

## METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Make appropriate claims about your impact based on the ‘rigour’ of your indicators, methods and data. People are more apt to believe claims that are cautious, objective and include an explanation about the limitations of the process used to generate the data.

As this section is detailed and can get quite lengthy, we recommend situating it in the appendix section of your impact report. If you have space to include a brief summary of your methods and limitations in the introduction section, consider including a short statement upfront as well.

### Methods Section

Your methods section will help readers determine the validity of your results by presenting them with a clear description of how the evaluation was done and rationale as to why specific methods were used.

To write your methods statement, briefly summarize five points:

- The purpose of your impact report
- Your data sources
- Your analysis or sense-making process
- Your process for validating the report findings
- Your review and approval process

### Sample Approach Statement

The purpose of this report is provide the community with an update on the (a) key activities in the implementation of the community plan to reduce poverty and (b) the outcomes and impacts that have emerged from that effort.

#### Step 1: Gather

The staff team gathered data from a variety of sources:

- Leadership Team, Roundtable, and/or Working Group partners
- Statistics Canada
- Special Report
- Etc.

#### Step 2: Initial Analysis

The staff team analyzed the data for themes, surfaced new questions, and reconnected with various groups to explore unanswered questions and/or request further information.

#### Step 3: Prepare and Test Draft

The group developed a draft report (or elements of it) and reconnected with [plan stakeholders] to determine if the data and descriptions were correct.

#### Step 4: Sign Off on Draft

The leadership group reviews, discusses, identifies adjustments, and signs off on the report for broader distribution in the community.

## Limitations Section

Limitations are the shortcomings, conditions or influences that are beyond your control as the researcher, which put restrictions on your methods. The limitations section provides additional context to readers, allowing them to evaluate the relevance and impact of your results; and demonstrates that you have an in-depth understanding of the evaluation and have thoroughly considered its weaknesses.

Poverty reduction collaboratives should pay attention to two types of limitations: universal and specific.

1. Universal limitations – These limitations are generally faced by all poverty reduction collaboratives. To write your limitations section, reflect on your methods and summarize:
  - Consistency
  - Quality
  - Timeframes
  - Attribution
  - Subjectivity
2. Specific limitations – These limitations vary case-by-case depending on the data gathering methods, indicators and outcomes you selected in Modules 2-5. Complete the exercise on page 5 to determine what additional limitations you have and how to communicate them.

## Sample Limitations Statement

There are five major limitations in how the data for this report was gathered, analyzed and reported. The first is the wide variety of ‘indicators and measures’ used by diverse groups to track outcomes and impact. While all the partners have agreed to a general working definition of poverty, they work on such diverse issues, projects and groups that it is difficult/impossible to have everyone use the same indicators to track progress. As a result, while all the plan stakeholders are measuring change, they employ different ways of doing so.

The second limitation is the mixed quality of the data gathered on outcomes and impact. The network of organizations and individuals working to reduce poverty in our community have different levels of resources and expertise to measure their progress. Some have full time staff whose job is devoted to measuring results, while others are comprised entirely volunteers who invest all their energy into project implementation. Most groups also work with modest evaluation budgets. Therefore, in some cases, available data may only be able to hint at what the true results might be.

The third limitation is that the diverse people and organizations providing the data for this report are all working with projects and workplans that produce information at different times. This means that the snapshot presented in this report is really a collection of smaller snapshots that have occurred over the past year, conveniently packaged in a larger album.

The fourth limitation is the difficulty in determining the extent to which our network partners - as opposed to other external factors – have influenced the outcomes and impacts described in this report. This is particularly true for population-level poverty levels, which are affected by dozens of factors outside of our network’s control (e.g. commodity prices, interest rates, income tax policy). Project partners do not consistently have enough resources and expertise to undertake the indepth research required to get a handle on to what extent their efforts were responsible for a change. As a result, throughout the report, we focus on the contribution our partners have made to outcomes and impact.

The last limitation is the difficulty in determining whether someone is “in” our “out” of poverty. The journey out of poverty differs from person to person – it is not like showing a passport and crossing a border. Even thresholds used in the Federal Government’s three indicators for “income poverty” – LICO, MBM, LIM – are widely debated. Therefore, our report focuses on capturing the general progress of reducing local poverty, rather than judging it along a hotly debated and definitive bottom-line.

With these limitations in mind, the data contained in this report still offers the broader community (a) an update on the key activities implemented in key areas of the community plan and (b) a coherent picture of [Roundtable’s name] overall progress in reducing poverty over the last year.

## GROUP EXERCISE

*Purpose: Clarify the type of claims you can make about your results based on the rigour of your methods.*

Refer to the outcomes and/or impacts you will report on (thus far). Use the following table to rate the methods you used to produce that data against some of the most important factors.

	Rating		
	Weak	Medium	Strong
1. Long term tracking of results.			
2. Multiple types of data and evidence used.			
3. Clear description of methods used and limitations.			
4. Evidence and data drawn from more than one site.			
5. The evaluator(s) has/have extensive expertise & credibility.			
6. The evaluation was done by or with external evaluators.			
<i>Appropriate Claim</i>	<i>These outcomes seem possible...</i>	<i>These outcomes seem likely</i>	<i>These outcomes seem probable</i>