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Newfoundland and Labrador's *Vital Signs*: Portrait of a Foundation-University Partnership

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Keywords: Community reports, community dashboard, quality of life, foundation partnerships, academic partnerships

Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador's *Vital Signs* report, a reader-friendly checkup on quality of life in the province, has been published annually since 2014. (See Figure 1.) *Vital Signs* is a national program of Community Foundations of Canada, and the edition for Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is one of the few reports to be produced in partnership between a community foundation and its local university. Because the Community Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (CFNL) is a small foundation, with an endowment of approximately \$1.5 million and only one, part-time, staff person, it lacked the capacity to assemble a *Vital Signs* report internally. The foundation partnered with the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, a research unit of Memorial University, which has expertise in both promoting community-based research across the university and making academic information accessible to the general public. As a result of this collaboration, NL's *Vital Signs* is able to access administrative support and research management expertise beyond the foundation's in-house capacity.

This article begins by detailing the background of the national *Vital Signs* program and the history of both partner organizations. It then describes the origins of the collaboration behind NL's *Vital Signs* and gives an overview of how the production of the report has evolved. Finally, it examines the lessons that have been learned, including key challenges, successes, and best practices, and addresses how *Vital Signs*

Key Points

- *Vital Signs*, a national program of Community Foundations of Canada, produces annual reports of the same name that examine the quality of life using statistics on fundamental social issues. With these reports, community foundations are able to present a comprehensive and balanced picture of well-being in their communities.
- The *Vital Signs* report for Newfoundland and Labrador is produced in partnership between the Community Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, a university research unit with expertise in both promoting community-based research and making academic information accessible to the general public.
- This article examines the origins of this collaboration and the lessons that have been learned from it, and discusses how the report addresses a need for community knowledge in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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History of *Vital Signs*

In 1998, by an act of the provincial government of Ontario, the six constituent municipalities of the Toronto metropolitan area amalgamated to form the new City of Toronto, becoming overnight the most populous municipality in Canada and the fifth most populous in North America.

FIGURE 1 The cover image for the 2017 edition of Newfoundland and Labrador's VITAL SIGNS



Leading up to the merger, staff at the Laidlaw and Maytree foundations, two privately established foundations headquartered in Toronto, became concerned that public dialogue was focused on the cost-saving and administrative aspects of the union, rather than its ramifications for the quality of life of the city's residents (Canadian FundRaiser, 1999; Stauch, 2012). The Toronto Community Foundation (TCF), now the Toronto Foundation, took the lead in determining how to measure and monitor well-being in the newly amalgamated city. Following a series of meetings and a public consultation with more than 200 leaders from a variety of sectors, TCF commissioned research teams at the University of Toronto, Ryerson Polytechnic University, and York University to help produce a report on the city (Lewington, 2000; Rose, 2014). In 2001, TCF released Toronto's *Vital Signs*, which featured

statistics on fundamental issues affecting quality of life in the metropolis.

Vital Signs became a flagship program for TCF, and other community foundations in Canada became interested in replicating the *Vital Signs* model in their own areas. Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) began to coordinate the program at a national level in 2005, providing guidelines, branding materials, and support for foundations wishing to produce their own reports (Patten & Lyons, 2009; Rose, 2014). CFC adopted the framework of 10 issue areas developed by Toronto's *Vital Signs* as the basic structure of these local reports. By reporting on arts and culture, belonging and leadership, the environment, the gap between rich and poor, getting started in the community, health and wellness, housing, learning, safety, and work,

foundations could present a comprehensive and balanced picture of well-being in their communities (Patten & Lyons, 2009).

To make the report more manageable to produce and more adaptable to local priorities, foundations were permitted to participate in the Vital Signs program if they included a minimum of three of the 10 recommended issue areas in their local report, with the stipulation that they strive to address the other areas in a future report or in some other way (CFC, 2014). In 2016, CFC expanded the Vital Signs program to include three components in addition to the full report format:

- *Vital Conversations*, community-discussion events on Vital Signs issue areas;
- *Vital Brief*, short reports on one to three issue areas released in the interim between full reports; and
- *Vital Focus*, in-depth reports on one issue area released as an alternative to a full report (CFC, 2016d).

These options make the program accessible to a broader range of participants, and 32 Canadian community foundations and 80 international organizations were actively engaged in Vital Signs in 2017 (C. Lindsay, personal communication, September 8, 2017). CFC has also produced its own *Vital Signs* reports — first, to address the 10 issue areas for the country as a whole and later, to delve into such areas of pressing national interest as sense of belonging, food security, and the impact of Canada’s changing social and economic landscape on the nation’s youth (CFC, 2016c).

Newfoundland and Labrador

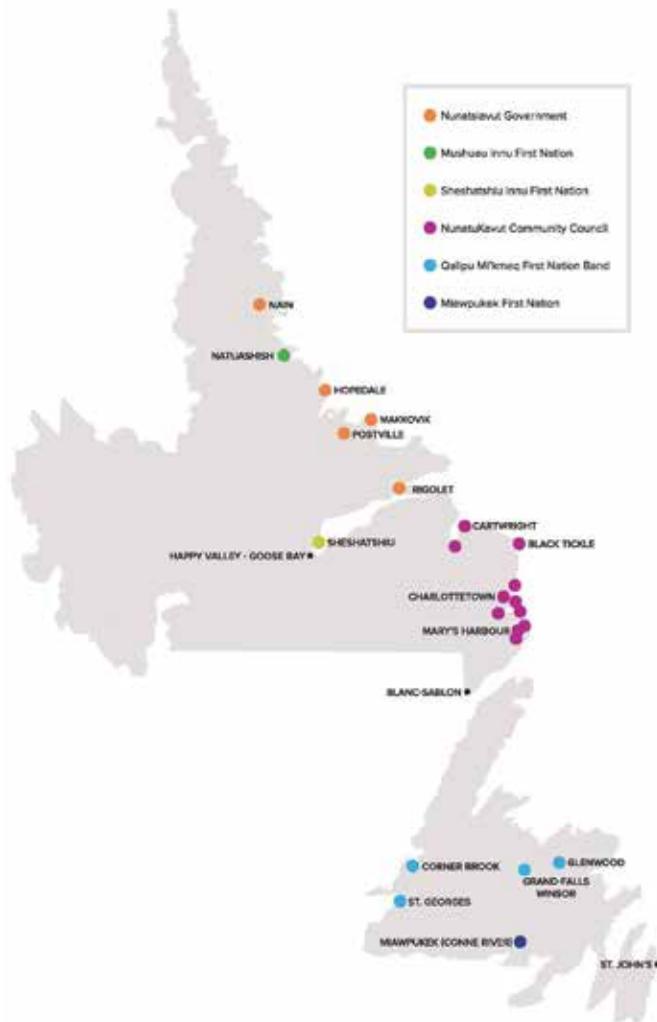
Newfoundland and Labrador is the easternmost province in Canada, encompassing both the island of Newfoundland and the neighboring portion of the Labrador Peninsula to its north, on the Canadian mainland. (See Figure 2.) It was the last province to enter into confederation with Canada, in 1949. Human habitation in the region dates back 9,000 years, and then, as now, most

By reporting on arts and culture, belonging and leadership, the environment, the gap between rich and poor, getting started in the community, health and wellness, housing, learning, safety, and work, foundations could present a comprehensive and balanced picture of well-being in their communities

settlements were dotted along the coastline to take advantage of the area’s rich sea life (Tuck, 1991; Cadigan, 2009). It was the plentiful fishing areas surrounding the province, particularly the legendary Grand Banks to its southeast, that drew European settlers beginning in the 16th century, and fishing remained the mainstay of the region’s economy until the late 20th century, supplemented by hunting, lumbering, and small-scale farming (Cadigan, 2009). In recent years, after the discovery of significant deposits in the province and its waters, oil and minerals have become the region’s primary exports (Lambert-Racine, 2013).

With a land area of some 143,000 square miles — larger than all but four states in the U.S. — and a population that has for decades hovered around only 500,000 individuals, NL has a pronounced rural/urban divide (Statistics Canada, 2017c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; CFNL and Leslie Harris Centre, 2014, 2016). Slightly less than half the population of the province — 205,955 individuals — is concentrated in the capital metropolitan area, while the next largest city, Corner Brook, is home to only 19,806 people; more than 200 towns, or three quarters of all municipalities, have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2017b). The province has the oldest

FIGURE 2 Newfoundland and Labrador's Indigenous Communities



Reflective Practice

population in Canada, with its rural communities hardest hit by declining population growth and an aging citizenry (CFNL and Leslie Harris Centre, 2014, 2015, 2016). About 11.4 percent of the population identifies as Indigenous, the second-highest percentage of any province in the country. Over 80 percent of Indigenous residents live outside the capital area, and Indigenous people make up almost half the population of Labrador, which is home to Nunatsiavut, a self-governing Inuit region (Statistics Canada, 2017c, 2017a). On the other hand, only 3.1 percent of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are immigrants or nonpermanent residents, compared

to 23.4 percent of the Canadian population as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2017c).

The Community Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador

CFNL was founded on the inspiration of Peter Roberts, who was born and raised in Newfoundland and spent his career working as a physician on the island's Great Northern Peninsula and along the coast of Labrador. On a trip to Ontario, he became acquainted with the work of community foundations and realized the tremendous benefit this type of organization

could bring to his province by encouraging philanthropy and providing support to underserved rural regions. Roberts assembled a team of philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and community sector organizers as CFNL's founding board of directors, and the foundation received charitable status in 2002.

CFNL is one of the few community foundations in the country with a provincewide mandate. The community foundation movement in Canada has expanded outward from Winnipeg, Manitoba, where the first foundation was established in 1921; there are now 193 community foundations nationwide (Winnipeg Foundation, 2017; C. Lindsay, personal communication, August 23, 2017). While most of these have municipal or regional catchment areas, each of the three provinces where community foundations were last to penetrate — Prince Edward Island, NL, and Nova Scotia — is home to a provincewide foundation (Knight, 2017). Provincewide foundations have the advantage of being able to provide resources to rural and remote communities that have few other sources of financial or organizational support. It is, however, challenging to maintain up-to-date knowledge of, communicate with, and secure representative foundation leadership from populations so geographically dispersed. Newfoundland and Labrador's *Vital Signs* report is one of CFNL's key tools for serving the needs of the diverse communities under its care.

The Harris Centre and the History of Public Engagement at Memorial University

Memorial University has a rich history of publicly engaged research, service, teaching, and learning. As NL's only university, founded in memory of those who served and died in World War I and World War II, the institution has a special obligation to the people of the province. Campuses and research sites located throughout the province as well as internationally extend the reach of the university and its capacity to engage the wider community. In 2012, the university senate approved a public engagement framework, which lays out four overarching goals:

1. Make a positive difference in our communities, province, country, and world;
2. Mobilize Memorial for public engagement;
3. Cultivate the conditions for the public to engage with the university; and
4. Build, strengthen, and sustain the bridges for public engagement.

The senate charged the newly formed Office of Public Engagement with catalyzing action and providing support to achieve these objectives. Since then, the office's portfolio has grown as it has assumed responsibility not only for stewarding the framework across the university's many departments and institutes, but also for leading diverse units such as a botanical garden, the *Newfoundland Quarterly* cultural magazine, alumni affairs, and the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development.

An early champion of public engagement, the Harris Centre was formed through the 2004 merger of the Public Policy Research Centre and the Centre of Regional Development Studies. The Harris Centre aims to support collaboration between the university and the people of the province and to promote informed public dialogue. To that end, it holds regular public policy forums and regional workshops throughout the province and leads a number of programs and initiatives in keeping with its mandate.

One such initiative is the Harris Centre's Regional Analytics Laboratory (RAnLab), led by Alvin Simms from Memorial's Department of Geography with support from senior researcher Jamie Ward. RAnLab uses specialized data tools to help regional and economic development decision-makers better understand their operating conditions. By combining economic, demographic, and spatial analytics, RAnLab aims to provide research-based evidence and projections that enable organizations to make more informed decisions in the present by understanding what the future is likely to bring.

[S]ome of the challenge in getting a “state of the province” initiative launched was navigating the relationship between the publicly funded university and the provincial government, which could interpret such a report as a critique of its policies. Partnering with the community foundation to access the politically neutral, community-based Vital Signs format eliminated any basis for accusations of partiality.

By 2013, representatives of CFNL and the Harris Centre had already met to discuss potential avenues for partnership. Among the primary objectives of the Harris Centre are mobilizing academic expertise within Memorial University to respond to pressing issues in NL, fostering collaborations between the university and community, and promoting public engagement. In connection with these purposes, Rob Greenwood, the Harris Centre’s executive director, had expressed an interest in creating a “state of the province” report, and Doug May of Memorial University’s Department of Economics had prepared a review of various national and provincial indices of well-being with funding from the Harris Centre’s Applied Research Fund (May, Powers, & Maynard, 2006).

To Guy and Hawthorn, Greenwood’s “state of the province” report sounded a lot like *Vital Signs*. When they showed him an example of a local report from Nova Scotia, he immediately agreed to partner on the publication of a *Vital Signs* for NL. Collaborating to create the report for the province would not only provide CFNL with a partner with expertise in research coordination and communications, but would also offer the Harris Centre a national format and community face for reporting on the state of the province to the general public. Indeed, some of the challenge in getting a “state of the province” initiative launched was navigating the relationship between the publicly funded university and the provincial government, which could interpret such a report as a critique of its policies. Partnering with the community foundation to access the politically neutral, community-based *Vital Signs* format eliminated any basis for accusations of partiality.

The launch of the partnership was facilitated by the fact that the chair of CFNL had served on Memorial University’s board of regents and another CFNL board member was an associate of the Harris Centre. These connections provided each organization with knowledge of the other from the outset, and the established relationships between members of the two groups created trust and supplied pathways for easy communication. Small jurisdictions can often

Forging a Partnership

In the spring of 2013, CFNL Executive Director Ainsley Hawthorn and then-Chair Jennifer Guy attended the biennial Community Foundations of Canada conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The conference included a workshop on how to implement *Vital Signs* at the local level, and both CFNL representatives returned from the conference inspired by the program’s potential. There were obstacles, however, to producing such a report in NL. CFNL was what Community Foundations of Canada defines as a Group 1 foundation — a foundation with an endowment of less than \$2 million (Gibson & Parmiter, 2013). With only one, part-time, staff member, CFNL had a limited capacity to administer additional programs. There would also be a need to recruit new expertise in social science data collection and analysis in order to provide accurate, timely, and detailed information on the communities of the province.

benefit from pre-existing social capital, as limited population enhances the likelihood of personal connections among organizations (Baldacchino, Greenwood, & Felt, 2009). Having foundation staff who understand the unique time horizons of university faculty also helps to forge university-community partnerships. Nongovernmental organizations and other collaborators are often frustrated by timelines dictated by academic semesters and deadlines for peer-reviewed publications. University knowledge-mobilization units like the Harris Centre can play a key role in mitigating these tensions by guiding external partners through institutional processes and timetables, while community collaborators who have direct knowledge and experience of universities can also smooth the way.

Once the decision had been made to proceed with producing a report for 2014, CFNL and the Harris Centre set about recruiting additional partners. The *Vital Signs* production committee struck by the two organizations reviewed several options for printing and distributing the report, with the goal of providing paper copies directly to as many residents of the province as possible in order to maximize access to and awareness of the report and its findings. After considering the possibility of disseminating the report by mail, the committee chose instead to emulate the Toronto Foundation's approach of distributing the report in the form of a newspaper insert. There are 13 regional newspapers in the province, with a combined circulation of 100,000 and coverage extending from the Burin Peninsula in the south to Labrador in the north. Their publisher, TC Media (now SaltWire Network), generously agreed to sponsor *Vital Signs* and to issue the report as a 16-page insert in all regional papers. In addition, the publisher provides 5,000 to 10,000 extra copies of the report to CFNL and the Harris Centre each year for distribution to libraries, schools, and stakeholders.

Funding the Project

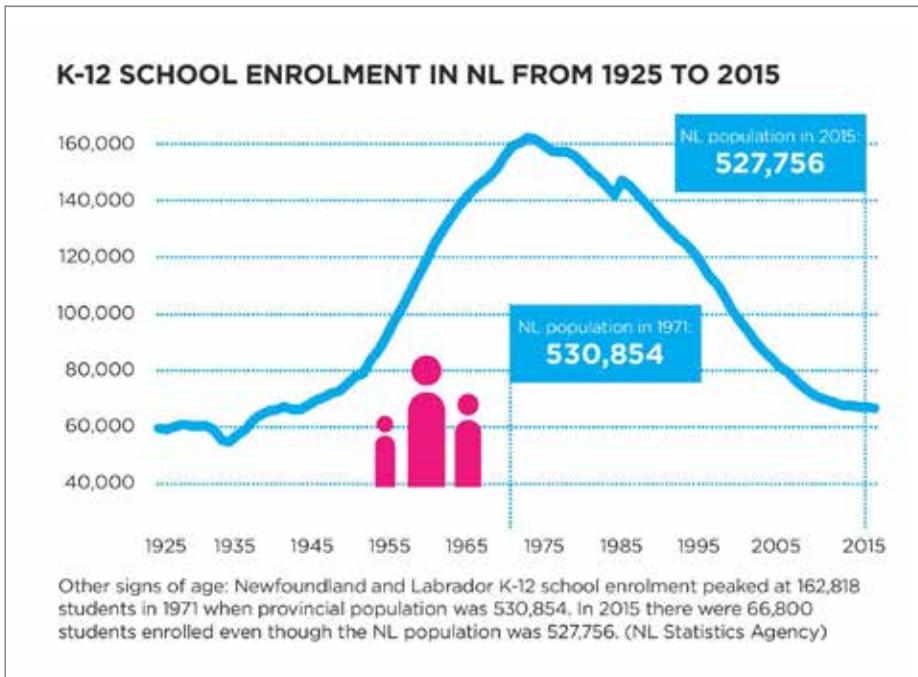
Next, both organizations turned their attention to attracting sponsors to fund the production of the report. Potential funders were selected on the basis of the affinity between the report and their work: prospects had either a provincewide

outlook, a community development focus, or a mission related to one of the report's issue areas (wellness, education, youth, and so on). The value of the sponsorship includes both the publicity associated with the prominent placement of the funder's logo on the more than 100,000 copies of the report and the creation of a research product that will ideally furnish the funder, as well as the wider community, with information useful to its line of work. Past sponsors have included businesses, boards of trade, university departments, and sectoral organizations. A number of charities have also taken advantage of a special rate intended to make the benefits of partnering as a report sponsor accessible to nonprofits.

A foundational principle of NL's *Vital Signs* was that the statistics chosen for publication should be driven first by the nationally recommended set of issue areas and indicators, second by the discovery of noteworthy trends in the data for NL, third by community feedback from stakeholders in the province, and fourth by the advice of subject-matter experts. In order to preserve the neutrality of the report, sponsors would not participate directly in its preparation. To avoid the appearance of influence, the NL *Vital Signs* steering committee has to date also opted not to invite sponsorship of individual report issue areas (for instance, the sponsorship of the wellness section of the report by a health-related organization) but rather to recognize all sponsors on the report's back cover.

Attracting sponsors has been a challenge. The Harris Centre's experience over 13 years has been that there is reluctance among both corporations and nongovernmental organizations to support public policy-related projects (Vardy, 2013). Many see this as the role of government or prefer to subsidize causes with more tangible community benefits. To date, however, NL's *Vital Signs* has been able to attract sufficient sponsorships to enable the production of the report each year, when combined with an investment of significant CFNL and Harris Centre staff time. Because community and industry stakeholders have now come to anticipate, appreciate, and make use of this regular update on the state of the province, we expect to be able to continue to secure

FIGURE 3 K-12 Enrollment in NL



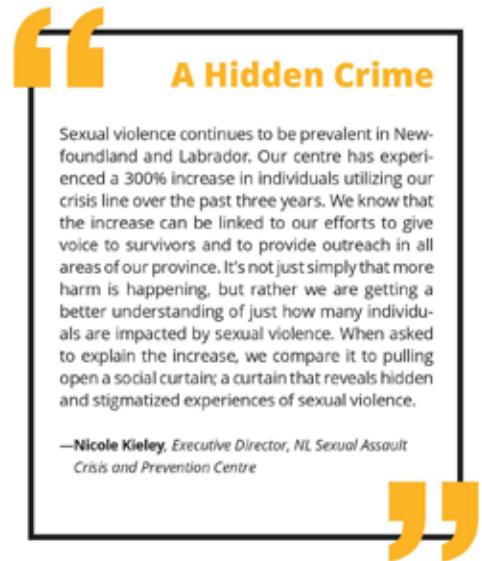
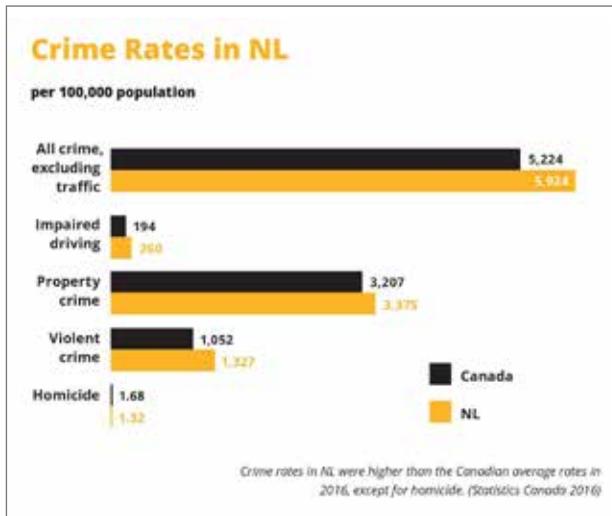
adequate sponsorships to support *Vital Signs* and do not expect its long-term viability to be compromised by lack of funding. Securing additional funds to expand the project beyond the basic format, however — to hire a dedicated project manager, conduct original research on issues of community interest, or develop a sophisticated website with easily shareable information — is likely to pose a more significant hurdle.

Capitalizing on the robust supports for public engagement partnerships at Memorial has been fundamental to resourcing NL’s *Vital Signs*. In its third year, the project was awarded competitive funding from Memorial’s Office of Public Engagement to hire a postdoctoral researcher, in partnership with Tony Fang in the university’s Department of Economics. Universities across North America are increasing their financial and administrative investment in university-community collaborations that result in mutually beneficial research projects or help to

make academic research findings accessible to the general public, and numerous resources are now available to inform best practices in this area.¹ This burgeoning university interest in public engagement and knowledge mobilization makes it an ideal time for foundations and other third-sector organizations to partner with universities on socially beneficial projects.

Because CFNL is an emerging community foundation with a relatively small endowment, it does not have internal financial resources that it can allocate to NL’s *Vital Signs*, but CFNL’s membership in Community Foundations of Canada has enabled it to leverage the national network of community foundations for support. CFC is funded by its member organizations on a sliding scale, so foundations with larger endowments pay higher membership dues; the annual *Vital Signs* participation fee paid to CFC by foundations that are activating the program at the local level varies according to endowment base.

¹ These resources include ResearchImpact (<http://www.researchimpact.ca>) and Community-Based Research Canada (<http://communityresearchcanada.ca>); see also Bouillon, Chingee, & Pinchbeck, 2013.

FIGURE 4 Crime Rates in NL (per 100,000 Population)

Thanks to this strategy of pooling the resources of many foundations to benefit communities across the country, CFNL has been able not only to access Vital Signs research data, graphic design, and brand resources compiled by CFC, with its greater capacity, at relatively low cost but also occasionally to take advantage of national CFC funding earmarked to support local Vital Signs projects. In 2017, for example, NL's Vital Signs received a grant from CFC to host three Vital Conversations across the province.

Producing the Report

Work on NL's *Vital Signs* began with the establishment of a committee to guide its development. The committee included staff and board members from both CFNL and the Harris Centre, a project manager, the two lead researchers of RAnLab, and a graphic designer. For the inaugural report, the committee chose to implement the nationally recommended format, covering the 10 fundamental issue areas and adding sections on population, transportation, and youth. The committee reasoned that this approach would offer a broad overview of quality of life in the province and serve as a point of reference that could be adapted in future years. Each section in the report would include infographics representing statistical indicator data

(See Figure 3), an expert comment (See Figure 4), and the story of a community project creating positive change in that field. The report was published on October 7, 2014, to coincide with the national *Vital Signs* release day, and a launch event was held in St. John's and simulcast online to present the report's findings and answer questions from the community and the media.

The committee decided early on that, in principle, *Vital Signs* would be an annual project, and full reports for NL have been published every year since 2014. This decision was made for several reasons, including the preference of the Harris Centre to run programs on an annual basis, the value of the report as a public relations piece for CFNL, the enthusiasm of the media partner, the high level of community interest in the project, and the wide variety of issues meriting coverage. Given the large investment of staff time necessary to produce *Vital Signs*, which is particularly onerous for CFNL with its single employee, the annual production schedule has recently come up for review between the partners. Strategies for alleviating the administrative burden are under discussion, including the option of moving to a biennial production schedule for the full report and releasing a shorter-format *Vital Brief* or *Vital Focus* in intervening years.

Participants in the consultations expressed an interest in learning not just about the overall state of domains like work and wellness, but also how specific groups of people in the province were faring. How did women's employment levels compare to men's? What was the profile of the province's Indigenous population? What health challenges were facing the growing population of seniors?

Consultations With Stakeholders

Community consultations were held in three locations across the province in the spring of 2015 to solicit feedback on the report, and representatives from a variety of sectors were invited to participate, including Indigenous, municipal, and community leaders. These consultations were our first opportunity to ask stakeholders whether the first edition of NL's *Vital Signs* had been useful to them and how we could improve it. What questions did participants have about their own fields? What information did they want the public to know? Attendees were asked which of the first report's issue areas they found least interesting, what areas they would like to see addressed in future reports, and any indicators or experts they felt should be included.

The input we received at these consultations shaped the 2015 and 2016 reports. Participants in the consultations expressed an interest in learning not just about the overall state of domains like work and wellness, but also how specific groups of people in the province were faring.

How did women's employment levels compare to men's? What was the profile of the province's Indigenous population? What health challenges were facing the growing population of seniors? As a result, the 2015 report included demographic sections that gauged how a range of issues were affecting Indigenous people, families, seniors, women, and the LGBTQ community, among others. One topic that came up repeatedly in the consultations became the theme of our 2016 report: the rural/urban divide. The 2016 edition of NL's *Vital Signs* considered how the economy, housing, sense of belonging, and other quality-of-life measures differ if a person is living in Cartwright instead of Corner Brook or Parson's Pond instead of Paradise. The Harris Centre's RAnLab initiative was able to leverage significant existing work on functional economic regions in the province to inform the report. Having an embedded university partner has connected NL's *Vital Signs* to existing strengths in the university that external parties would have found more difficult to locate. University units that can play this navigation role are critical to fostering university-community partnerships (Goss Gilroy Management Consultants, 2012; Hall, Walsh, Vodden, & Greenwood, 2014).

Streamlining the Process

Since 2014, the process for producing NL's *Vital Signs* has evolved substantially. The original single, large committee has been replaced with three smaller groups: a steering committee, which includes executive members of both CFNL and the Harris Centre; a production committee consisting of staff members and project contract personnel; and a review panel of subject-matter experts representing each of the report's issue areas. Decisions on the direction of the report, such as its overall theme (if any) and issue areas to be included, are made by the steering committee, which also recommends potential experts, community stories, sponsors, and other resources. More detailed decisions on the text, indicators, infographics, and photographs are made by the production committee. Once the report is drafted, it is read by the members of the steering and production committees, and their revisions are incorporated before a second draft is forwarded to the members of the

expert review panel for their input. The goal of dividing the committee into smaller, specialized groups was to streamline the production of the report, and the process has become more efficient since the inaugural year as a result.

It took some time to determine the precise research needs of the project. In its first year, research for the report was conducted by Alvin Simms and Jamie Ward of RAnLab; in its second year, *Vital Signs* employed a graduate student on a summer contract; and in its third and fourth years, the report has had the half-time support of a postdoctoral fellow. Initially, the team's approach to determining which statistical indicators should be included in the report was to get an overview of recent research and then to select indicators based on which data exhibited the most revealing or surprising trends. The problem with this method, however, was that much more data was collected than was ultimately needed for the report, which placed an unnecessary burden on the *Vital Signs* researchers and increased the amount of editing work delegated to other staff. Since the second year, indicators have been chosen based on community feedback and the advice of subject-matter experts, so that only fine-tuning needs to be done if some indicators prove to be less useful than expected. A part-time postdoctoral fellow has brought the ideal amount of research support to the project. The fellow's level of expertise allows for her or him to recommend indicators that will answer community questions and to collect data efficiently, identify and reach out to appropriate academic experts for more detailed information, and troubleshoot potential problems or inaccuracies.

Project Outputs

CFNL and the Harris Centre, with the support of their partners, have produced three outputs through the *Vital Signs* program:

1. A 16-page, reader-friendly report distributed annually in paper format to 100,000 households and businesses provincewide and published online on the CFNL and Harris Centre websites.

The print distribution of the report plays a crucial role in ensuring public access to its contents. CFC's 2016 national Vital Signs report revealed that 28 percent of rural households in Canada have access to high-speed internet, compared to 99 percent of urban households, and only 60 percent of Canadians with an annual household income below \$31,000 have internet access at home.

2. A launch event hosted in St. John's, NL, on or shortly before the report's publication date and transmitted simultaneously online.
3. A 40-minute roundtable discussion broadcast by a provincewide radio network and posted afterward as a podcast.

The print distribution of the report plays a crucial role in ensuring public access to its contents. CFC's 2016 national *Vital Signs* report revealed that 28 percent of rural households in Canada have access to high-speed internet, compared to 99 percent of urban households, and only 60 percent of Canadians with an annual household income below \$31,000 have internet access at home (CFC, 2016b, 15). The regional newspapers have a wide circulation to both urban and rural areas, guaranteeing high visibility for the report. Because there is a purchase cost for the newspapers, we also mail copies of *Vital Signs* to public libraries across the province as one means of making it available to NL's low-income residents. Since the purpose of the report is to

provide the province's communities with the information they need to address challenges, identify opportunities, and improve their quality of life, making the report accessible to as wide a swath of the population as possible is essential to achieving its mission.

The launch event and radio roundtable complement the print publication of the report. At the launch, a presentation is given on the report's findings and a panel of community and university experts is available to answer the public's questions. In 2017, the launch was followed by community conversations in three locations — St. John's, Corner Brook, and Happy Valley-Goose Bay — to solicit feedback on the report and discuss how to use its data to drive positive change. The chance for the public to raise questions and have an open dialogue at the launch event encourages the community to exercise ownership over the report and its contents; we were thrilled when an attendee at the first launch referred to "our *Vital Signs* report." By demonstrating to community members that we value their knowledge and insights, we not only improve our ability to produce a report that is useful to the residents of our province but also foster the sense of personal investment that motivates people to contribute their time, resources, and gifts to the places they call home. By encouraging conversation participants, many of whom represent community organizations, to brainstorm ways to address the challenges raised by the report, we hope to foster a community-sector culture that is responsive to the province's changing needs and to create a pipeline for CFNL's discretionary granting, where *Vital Signs* uncovers issues of pressing importance to the community, community organizations strategize to respond to these needs, and CFNL funds their work through its annual grant program.

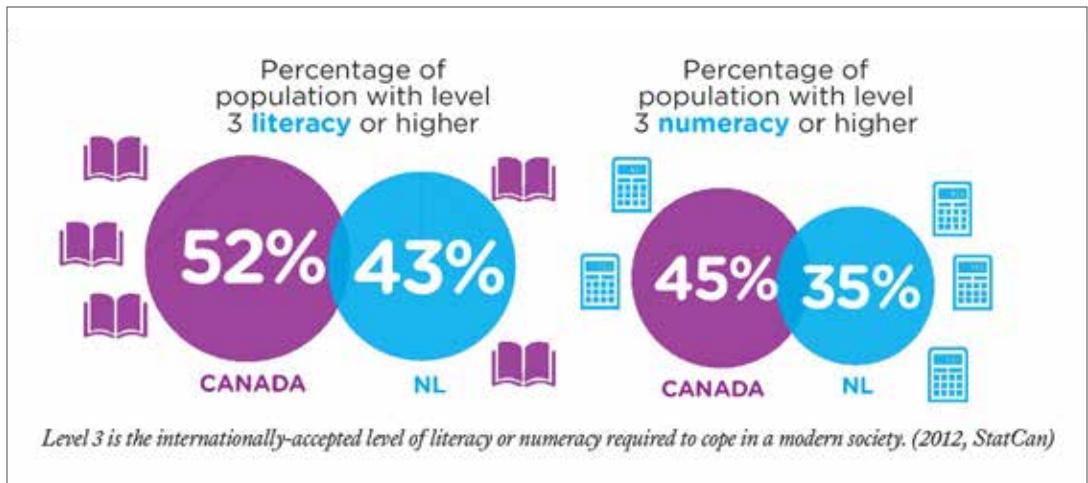
The radio roundtable, a new addition to NL's *Vital Signs* program in 2016, was hosted by and broadcast on VOXM, a provincewide private radio network (VOXM, 2016a). The roundtable featured two academic and two community experts; the station's news director led them in a discussion of the 2016 report and its implications. The idea for a *Vital Signs* audio program

was sparked by a finding we published in our first report showing that only 43 percent of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have level 3 literacy — roughly equivalent to high school literacy — or higher. (See Figure 5.) People with less than level 3 literacy struggle to read a newspaper, making the print version of *Vital Signs* inaccessible to over half of the adult population of the province. We decided to approach VOXM to host the program because the network targets the rural, older demographic most likely to be affected by low literacy.

Best Practices

Three central factors have contributed to making NL's *Vital Signs* a successful foundation-university partnership:

- *Vital Signs* aligns with the missions of both organizations, supporting CFNL's goal to be a source of community knowledge and the Harris Centre's aim to stimulate informed discussion of important provincial issues.
- CFNL and the Harris Centre are willing to compromise to ensure that *Vital Signs* serves each of their objectives. For example, our coverage of NL's economy has been more extensive than is usual for local *Vital Signs* reports to reflect the Harris Centre's interest in economic development and the capacity of RAnLab, and we have profiled CFNL grant recipients in our community stories to demonstrate the impact of strategic grantmaking.
- Each organization contributes distinct resources and competencies. The Harris Centre is able to source researchers, broker partnerships with other university departments, and marshal academic expertise to answer critical questions about the state of the province. CFNL brings research, graphic design, and communications materials through the national community foundation-led *Vital Signs* program, relationships with community stakeholders, and an apolitical, community face for the project.

FIGURE 5 NL Literacy/Numeracy Levels

Over our four years of collaboration on the Vital Signs program, we have also developed a number of best practices for overcoming potential challenges:

- Lay out responsibilities and overall program structure in a written partnership agreement. Having clear guidelines in place for how decisions are to be made enables both organizations to have input into the report's content without overburdening the volunteer members of the steering committee.
- Establish an expert review panel to check the final draft of the report in order to avoid errors of fact or interpretation.
- Engage a balance of university and community experts to provide comments for publication in the report and to serve on its review panel. This recognizes the complementary ways of knowing of academics and community members.
- Ensure the report presents information on different regions and municipalities in NL, and not just on the province as a whole. Provincewide data can obscure differences within the province that may be as significant as distinctions between this province and other parts of Canada. Where the data do not break down to the regional or

municipal levels, diverse geographic representation is achieved through the stories told in the report's journalistic-style articles.

- Solicit feedback from community stakeholders at regular intervals and use their comments to guide the direction of future reports. Receptivity to feedback enables *Vital Signs* to be a responsive resource that answers the community's most pressing questions and contributes to a culture of public engagement.
- Give equal prominence to CFNL and the Harris Center in the report itself, at the launch event, and in all communications materials. This reflects the full partnership that underlies NL's *Vital Signs* and ensures that both organizations benefit from the profile associated with releasing the report.
- Remain politically neutral. The purpose of the report is not to assign blame for NL's problems, but instead to provide the residents of the province with knowledge that can inform debate, guide policy, and inspire community action. The report refrains from conjecturing about the influence of government policies on the data presented and aims to present a balanced picture that includes both the negative and the positive.

The long-term goal of the report, however, is to bring about improvement in quality of life in the province, which will only happen if the data are translated into action. The engagement components of the Vital Signs program are therefore integral to its success, as a means of encouraging community members and political leaders to think about how they can respond to the challenges identified by the report.

Measuring Impact

From the beginning, the community embraced NL's *Vital Signs*. More than 125 community, government, and industry representatives attend the launch event every year, and staff of charitable organizations and ministerial offices have informed us that they refer to the report in the course of their work. Municipalities NL, the umbrella organization for local government in the province, has been a funder from the outset and hosts a presentation on each year's report at its annual convention, reaching an audience of over 300 elected officials and staff. Chambers of Commerce and Rotary Clubs from across the province have also requested presentations based on *Vital Signs*. In 2016 and again in 2017, a dozen pieces on NL's *Vital Signs* appeared in print and on radio and television — the most extensive coverage of any local *Vital Signs* report in Canada — and journalists have used information from *Vital Signs* as background for other stories well after each year's launch (Venn, 2016; Nikota,

2017; VOCM, 2016b). The report has become an integral component of community dialogue in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The long-term goal of the report, however, is to bring about improvement in quality of life in the province, which will only happen if the data are translated into action. The engagement components of the *Vital Signs* program are therefore integral to its success, as a means of encouraging community members and political leaders to think about how they can respond to the challenges identified by the report. Testimonials from local government officials have included statements to the effect that *Vital Signs* is motivating conversations on issues critical to the well-being of their communities. The mayor of the remote Northern Peninsula municipality of Roddickton, Sheila Fitzgerald, reports that the demographic data in *Vital Signs* is inspiring her town to mobilize to promote sustainability (S. Fitzgerald, personal communication, November 17 2016). At the provincial level, ministers in the current liberal government have often referred to demographic projections for the province published in *Vital Signs* and drawn from the Harris Centre's Population Project and have instituted numerous population-growth initiatives consistent with the issues raised in the report.

But how to measure change over time? *Vital Signs* may be unique in that it can serve, to some extent, as its own metric. By regularly publishing the latest data on indicators like literacy, the incidence of disease, and the volunteer rate, we can track whether social progress is occurring in the communities of our province. Our intent is to revisit the basic issue areas of our inaugural report every five years to update the indicators with data from the latest census, creating a current snapshot of well-being in NL that can be compared to the benchmark indicators in the first report. An evaluation framework for NL's *Vital Signs* will be developed in our fifth year to inform the return to the issue areas and indicators of the inaugural report. Case studies, testimonials, and quantitative data will be utilized. What will perhaps be most significant is when we can point to culture change in our governments, NGOs, and industry organizations

that reflects increased recognition and use of evidence in decision-making.

Conclusion

In the three years since the publication of NL's first *Vital Signs* report, the program has gained a great deal of traction in our province. Journalists, political representatives, and community leaders anticipate and attend the report's annual launch, and statistics from *Vital Signs* are referenced throughout the year in the media and at community events. All this public attention has substantially raised the profile of CFNL. The report, with its timely and eye-opening facts about the province, draws media coverage in a way that grant announcements and calls for applications never could. As a communications piece that the foundation distributes to fund holders, prospective donors, and event attendees, *Vital Signs* is tangible evidence of what sets community foundations apart: solid, place-based knowledge. In particular, NL's *Vital Signs* helps CFNL to bridge the rural-urban gap by connecting the foundation with rural stakeholders through its provincewide distribution and by providing up-to-date information on the needs of the province's rural communities. An evidence-based understanding of the communities of the province enables CFNL to make strategic investments and guide donors so that their gifts have the utmost impact. Ultimately, *Vital Signs* and CFNL's grantmaking initiatives go hand-in-hand to provide Newfoundland and Labrador's communities with the knowledge to identify challenges and the resources to change things for the better.

Without partnering with the Harris Center and Memorial University, CFNL would not have been able to implement the *Vital Signs* program at this stage in its development. CFNL is the smallest of the 26 Canadian foundations that produced local *Vital Signs* reports in 2016 (CFC, 2016a; Knight, 2017). Collaboration with the university significantly increased staff support for the project and enlarged the networks through which the report could be sponsored and promoted, making this large-scale project accessible to an emerging foundation. Most of all, partnering with the Harris Centre has made the research resources of

the university available to the project, facilitating access to recent findings from university faculty and lending credibility to the report.

From the university perspective, NL's *Vital Signs* has become a signature public-engagement initiative that has enabled faculty and students from many faculties and schools to connect their work with community organizations and issues. Memorial University is the only university in Canada with a public engagement framework approved by its senate as a governing document. *Vital Signs* provides a platform for Memorial to collaborate with a community partner in a manner that spans not only the entire university but the entire province. The president of the university keeps a copy of the report on the coffee table in his office and cites *Vital Signs* in his speeches. Newfoundland and Labrador's *Vital Signs* is an example of one way that a local university and a place-based foundation have partnered to their mutual benefit and to the long-term benefit of the province they both serve.

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