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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that community gardens in Winnipeg, including the Meadowood Victory Garden, are located on Treaty 1 territory and the original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples. This is also the homeland of the Métis Nation. We acknowledge that indigenous food systems have been disrupted by histories of colonialism, and that truth and reconciliation involve building respectful relationships among our communities and with the land. We recognize and support opportunities to build connections through inclusive practices of growing and sharing food.

We are grateful to everyone who contributed to this research by agreeing to be interviewed and sharing their experiences, especially Jeanette Sivilay for supporting this study from its initial stages, as well as the Winnipeg Food Council for their continued work on food systems issues. We would also like to thank the University of Manitoba Centre for Human Rights Research (CHRR) for funding this research project through its small grant program.

Project Description

The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in the food system that sparked interest in growing food in home and community gardens.¹ This interest resulted in a rush to buy seeds and garden supplies and led to an increased demand for garden community garden plots². Amidst this interest in growing food during the pandemic, some gardeners have specifically linked their efforts to "Victory Gardens," food gardens popularized during World War I and II that aimed to support the war effort and alleviate pressures on the food supply.

Victory Gardens modelled on the wartime community gardening movement emerged in various North American cities as a response to the pandemic. These gardens often aimed to address potential food shortages, inspire hope, and build community, but the actual effects of pandemic Victory Gardens—including the benefits, challenges, and long-term sustainability of these projects—has not been sufficiently examined. This research investigated the concept of "Victory Gardens" as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic using the Meadowood Victory Garden in Winnipeg as a case study.

In the summer of 2020, the Meadowood Victory Garden was established at the St. Vital Centennial Arena with the support of the Winnipeg Food Council, partners, and volunteers. The Meadowood Victory Garden is an innovative project that offers lessons about urban gardening during and beyond the pandemic. Two aspects make this Garden unique. First, the garden made use of city property and resources that were unused due to the pandemic. Second, the food harvested from the Meadowood Victory Garden was shared with community members who were not part of the project.

During WWII, governments promoted and helped fund victory gardens, which raises important questions about the role of municipalities in enabling an urban gardening movement that is sustainable in the longer term. Our research examined the potential of using the city's green spaces, water, and infrastructure to grow food for city dwellers during the pandemic and beyond. We also examined the benefits of community gardens for the health and wellbeing of local residents, and interrogated the potential of urban food production to contribute to household and community food security. We conducted semi-structured interviews with garden participants and a review of documents related to the Meadowood Victory Garden and urban agriculture.

¹ A report by the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University indicates that almost 1 in 5 Canadians started to garden in 2020, and two-thirds were significantly influenced by the pandemic. https://www.dal.ca/sites/agri-food/research/home-food-gardening-during-covid-19.html

² Aidan Geary, "'Huge spike' in new gardeners has Manitoba's horticultural community blooming." CBC News, July 12, 2020. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-gardening-covid-19-1.5645123

History of Victory Gardens

Victory Gardens emerged as part of a community gardening movement in the midst of, and in response to, World War I and II. "War gardens" began during WWI, but the Victory Garden movement was strongest and more formally introduced in Britain, Canada, and the United States during WWII. Victory Gardens were created in household yards, school playgrounds, public parks, and various vacant plots of land.³ Land was offered (or rented) by both municipalities and private businesses.

As a response to the food shortages and rationing of food during wartimes, Victory Gardens were promoted as a way to grow food for one's household and community. With a focus on the larger war effort, it was believed that the food produced could be exported to those fighting abroad, feed local communities, and contribute to the conservation of resources that was important during wartimes. While the term "food security" was not used at the time, growing food at home or in community gardens may have given people more access to fresh food in times of scarcity. Ultimately, however, Victory Gardens did not have a significant impact on levels of food security.⁴

The most significant contribution of the Victory Garden movement was that it boosted people's morale and gave them a sense of purpose during uncertain times. Thus, it can be argued that Victory Gardens built solidarity through the collective, voluntary mobilization of labour across nations. Their value was also symbolic, as the transformation of vacant and unproductive land into gardens symbolized hope and renewal.

Victory Gardens and COVID-19

Though the term is not always adopted by community gardeners responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, what defines a Victory Garden is that it is intentionally created in response to a large-scale societal conflict, event, or circumstance that captures the public's attention. The conflict or event also captures the attention of governments (at various levels) who dedicate attention and resources to gardening as a strategic response. During such a time (whether war or a pandemic), people need a productive and pleasurable way to spend their time. Additionally, the issue of food security enters into the public's consciousness and leads them to consider aspects of their food system that they might have not previously thought about (e.g. concern about food shortages or working conditions on farms due to COVID-19).

The benefits of wartime gardens also apply to community gardening during the pandemic: building solidarity; teaching new skills to children and adults who have never gardened; the creative use of vacant spaces; producing healthy food; serving as a symbol of hope; and providing a comforting, productive activity during a challenging time.

³ Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁴ Ian Mosby, *Food will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front.* (Vancouver and Kent: UBC Press and Kent State University Press, 2014).

Meadowood Victory Garden

The plan for the Meadowood Victory Garden (MVG) was put in motion by the Winnipeg Food Council at the start of the gardening season in 2020, and came together quickly in response to the pandemic. The project was made possible through a collaboration with the St. Vital Minor Hockey Association, which provided the site for the gardens at the St. Vital Centennial Arena and access to their facilities. The arena's canteen, closed due to COVID-19, contained a large refrigerator and wash station that were made available for the garden's operations. Crucial to the project was the Food Council Coordinator, Jeanette Sivilay, who maintained the garden, and City Councillor Brian Mayes, who sought out partners and funding for the project. Lawson Sales (a construction and agricultural equipment supplier) was instrumental in providing equipment and staff to prepare the garden beds, and also donated plants and seeds for the garden. A small group of volunteers helped with the installation of the garden, harvesting vegetables, and distributing the harvest through a "good food box" program.

Even though the arena was not an optimal location for a garden (the original beds were filled with gravel, and some areas were shady), gardeners were able to grow at least 13 different crops for a total harvest of 282 pounds over ten weeks.⁶ According to Jeanette Sivilay, the concept of "Victory Garden" fit the nature the project, which was not a conventional community garden with different plots. The name was also "a nod to the fact that it was in response to these shocks that we're seeing" (as a result of the pandemic). As people adapted to lockdowns, the closure of businesses and facilities, and working from home, they needed to find ways to stay active and spend time outdoors safely.

Benefits of the Garden

Community gardens can contribute to individual wellbeing through social interaction and outdoor activity, and the pandemic made this even more evident given the prolonged social isolation that many experienced and reduced opportunities for travel, entertainment, and leisure activities. Gardening can also contribute to a household's access to fresh vegetables, and an important aspect of the MVG was the creation of "good food boxes" using the garden harvest. Beneficiaries of 90 food boxes distributed over the summer included residents of a housing cooperative located across the garden and a neighbourhood daycare.⁷

According to one of the food box recipients that we interviewed (a resident of the housing co-op), the garden also brought a "community-based" feeling that she had not

⁵ Winnipeg Food Council, Meadowood Victory Garden Report, Winnipeg, December 2020, pg. 6.

⁶ Winnipeg Food Council, Meadowood Victory Garden Report, pg. 10.

⁷ Winnipeg Food Council, *Meadowood Victory Garden Report*, pg. 10.

experienced since moving to the area, and even the taste of the food evoked positive memories:

"It was just so wonderful. I used to walk by there on my walk and just look at everything. It reminded me of my own garden I used to have [...] And I'm on a budget, so [the food box] really helped me because I'm in subsidized housing here. So that was really helpful money-wise." ~ Community Member

The food box provided recipients with an additional source of fresh food that contributed to their diet without stretching an already-limited budget. These recipients may not have made use of other services such as food banks, so initiatives such as the good food box fill a need and benefit lower-income families that may not otherwise seek out assistance. Given that the pandemic led to unemployment and financial insecurity for many families, projects such as the Meadowood Victory Garden can provide some welcome relief.

Anecdotally, the garden was positively viewed by people who interacted with it, but its larger impact, particularly as it relates to meeting household and food security needs, was harder to gage. One of the volunteers discussed the lack of data about the garden's impact on food security: "The victory garden and the metrics that were used for it, as far as I know, were generally the output of food, but that isn't actually a social return on investment. It's who was fed? What did they save on their grocery bill? What were they able to spend that on? [...] What was the nutrition value of their calories during that summer?" This comment points to the need for more systematic record-keeping that can attest to and help maximize the garden's benefits.

Sustainable Food Systems

The MVG provided a successful model that participants hoped could be expanded or replicated elsewhere. However, one garden volunteer we interviewed recognized that doing so would require "replicating the *process*, not the garden itself," to account for the particular needs and conditions in each community. This interviewee also acknowledged that a project such as the MVG could not be sustainable if it relies entirely on the unpaid labour of volunteers. She recognize her own privilege of having a flexible schedule and childcare provided by a supportive partner that allowed her to devote some hours to the garden. In some cases, however, economic instability or lack of childcare might prevent people from participating fully in community gardens. These factors are often tied to gender, class, race, and other socioeconomic factors that affect people's access to community gardens and need to be carefully considered when initiating any community project.

Interviewees generally supported the idea of creating other community gardens. This would require the city to provide greater support for urban agriculture and local food production:

"I think the city has a responsibility to use the land that it owns wisely and for the enrichment of its citizens. And one way we do that is entertainment and community-building, like a skate park, like an arena. But if we can add sustainability and food security on that, why not? [...] If we're willing to subsidize large-scale commercial food production then we should also be willing to subsidize small-scale local sustainable food systems production." ~ Garden Volunteer

While our interviewees recognized the benefits of community gardens, some also emphasized their limited role in strengthening local food systems. According to Jeanette Sivilay, community gardens are only part of the solution to food insecurity in the province:

"For people who are experiencing household food insecurity, one community garden seems like an outrageous kind of approach to take because obviously the scale is much different. But I think we need to keep talking about those things from a kind of a regional perspective. Yeah, from a regional perspective, it's like we grow so much food and we're just known to be a food-growing province, but how do we grow more food for our neighbours and ourselves?" ~ Winnipeg Food Council Coordinator

Scaling up community gardening efforts such as the MVG would be necessary to make a bigger impact, address food insecurity in the community, and create a more secure local food supply. This requires putting more land and resources into urban agriculture, but lawmakers have not usually considered community gardens a priority. The relative scarcity of public land and green spaces in Winnipeg (measured on a per capita basis) poses a significant challenge, since there is often competition over how those spaces are used. According to Jeanette Sivilay, community gardens often end up on less desirable or marginal land: "If there's leftover space and it can't really be used for anything else, that's often what's selected for community gardens."

However, some of the MVG participants were hopeful that the experience and the attention put on food issues as a result of the pandemic may help to prioritize urban agriculture. According to another MVG participant, COVID-19 sparked people's interest and got them thinking about the "need to change the way we're doing things" with respect to how we grow our food and take care of the planet. In order to make changes, "the biggest thing is being able to make property available so that this can be done."

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has given more urgency to food issues and put them up for discussion at City Council. A city councillor involved in the project acknowledged

that his own thinking about food security has evolved over time, and issues that were once considered unimportant (or outside the responsibilities of city council) have now come to the fore:

"I think the pandemic has legitimized the Food Council. It has made people think, "Oh, this is serious. This isn't peripheral. These are real issues. This is something we are going to have to contemplate both for environmental reasons, but also just public health reasons. We need to be doing more on this." ~ Winnipeg City Councillor

The success of the Meadowood Victory Garden was one small piece of a larger issue, but it is part of a shift in perspective that has influenced political debate and action. It has led to discussions about city bylaws changes for urban agriculture that would make it easier to grow and sell food, thus supporting local food producers and consumers. The biggest challenge will continue to be how to provide land and water for community gardens, but as the Meadowood Victory Garden has shown, small scale efforts can help pave the way for policy changes.

Conclusions:

Learning from Victory Gardens

Given that Victory Gardens were a short-term phenomenon during the war, it is important to consider how these initiatives could be improved to become more long-lasting. This is especially relevant given the transformation of local and global food systems since the 1940s and the entrenchment of industrialized food systems. The adoption of the Victory Garden concept during the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to be more inclusive, to respond to climate change and food insecurity within the city, and to promote and improve a localized food system. The success and limitations of Victory Gardens, both past and present, can offer valuable lessons for urban agriculture in the city.

1. Government involvement: The role of the government was central to the growth of the Victory Garden movement during WWII. In Canada, there was strong support for state intervention and the government's ability to support citizens and the economy⁸.

⁸ Ian Mosby, *Food will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front.* (Vancouver and Kent: UBC Press and Kent State University Press, 2014).

By contrast, pandemic Victory Gardens have been smaller, localized, grassroots initiatives that have not received widespread attention or support from governments in Canada. The surge in gardening during the pandemic has "lacked a unified, depoliticized social movement to fuel it." The Meadowood Victory Garden offers an example of how a Citizen Advisory Committee established by the City Council mobilized the city's resources to grow food for the community. However, urban agriculture and food security initiatives require coherent support from all levels of government.

- 2. Inequality and inclusion: Wartime Victory Gardens were most prevalent among white, middle-class families who owned their homes. In part, this was due to the ways in which Victory Gardens were promoted, featuring stereotypical middle-class domestic lifestyles with nuclear families¹⁰. It is likely that the eventual decrease in Victory Gardens following the war was in part a result of these families' movement out of urban regions to the suburbs. By contrast, the Meadowood Victory Garden is an example of how city land can be made available for community use, for the benefit of people who do not necessarily own a home or have access to a garden. However, community gardens today also risk excluding marginalized and racialized communities, since voluntary participation in community gardens requires time, knowledge, and resources that are not equally available to everyone.
- 3. Community Food Security: One of the limitations of community gardens is their inability to address large-scale issues, including food security. While the food produced at community gardens may contribute to household food security for volunteer gardeners, this does not necessarily translate into community food security. Some community gardens in Winnipeg donate a part of their harvest to local organizations that distribute food to families in need, while the Meadowood Victory Garden offered food boxes to community members. The food box program was similar to a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) model, which differs from the more common practice of distributing harvested food to those who volunteer at the garden, or selling the surplus food in a farmers' market. Community gardens could address food insecurity in the city more directly and operate in ways that benefit the larger community. Other initiatives are also needed to scale up urban agricultural production to benefit a greater number of people beyond those who are able to participate in community gardening.

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⁹ Jennifer Steinhauer, "Victory Gardens were More about Solidarity than Survival." *The New York Times*, July 15, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/magazine/victory-gardens-world-war-II.html

¹⁰ According to Steinhauer (2020), in the United States, Victory Gardens were a "transitional phase" for white, middle-class families intent on moving to the suburbs following the war.

Recommendations



The Winnipeg Food Council's swift response to the rise in public interest and participation in gardening amid the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the creation of the Meadowood Victory Garden was a timely and creative strategy to support community members. The Victory Garden is also an excellent example of how the City and members of the public can collaborate to participate in the local food system.

The success of the garden was due to numerous factors, including eager community volunteers, access to public land and city-funded water, and the commitment of the Winnipeg Food Council coordinator. In the context of our research on this initiative, we recommend that the Winnipeg Food Council continue to operate the Meadowood Victory Garden and seeks out areas to build additional victory gardens in Winnipeg.

To inform this work, we present the following recommendations for the Winnipeg Food Council (WFC) and other institutions interested in supporting community gardens in the city:

1. STRATEGIC EXPANSION OF VICTORY GARDENS

There must be strategic development and implementation of additional victory gardens. We recommend that the following be taken into consideration when locating opportunities to create gardens:

- Locate areas of need and interest: Identify other housing co-operatives, low-income neighbourhoods, or other areas where residents can benefit from and have an interest in growing food.
- Use of public water: Identify locations where there is available public land and a water supply paid by the city.

2. DESIGNATED VICTORY GARDEN COORDINATOR

With her expertise in urban agriculture, Jeanette Sivilay's expertise was critical to the success of the Meadowood Victory Garden. We recommend that the following responsibilities are added to the job description of the WFC coordinator. Alternatively, the WFC could hire a victory garden coordinator dedicated to running the program. This individual must be available to work during daytime hours and have considerable experience with community gardens and/or urban agriculture. The responsibilities of the WFC coordinator or the victory garden coordinator should include:

- Acquiring gardening resources (including seeds, tools) and any available sources of funding
- Recruiting volunteers and delegating tasks
- Attending to the gardens (e.g. planting seeds, weeding, watering, harvesting, etc.)
- Promoting the garden through WFC social media channel(s)
- Distributing food to local partners (e.g. housing co-operative or other organizations in the community)
- Reporting to the WFC at the end of the growing season to discuss allocation of funds and resources, the social impact of the gardens in each community, and recommendations for improvements.

3. PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

We recommend that the WFC continues to include community members who are interested in volunteering their time or donating resources. Not only does community participation help the victory garden program operate efficiently with low costs, it also provides the opportunity for people to meaningfully support their community.

- Tracy Jensen from Lawson Sales, was an eager volunteer involved in the Meadowood Victory Garden and has expressed his interest in continuing to contribute to the future gardening initiatives. He also has the ability to gather additional volunteers, and to provide and operate equipment necessary for preparing garden beds.
- Residents of nearby homes may be interested in volunteering.
- As victory gardens expand throughout other wards, city councillors may be aware of people who have the time and skills to volunteer with the garden. They can help direct these people to the Victory Garden Coordinator.

4. CONTINUATION OF FOOD BOX DISTRIBUTION

The Meadowood Victory Garden produced an impressive volume of food which was distributed to local community members for free through a food box program similar to a community supported agriculture (CSA) approach. This contrasts most community

garden models where only those who volunteer in the garden receive food. The time commitment, knowledge, and labour required to volunteer can be barriers for many people who could benefit from the nutritious food produced in community gardens. Therefore, the Meadowood Victory Garden's free food box program is a notable strength of the initiative and we recommend that it continues in the upcoming growing season.

5. MEASURE IMPACT OF VICTORY GARDENS

It is important to measure the impact victory gardens have on community food insecurity. Therefore at the end of the growing season, surveys should be conducted with recipients of the food boxes to measure the following:

- How much food was grown
- Demographics of those who received food and were fed
- If they saved money on their groceries as a result of receiving the free produce
- If the produce helped improve the nutritional value of their diet that summer
- If the food was culturally appropriate and fit their preferences

6. GROW SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

The Winnipeg Food Council has an active Instagram account which is used to inform the public about various events, resources, organizations and projects that support our local food system. The food council should continue producing informative content and building their following on Instagram. This is a convenient way for members of the public to become more aware of and involved in our city's food system. The WFC Instagram account may also be an effective way to raise awareness of victory gardening (and other urban agricultural activities) and recruit volunteers and donations.

7. BUILD COMMUNITY GARDEN NETWORK

We recommend that the WFC facilitates an online network through which existing and new community garden coordinators (and possibly volunteers) can interact. This channel would allow individuals to share knowledge and resources, and have a more collaborative approach to urban food production. This could entail an email listserv, a Facebook group, or a communication channel via apps such as Slack or Signal.

8. CITY-RUN WATERING INITIATIVE

Throughout Winnipeg, numerous flower beds on public property are watered by city employees and contribute to the beautification of the city. Victory gardens should also be considered as part of the city's landscaping and beautification efforts, and city employees should be assigned the task of watering gardens throughout the city. These gardens would also have the benefit of sustainably producing and providing food for community members in need.

Community Resources

The Meadowood Victory Garden provides an example of how the benefits of a community garden can extend beyond gardeners and volunteers and into the community at large. While some community gardens already donate surplus produce to local organizations, we noted a lack of public information about where and how to donate fresh fruits and vegetables. The following guide can be shared with community gardens and home gardeners wishing to share their harvests with others.

Growing for Our Community

Where to Donate Surplus Food Grown in Gardens in Winnipeg



When we think of food donations, we usually think about giving canned goods to a food bank. But did you know that you can also donate fresh fruits and vegetables? There are several organizations in our city that work with local communities to provide groceries or healthy meals, and they often appreciate donations of fresh produce. If you are growing food in a home or community garden and have more than you can consume or share with friends and family, below are some organizations that take donations of fresh fruits and vegetables.

You may also be interested to learn that The Food Donations Act (CCSM c. F135) protects people and organizations who donate food in good faith. So as you harvest produce from your garden this summer, feel free to give generously!

Organizations Accepting Donations

Agape Table

Agape Table provides food to community members in need through its free breakfast program, emergency food bank, and free grocery program.

https://www.agapetable.ca/

Drop off: 364 Furby St between 8am - 2pm

Contact: (204) 783-6369

Bear Clan Patrol

Bear Clan Patrol is a community-based approach to promoting safety and solidarity within Winnipeg.

https://bearclanpatrol.org/

To arrange donations, please contact: Cristina (431) 777-0095



Broadway Neighbourhood Centre

The Broadway Neighbourhood Centre provides numerous free services for youth in Winnipeg. Food and nutrition is a significant part of their work and they appreciate donations of fresh produce which can be used to feed the community.

https://www.thebnc.ca/

To arrange donations, please contact:

Jackie Drapeau Executive Assistance Broadway Neighbourhood Centre 185 Young St, Winnipeg, MB R3C 1Y8 Cell Phone: 204-612-6859 (primary

contact number)

Office Phone: 204-772-9253

(secondary contact and currently not

in use due to shut down)

* Please call to book produce donation deliveries one week prior to delivery, to accommodate for storage space requirements. If you cannot reach Jackie by phone for any reason, please feel free to reach out via email at infothebnc@gmail.com.

Fireweed Food Co-Op

Fireweed Food Co-Op is a local co-operative that supports Manitoba-produced food through numerous programs including a food hub and farmers market. Through their Waste Not program, Fireweed gathers food donations from local producers and community members, and puts together food boxes. The food boxes are distributed through the Mutual Aid Society's initiative, Serve the People.

The partnership between Fireweed and the Mutual Aid Society is providing local, nutritious food to many households in Winnipeg, while also reducing food waste.

https://www.fireweedfoodcoop.ca/

Drop off: Tuesdays between 4 - 8pm at Fireweed's warehouse (1338a Clifton St) or Wednesdays between 4 - 8pm at the South Osborne Farmer's Market (725 Kylemore Ave).

Contact:

projects@fireweedfoodcoop.ca

Harvest Manitoba

Harvest Manitoba is Manitoba's food bank network which provides food to thousands of Manitobans. While donations predominantly include non-perishable food items, fresh produce is also welcomed and appreciated.

https://www.harvestmanitoba.ca/

Drop off: 1085 Winnipeg Ave Contact: (204) 982-3663

Oak Table

Oak Table prepares and serves food to community members. In addition to building community through food, Oak Table connects people to health care resources, provides a space to build community, and offers access to other resources.

https://www.oaktable.ca/

Drop off: 107 Pulford St (Please phone Oak Table before dropping off donations, so that they can be prepared to receive them).

Contact: (204) 416-2240

Siloam Mission

Siloam Mission provides a variety of services including meals, clothing, emergency shelter, health care, spiritual care, and programs to connect people with housing and employment. Fresh produce can be donated to support Siloam Mission's Drop-In space where food is provided to the community.

https://www.siloam.ca/

Drop off: Shipping and Receiving department at 300 Princess St (Monday - Friday: 8am - 4:30pm)

Contact: donategoods@siloam.ca

(204) 956-4344

West Central Women's Resource Centre

The West Central Women's Resource Centre operates a drop-in centre and meal program for women and their families. The WCWRC also supports women through numerous services including a community gardening program, housing support, various training programs, and research and advocacy.

https://wcwrc.ca/

Drop off: 640 Ellice Ave

Contact: (204) 774-8975

drop-in@wcwrc.ca

Schools, nursery schools, and daycares

Contact local schools, nursery schools and daycares in your neighbourhood to ask whether they are able to accept and make use of fresh produce.

If you belong to an organization that would like to be included on this list, please contact Dr. Fabiana Li (Fabiana.Li@umanitoba.ca, Department of Anthropology, University of Manitoba).

Information compiled by: Laura Funk and Fabiana Li. Last updated: May 2021