

Poverty & Community Breakdown

What causes community breakdown?

One could argue that the problem is poverty - a growing divide between the rich and the poor, between individuals in Canadian cities, and also between wealthy and poor regions of our country and our world.

We believe the problem is deeper than this and poverty is just a surface issue or symptom of the problem.

We believe community breakdown is related to public attitudes and society's weakening belief in the power of community and communal responses. It is about a growing cynicism in people; they no longer believe positive change is possible. This has resulted in the breakdown or reduction of centrally or politically-driven social interventions.



What causes community breakdown?

THE POVERTY PROBLEM

Poverty is a growing problem in every city and region of Canada and just about every country in the world.

The progress against poverty that Canada managed to achieve in the 1960s and early 1970s has stalled since 1975. Poverty has not declined in the last 20 years.

The low-income population was substantially larger in 1995 - 20% of all Canadians - than in 1975 when it was 15.4%.

Moreover, in the 1990s the ranks of the poor grew faster than the general population. While the total population of Canada increased by six percent between 1990 and 1995, the low-income population grew by 29%.

There were 1.2 million more people in poverty in 1995 than in 1990.

This trend has continued into the new millennium.

Poverty is most prevalent in the elderly and youth populations, in single-family households and amongst women.

More than 50% of all poor are working.

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By Paul Born

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There are more poor jobs than before, fewer social programs and overall falling incomes. People in poverty often experience higher rates of illness, stress, food insecurity, inadequate housing and difficulty accessing community services.

CURRENT APPROACHES

The public or community response to poverty has most often been addressed in Canada through the alleviation of the deprivation caused by lack of income.

The basic assumption is that if we provide a little extra food, affordable rent, job search and personal counseling and training, the economic system will absorb those willing and able to work.

The system has an unwritten mandate - to make better poor in the hope that there will be less poor.

This has not been an effective strategy.

We may have better poor (more food, skills, and housing) but we certainly do not have less poor.

Few programs have as their measured outcome the reduction of poverty. Our job search programs reward organizations for helping people find jobs, rather than helping people to find jobs that allow them to move out of poverty.

A SOLUTION

Let's change the paradigm from a system built on poverty alleviation to one built on poverty reduction. The solution we propose is to think differently about the intervention.

We want to see less poor.

Society must begin to think of new ways to move people out of poverty. This includes helping people find jobs that pay a living wage, providing comprehensive extended benefits, and helping people find permanent rather than temporary housing.

Social service organizations need to be held accountable not only for the quality of the intervention (provide food well) but also for the effectiveness of the intervention they make in moving people out of poverty.

Business needs to be held accountable not only for the creation of jobs but also for ensuring that jobs pay a living wage and provide good benefits and security.

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Government needs to be held accountable not only for providing services but also for being accessible to the poor and for effectively partnering with citizens to develop policy and projects that create better opportunities for people in poverty.

People in poverty need to be held accountable not only for accessing available services but also for adding their rich voice to the dialogue around poverty reduction and for being active participants in the creation of policy, strategies and programs that create opportunities.

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