

The prevalence of poverty in canada



What is poverty and what is the prevalence of poverty in Canada? Why does poverty exist in a country like Canada? Is there a connection between poverty and different population groups? What can be done to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty?

Living in a developed country like Canada, we are oblivious to poverty issues domestically and most of us fail to realize such issues exist in our country. Most people do not know the difference between being poor and living in poverty. Although, both terms relate to not having money, they actually have different meanings. By definition, poor is when an individual has low income and wealth and has little to no possessions, on the contrary, living in poverty is the condition of living without adequate food, shelter and clothing. People generally associate the term "poverty" with Africa or some place in the world that is insignificant to their daily lives. However, poverty exists wherever civilization exists and the issue of poverty is more serious than many know. This paper will examine the prevalence of poverty in Canada and why it exists in such a developed nation. Moreover, it will explore the connections between poverty of different population groups and finally, it will suggest ways to reduce poverty.

As mentioned previously, most people do not associate the term "poverty" with Canada as the overall national prosperity has increased in the last few decades. Likewise, one would have expected the opposite since Canada is ranked 4th in Human Development Index, a measure of quality of life of their citizens under the following criteria: life expectancy, literacy rates, school enrolment and the overall economy of the country. Moreover, most statistical studies put Canada in the top 10 for best places to live; a simple

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search on Google will return such results. However, despite the overall quality of life in Canada, behind the scenes, many people are starving under bridges and standing on roadsides holding signs pleading for spare change. These individuals contribute to the 10% population of Canadians that live in poverty (Collin et al., 2009). Although, the overall poverty rate is 10% in Canada, the rates vary by province. British Columbia has the highest incidence of poverty followed by Quebec and Manitoba. In 2000 a study was conducted by Kevin Lee, a member of the Canadian Council on Social Development, to compare poverty rates among provinces to illustrate a profile of poverty in Canada. His main findings are (Lee, 2000, p. 91):

Poverty is largely an urban phenomenon

From 1990 to 1995 the total number of poor people in Canada increased dramatically

Certain population groups were more likely to be in poverty than others

Poverty rates varied according to age and gender

Poverty rates varied based on educational levels

Poverty rates varied based on occupational skill levels

According to Lee's findings, the people that live in poverty or have a high chance of going into poverty are those who "are society's most vulnerable, most disadvantaged, and least equipped to compete in a highly-competitive and fast-polarizing labour market" (Pohl, 2002).

Similarly, no matter how advanced a civilization is and how advanced technology is, there will always be a portion of the population that cannot support themselves financially. This could be a result of unwillingness to work or inability due to disabilities. In 2006, statistics show that of all working age Canadians with disabilities, only 51.3% were employed, 4.9% were unemployed and the remaining 43.9% were not in the labour force. In contrast, the percentage of people without disabilities that were not in the labour force was only 19.8% (Collin et al., 2009). This lack of participation in the workforce is often a result of the nature of the disability itself preventing work, discrimination from employers, or inadequate accommodations from the workplace.

Although poverty is a natural phenomenon, poverty rates vary between different population groups. Visible minority groups experience higher rates of poverty compared to majority groups. These groups experience higher rates of poverty due to barriers to equal participation in the job market and lack of access to permanent, skilled, and reasonably well-paying jobs (Jackson, 2001). Like visible minorities, immigrants also have a higher chance of going into chronic poverty. The following is from a Parliament Publication on poverty trends that illustrate key findings on poverty trends among immigrants (Collin et al., 2009):

Recent immigrants encounter more difficulty finding employment than other Canadians. The 2007 employment rate for immigrants was 77.9%, whereas the Canadian-born population had an employment rate of 83.8%. In that year, the unemployment rates among immigrants and non-immigrants were 6.6% and 4.6%, respectively, while the unemployment rate of recent

immigrants (living in Canada 5 years or fewer) was more than double that of the Canadian-born population.

Recent immigrants are more vulnerable to low income than other Canadians. The most recent Census found that immigrants who had arrived in the preceding five years and who were in economic families had a low-income rate of 32.6% in 2005, while those who were unattached had a low-income rate of 58.3%. By contrast, the respective rates of low income among their non-immigrant counterparts were 6.9% and 26.3%.

In 2004, immigrants of working age (18-64 years) who had arrived in Canada since the early 1990s had a low-income rate of 21.5%, as compared with 11.2% among earlier immigrants and 9.3% among native-born Canadians. Of recent immigrants not living on a low income, three out of five were considered vulnerable to this situation. The same year, the low-income rate among immigrants who had resided in Canada for 10 years or fewer (32.9%) was significantly higher than that among the total population (14.2%), according to the Low Income Measure.

Rates of low income among recent immigrants tend to decrease with time spent in Canada. In 2004, immigrants who had been in Canada for one year had a low-income rate of 42.2%, as compared with a low-income rate of 30.3% among immigrants who had resided in Canada for 10 years. The difference between the low-income rates of immigrants and non-immigrants also lessens over time. The low-income rate of the 1992 immigrant cohort, for example, fell from 3.0 times the rate of the Canadian-born population during their first year in Canada to 2.2 after 10 years. Although this trend

persists, the 2002 and 2004 immigrant cohorts displayed higher relative rates of low income upon entry to Canada than cohorts in the 1990s.

Evidently, immigrants are more vulnerable and more likely to live in poverty compared to Canadian-born individuals. Society needs to find a balance so more people can enjoy a better standard of living.

In addition, as Nelson Mandela once said: "Poverty is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings." There are many actions society can take to lower poverty rates. It should start with discrete problems such as food insecurity, then childhood opportunities such as education and employment, next is to focus on specific groups susceptible to poverty such as immigrants, lastly scaled from a local to pan-Canadian levels in providing affordable housing investments (CWP, 2009). Moreover, in the Amnesty International's campaign to tackle global poverty, they wrote (CWP, 2009):

"Whatever plan is pursued, whatever projects are prioritized, whatever aid package is agreed, no solution to poverty without human rights at its core will have any long-term impact. Protecting the rights of those living in poverty is not just an option - it is an essential piece of any solution....

Economic growth is an important component of a strategy to tackle poverty, but it cannot be the only piece. Governments must create the conditions that allow people living in poverty to claim their human rights, to empower themselves, so that they can be masters, and not victims, of their destiny."

Like Nelson Mandela, the Amnesty Council also feels that poverty can only be resolved by humans and defining poverty as a human rights violation.

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Furthermore, effective leadership of Canadian governments is critical to eradicate poverty. For example: 1. explicitly recognizing poverty as a human rights issue; 2. passing legislation to ensure enduring governmental commitment and accountability for results; 3. developing and implementing comprehensive plans to combat poverty; and 4. ensuring sufficient public investment in social security (CWP, 2009). Moreover, the Canada Without Poverty organization suggests that paying living wages or better, providing fair and equitable benefits, and ensuring other decent working conditions for all employees, whether unionized or not, is a major part of the solution (CWP, 2009).

In conclusion, poverty seems to be inevitable and will always be a shadow of civilization. However, as Martin Luther King said: "The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty." (King, 1967). Though we're far from total abolition of poverty, society has evolved drastically since Martin Luther King made his speech. Statistics have shown that poverty rates have been decreasing in the last few decades. If all humans recognize the issue of poverty and place a greater focus on the issue, there is no doubt that Martin Luther King's dreams will become a reality.

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