



University
of Manitoba

Village
Lab

villagelab.ca

Village Lab: Research for Stronger Communities

Village Lab

Strategic Plan
2024-2025

Land Acknowledgement

Village Lab is located on original lands of the Indigenous People of Turtle Island, including the ancestral territories of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Ojibwe-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Red River Métis Nation. We acknowledge that our water is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation. By acknowledging these lands, and by respecting the Treaties that were made on these territories, we are encouraged to continue honouring our relationships with Indigenous people as a part of ongoing reconciliation efforts, which will serve to educate the generations to come.

What is Village Lab?



The Village Lab is an interdisciplinary, community-based research lab led by Dr. Rusty Souleymanov at the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba. Formed in 2021, the Village Lab aims to facilitate and support high quality community-led research via strong community collaborations. Drawing on a variety of community-based research principles, approaches and methodologies, the Village Lab operates at the intersections of the health and social sciences to address health and social equity issues for socially and economically marginalized communities in Canada.

Introducing 2024-2025 Strategic Plan

This strategic plan builds upon the Village Lab's history, accomplishments, highlights, current initiatives, and indicates new priorities for the future of community-based research within the Lab. The goal of this plan is to guide the lab's strategic directions for the next two years to 2025. The process of the strategic plan involved a multi-stage consultative review and refinement process with the lab and community members.

This plan is a result of consultations with many key stakeholders which included: our lab's Elder, peer research associates, lab manager, graduate, and undergraduate student trainees, community partners and community organizations.

The lab is committed to a mission that reflects the collaborative efforts of our team in addressing key and priority populations and communities, including individuals living with HIV and STBBI. Moreover, the Village Lab places significant emphasis on studying the social aspects of infectious diseases and promoting harm reduction. The lab has pinpointed five strategic directions to concentrate on and enhance our influence on the well-being of equity-seeking and marginalized communities in Manitoba.

Terms and Definitions

1. Research: Is a systematic and organized process of investigation and inquiry aimed at generating new knowledge, insights, or understanding about a specific topic or question.

2. Marginalized: Marginalized communities or individuals are those who are pushed to the edges or margins of society, often experiencing social, economic, and political exclusion. This exclusion can result from various factors such as discrimination, poverty, lack of access to resources, and limited representation in decision-making processes.

3. Equity-Seeking: Equity-seeking refers to efforts or actions taken to address and promote fairness, justice, and equal opportunities for individuals or groups who have historically faced discrimination, disadvantage, or systemic barriers. These efforts aim to create a more equitable and inclusive society where everyone has a chance to thrive regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances.

4. Communities of Practice: Communities of practice are groups of individuals who share a common interest, profession, or passion and come together to collaborate, learn from one another, and improve their knowledge and skills in that area. These communities foster the exchange of ideas, experiences, and best practices, contributing to the growth and development of their respective fields.

5. Stakeholders: In community-based health research encompass a broad range of individuals and groups, including community members, researchers, healthcare and community-based service providers, government agencies, non-profit organizations, funding organizations, local authorities, advocacy groups, community leaders, healthcare and social care recipients, and educational institutions, all of whom have an interest in or are affected by the research outcomes.

6. Key and Priority Populations: In the context of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) prevention and treatment, "key populations" and "priority populations" are terms used to identify specific groups that are at a higher risk of HIV infection or face unique challenges related to HIV prevention, testing, treatment, and care.

Village Lab Vision

The Village Lab envisions a future in which socially and economically marginalized communities, including key and priority populations such as those who are disproportionately affected by health inequities enjoy a life of optimal health, well-being, and meaningful social inclusion.

Village Lab Mission

Village lab is a leader and catalyst in Manitoba for improving the health and well-being of key and priority populations in HIV/STBBI, other infectious disease and harm reduction through integrated research, education, interventions, and policy.

Lab Structure and Team

The Village Lab team (<https://www.villagelab.ca/the-team>) includes the Village Lab director, our Indigenous Elder and knowledge holder, manager, graduate and undergraduate students, research assistants, research and community program coordinators, and community members. The lab director is Dr. Rusty Souleymanov, who is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at University of Manitoba. All research projects at the Village Lab are guided by community guiding circles made up of representatives from the diverse communities we work with. This includes people living with HIV and Hepatitis C, sexual and gender diverse people and Two-Spirit people, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, Black, African, and Caribbean people, immigrants and refugees, racialized communities, and people who use drugs. Our approach to governance emphasizes participation and aims to weave and integrate team members in decision-making.

About the Lab

The Village Lab supports researchers and community in delivering high quality decolonizing community-based health research and social science with impacts on the health of marginalized communities in Manitoba and other Canadian provinces. The choice and intention to focus in this area is driven by evidence and demonstrated need from communities that are disproportionately affected by a wide range of health inequities, including negative sexual and physical health outcomes, mental health outcomes, and substance use-related harms.

To turn the tide on these health disparities, our research focuses on how to make sure that health care and community-based services are available and accessible to those who need it most. Since the lab was established in 2021, we have been awarded funds through multiple grants from the Federal Government of Canada, the Canadian Institute of Health Research, and the Public Health Agency of Canada to advance this cause. Our projects were also funded by multiple other grants including the Manitoba Medical Service Foundation, the Winnipeg Foundation, as well as the financial support from the University of Manitoba.

In the short time the Lab has been operational, we have experienced a great deal of success. In some areas we have been identified as leaders in knowledge production by our community partners and larger funding systems. This is supported in part by our unique approach and commitment to decolonizing and Indigenizing community-based research that affects multiple key and priority populations. Most importantly, however, is that the lab is intentionally staffed by individuals who are part of the key and priority populations, including peer research associates as well as individuals who work in community agencies where key and priority populations access the services we aim to improve.

What We Do

Facilitating Communities of Practice

The Village Lab facilitates the development of cross-jurisdictional collaborations and partnerships between key health system stakeholders, including Indigenous community members, service provider agencies in Manitoba, regional health authorities, and policymakers, to better integrate research data and knowledge into the development of health services and initiatives for marginalized and equity seeking communities in Manitoba. The Lab is committed to creating a meaningful and sustainable Manitoba-wide network of researchers, Elders, knowledge holders, peers, people living with HIV, people with lived and living experience, service providers, governments, advocates, and funders, working to address complex health and social system issues affecting marginalized and equity seeking communities in Manitoba. Through these partnerships and communities of practice, we create the infrastructure, which in this context refers to the supportive framework and resources necessary for effective community-based research. This infrastructure includes specialized resources such as access to research facilities, data collection tools, funding opportunities, and institutional support. Additionally, it involves expertise in research epistemologies and methodologies, ethical considerations, data analysis, and community engagement strategies. We also provide mentorship and training for students and learners, offering guidance in research design and implementation, and we share resources and expertise with the wider community, ensuring that knowledge and best practices are disseminated and applied beyond the colonial academic research setting.

Capacity Strengthening.

The Village Lab is committed to strengthening research capacity among community partners, peers, mentees, trainees, and students, including the capacity of community agencies to conduct community-based research and develop/implement interventions. We are also committed to skills building and capacity strengthening among trainees, peers, and community members.the colonial academic research setting.

Knowledge into Action.

The Village Lab is dedicated to transforming research knowledge into action to make a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of marginalized and equity-seeking communities. Through community-based research and interventions that include decolonizing approaches, we generate and share knowledge across a range of topics and domains, such as HIV, sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBIs), infectious diseases, harm reduction, community health and well-being, social inequities, and social determinants of health, as well as health and social care access. Our goal is to go beyond research to actively apply the knowledge we acquire in ways that inform policies, services, and organizational practices. Through these efforts, we also prioritize sharing the knowledge we generate via research with our communities in accessible ways.

Values and Principles

At its core, the Village Lab holds significant values and principles. We are guided by a social justice-oriented and human rights agenda, as well as a strong commitment to decolonization, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Recognizing the historical injustices and systemic barriers disproportionately affecting Indigenous peoples, we are dedicated to the process of decolonization and Indigenization in our research, practices, and spaces. This means respecting and valuing the knowledge and cultures of Indigenous communities. We stand firmly in support of the concerns and calls for justice raised in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit (MMIWG2S) report, aligning our values with the pursuit of justice and healing for affected communities. Furthermore, our dedication to Truth and Reconciliation remains resolute, as we affirm our commitment to honor the First Nations' ethical framework for research, including principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP®), as well as the Principles of Ethical Métis Research and the Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit principles.

In every aspect of our work, the Village Lab strives to be a force for positive change, fostering understanding, empowerment, and respect for all communities, especially those who have been marginalized and oppressed by historical inequities and systemic injustices, championing their voices and aspirations towards a more inclusive and equitable future.

Strategic Planning 2024-2025

Through our Strategic Planning process, the Lab identified five strategic directions through which to focus and maximize our impact on the health of marginalized communities in Manitoba.

Our strategic priorities for 2024-2025 are as follows:

- 1. Positioning Towards Strategic Community Research Priorities and Agendas**
- 2. Continued Focus on Capacity Strengthening, Training, and Career Development**
- 3. Increasing Our Social Impact**
- 4. Improving Knowledge Translation and Exchange Mechanisms and Outputs**
- 5. Operational Sustainability and Sources of Funding**

Positioning Towards Strategic Community Research Priorities and Agendas

This priority refers to aligning our work at the Village Lab with community priorities, needs, capacities and agendas. Over the next three years, we will be committed to the development, adaptation and implementation of a strategic research agenda aligned with current and emerging priorities in HIV/STBBI, harm reduction and community health research in Manitoba. This can be achieved by consulting with community members, funders, community agencies, grant partners, and organizations who also work with communities that we serve. As part of this process:

As part of this process, we will prioritize:

1. Establishing proper platforms for community-university channels of communication.
2. Conducting and engaging in consultation with the Lab Elder and knowledge holders.
3. Aligning our emerging priorities with data from the Manitoba HIV Program.

Project priorities over the next two years will include a commitment to key and priority populations in HIV/STBBIs, harm reduction and community-based health research, including Indigenous communities, people who use drugs, Black African Caribbean communities, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, refugees and migrants, and people living with HIV. New funding applications will be submitted that focus on communities of people who use substances, and strengthening strategic information systems to better guide harm reduction and HIV prevention responses for diverse populations of people who use substances in Manitoba (with a particular priority for Indigenous communities). Other priorities include the use of community-based principles, decolonizing and Indigenizing approaches.

The following outcomes will demonstrate success achieving the priorities above, including:

1. The advancement of research projects that mitigate the risks associated with HIV and other infectious diseases among marginalized communities in Manitoba and Canada at large;
2. The advancement of research and policy to improve HIV/STBBI prevention and testing, as well as health and social care service delivery for marginalized communities, with a particular focus on key and priority populations (Indigenous people, African and Caribbean people, 2SLGBTQIA+, people who use drugs, and migrants);
3. The participation in decision making related to research, harm reduction programming and policy that affects people who use drugs, in particular people who use injection drugs by producing and submitting policy briefs that focus on improving services and programs that focus on harm reduction and substance use supports
4. The active participation in challenging systems of oppressions that continue to threaten the health and wellbeing of marginalized communities in Canada, and globally through research, community education, and policy,
5. The continued exploration of funding opportunities for emerging innovations in the realm of HIV/STBBI prevention through Indigenous HIV doula initiatives in Manitoba

Continued Focus on Capacity Strengthening, Training, and Career Development

Over the next three years, the Village Lab aims to continue strengthening the capacity to conduct community-based research through training and mentoring activities, including capacity building programs, training, and opportunities for self-development. We will continue to provide multiple opportunities to our peer, trainees, and community partners.

Specifically, over the next three years we will:

1. Strengthen peers', community members, and students' capacity to conduct community-based research,
2. Strengthen our community members' and peers' capacity of knowledge transfer and exchange (by attending and presenting at conferences),
3. Strengthen community members' capacity to engage in health system decision making.
4. House training programs for capacity strengthening and building within communities. For example, the Investigaytors Winnipeg program.
<https://www.villagelab.ca/investigaytors>.

Increasing Our Social Impact

The research of the Village Lab helps to develop and advance knowledge on the health and wellbeing of marginalized communities and gather the evidence needed to impact public health, health, and social policy and create positive transformations in health and social systems in Manitoba and other Canadian provinces. In this sense, Village Lab directly informs models of health promotion, service delivery, and health and social interventions for a variety of communities that we serve. The Village Lab is further strengthening community-based research and improving health for key populations across Manitoba. With the support of national, provincial and local funders, the Village Lab will enhance focus on and leadership in these critical areas of research with an eye toward reducing the burden of health disparities faced by marginalized communities.

Given our commitment to social justice, our research projects will continue to provide significant contributions to advancing knowledge that will address the health disparities faced by marginalized communities in Canada and will ensure active and meaningful involvement of stakeholders and partners in lab's activities and governance committees. We will also ensure that we make a significant social impact on the systems that we are trying to change.

Over the next two years, we will continue:

1. Engagement with communities to improve our social impact within those communities using different engagement methods, including inviting more community members and organizations to be part of our initiatives, through community guiding circle engagement, and other mechanisms;
2. Refocusing our efforts towards decolonizing, Indigenized, and action-oriented research, including making research knowledge more accessible to communities,
3. To improve our methods of measuring our success of social impact on communities and organizations.

Improving Knowledge Translation and Exchange (KTE) Mechanisms and Outputs

A key priority for the Lab is the timely uptake of knowledge generated into health and social outcome improvements and guidelines that support the use of best practices by community members, service providers, and policy makers. Moving forward, we will establish better ways to generate and exchange knowledge, including via:

1. Community reports and infographics
2. Community workshops
3. Peer reviewed publications for academic audiences
4. Interviews with the media for community
5. Presentations at conferences, symposiums, and other gatherings
6. Social media and website updates

Operational Sustainability and Sources of Funding

The lab will continue to invest in research that addresses the health disparities faced by marginalized communities and will continue to seek funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and other funders. While our major funder is CIHR, other funders in the past have included the Manitoba Medical Service Foundation and the Winnipeg Foundation. We will actively pursue new funding from local and national funders. Over the next two years, we will focus on securing sustainable funding to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Lab.

Summary

The Lab's Strategic Planning for 2024-2025 revolves around five key priorities aimed at improving the health and social outcomes of marginalized and equity seeking communities in Manitoba. These priorities include aligning research with community needs and agendas, enhancing capacity building and career development, increasing social impact, improving knowledge translation and exchange, and ensuring operational sustainability and diverse funding sources.

First, the Lab plans to align its research with community priorities by prioritizing consultations with various stakeholders, including Indigenous community members, to develop a strategic research agenda focusing on HIV/STBBIs, harm reduction, and community health research. Second, there's a commitment to strengthening capacity through training programs and knowledge transfer, with an emphasis on engaging community members in health system decision-making. Third, the Lab aims to increase its social impact by informing health and social policies and interventions for marginalized communities and actively involving stakeholders in research activities. Fourth, improving knowledge translation and exchange mechanisms is a priority, involving methods like community reports, workshops, publications, and social media to ensure research findings benefit the communities they serve. Finally, the Lab will work on securing sustainable funding from various sources to ensure the long-term viability of its research endeavors. This strategic plan reflects a commitment to addressing health disparities and promoting positive transformations in health and social systems for marginalized populations and equity-seeking groups in Manitoba and beyond over the next two years.

Over the next two years these strategic priority areas will provide clear direction for the Village Lab to continue our work in Manitoba and in Canada with regards to community-based health research. We offer many thanks to Elder Albert McLeod, the Village Lab staff and members, and community partners who contribute to the work of the lab and to those who shared their knowledge and wisdom in the development of this new Strategic Plan. We look forward to continued energy and participation for achieving aims set out in this plan and welcome you to continue walking with us along our journey.