they are to be concerned about crime. There were few exceptions to this general pattern.
- These perceptions and feelings exist despite the general recognition that law enforcement agencies in each of the communities participating in the research had made headway in combating criminal activity. Here, participants refer to neighbourhood initiatives, school involvement and bike patrols, as well as programs such as the immobilizer initiative undertaken by Manitoba Public Insurance.
- Gang activity was recognized as existing in Brandon, Portage and Winnipeg, although only the latter city was seen as having a visible gang problem.
- In citing specific areas of concern, research participants state that random crime perpetrated by youth constitutes the most significant threat to their property and personal safety. Although there was general recognition that organized crime exists in all communities, research participants did not perceive this to be a direct threat to themselves or their family.

Organized vs. Random Crime

- For some participants, organized crime is somewhat distinct from gang activity although there was a general recognition that the latter constitutes a form of organized crime. For these participants organized crime conjures the image of financial gain through somewhat sophisticated businesslike activity. Gang activity, on the other hand, was generally seen as a group of young people getting together to, in the words of one Brandon woman, "make life miserable for other people".
- Despite the comparatively high profile of organized crime in the media, participants in each city maintain that most instances of criminal activity in their own communities are random in nature.

Facilitating Organized Crime

- Drugs were generally recognized as being the primary source of income for organized crime in each of the three Manitoba cities included in the research. By comparison, there was some doubt as to whether prostitution exists in Brandon and Portage.
- Despite the recognition that casual users of drugs are likely fueling organized crime activities, there appears to be no appetite for law enforcement efforts to be directed at highlighting or addressing casual drug use for substances such as marijuana and its derivatives. There is, however, considerable enthusiasm for the notion of more aggressively tackling the trafficking and use of cocaine, crystal meth and other manufactured drugs. The basis for this distinction appears to be that these types of drugs were regarded as being personally destructive and thought to perpetuate criminal activity.

Crime Resolutions

Module Synopsis: This module examined potential means by which government may seek to address criminal activity Manitoba.

Expectations of Government

- Crime was invariably acknowledged as an issue area that ought to be addressed by governments in Canada. A majority of participants described addressing crime as a high priority for Canadians.
- Although there was some recognition that various levels of government have unique responsibilities with respect to law creation and enforcement, there was a strong consensus that the responsibility for addressing issues arising from criminal activity be shared equally at the federal, provincial and municipal levels.

Prevention or Punishment

- There was lively debate among participants as to whether government efforts should be directed at the prevention of criminal activity or punishment of perpetrators. There was little in the way of consensus on this matter, with individuals within each session arguing passionately for either case. The general lack of consensus concerning a preferred direction was compounded by several participants who stated that they would like to see both potential crime fighting approaches enhanced.

An exercise intended to identify preferred resolutions to the issue of crime in Manitoba and individual communities was conducted. Participants were assisted by the moderator in generating a list of potential measures that may be implemented in order to combat crime. Participants were then provided with five dots and asked to allocate the dots to the measures they personally perceived to be most effective in tackling crime.

- Although there was a considerable element of dissenting opinion, participants collectively tended to favour preventative measures.
- In explaining the concept of restorative justice participants were made aware that the emphasis would be on rehabilitation of the perpetrator rather than on punitive aspects of the process.
- It is worth noting that participants stated that they completed the exercise while thinking about individual perpetrators and random acts of crime to a much greater extent than they considered these measures as a means by which to combat organized crime.

Youth Gangs

- Focus group participants were generally not supportive of the notion of developing a publication intended for parents of at-risk children that would offer advice about keeping children out of gangs. The sentiment here was that more significant measures need to be taken and that any strategies that might be employed are likely already known or need to be delivered in a more meaningful manner than a publication.
- There was some resistance to the suggestion that provincial crime prevention efforts be directed at youth gang members. For many, such an approach would be perceived as coddling the criminal or providing benefits unfairly to a particular segment of the community. Furthermore, several participants contended that all socioeconomic strata are populated by potential gang recruits and that preventative measures should be aimed at all children.

Auto Theft (Winnipeg only)

- Focus group participants in Winnipeg perceive that there has been significant headway made in combating auto theft. Participants largely credit the efforts of MPI and its immobilizer program for addressing this issue.

Policing the Police

Where time permitted, participants were asked about the notion of developing a system by which police could be investigated following instances where officers were suspected of committing a serious offense. Participants were provided with two scenarios. The first involved having an external police force conducting an investigation. The second involved having a standing investigative unit within Manitoba composed of a civilian director, independent lawyers and investigators with policing backgrounds.

- In virtually every instance, participants offered vocal opposition to police forces investigating one another. The feeling here was that there is a “brotherhood” the loyalties of which override the likelihood of justice being served. The nature of the police force or the distance of the investigating force from Manitoba had little bearing upon participants’ views on this option.
- Although the standing unit was the preferred option, there was also some opposition to this alternative. Here participants objected to having personnel who are likely former police officers conducting the investigation. Once again, there was the perception that a special bond exists among police personnel, whether they be current or former police officers.