

The United Church of Canada's Response to the Federal Government's 2017 Poverty Reduction Consultation Online Survey

Report based on the final draft of our online survey responses submitted June 30, 2017

Poverty-related programs/services in The United Church of Canada

The United Church of Canada works to address issues of poverty through a wide variety of initiatives at the local and regional level.

The church's 'Community and Social Justice Ministries Network' consists of over 70 ministries across the country, ranging from small church presbytery supported ministries to larger separately incorporated community organizations. Over 80% of these [Community Ministries](#) provide programs and services which address issues associated with poverty (such as advocacy, children and youth, clothing, hygiene, employment/unemployment, food, hunger, housing and shelter, immigration and refugees, etc.). Over 70% of these ministries broadly address the issue of poverty reduction/elimination.

Congregational outreach programs (such as community kitchens, cafés, clothing depots, out-of-the-cold programs, etc.) are also active across the country, and many are involved in supporting local community and social service agencies which address many of the direct needs of those living in poverty.

The United Church of Canada also partners with national organizations engaged in anti-poverty work and encourages the wider church to participate. These partners include: [Canada Without Poverty](#) and [Citizens for Public Justice](#) – and their [Dignity for All Campaign](#), [Canadian Housing & Renewal Association](#), [Canadian Foodgrains Bank](#), [KAIROS Canada](#), and the [Canadian Council of Churches](#) (signed on to 2015 '[On Promoting Climate Justice and Ending Poverty in Canada](#)').

Since the 1986 and 1998 apologies to Indigenous Peoples, the church has worked towards healing and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The church supports the work of a variety of community ministries across the country that address poverty among Indigenous people in urban areas, including [Our Place Society](#) in Victoria, Longhouse Council of Native Ministry and [First United Community Ministry](#) in Vancouver, [Bissell Centre](#) in Edmonton, [River Bend Integrated Community Ministries](#) in Saskatoon, [Northend Stella Community Ministry](#) in Winnipeg, [Toronto Urban Native Ministry](#) and [Toronto's Christian Resource Centre](#), and more.

[A Healing Fund](#) helps with healing, cultural restoration, and community revitalization. Over 25 projects are funded annually through this Fund, including the Highway of Tears healing project at Skidegate British Columbia, remembering murdered and missing Indigenous women. In the near future, the [Alvin Dixon Memorial Bursary Fund](#) will support Indigenous

education initiatives, and [The Dorothy Jenkins Fund](#) will promote community development, right relations, and continuing education for ministers. In addition to the above work done at the national level, many local United Church ministries partner with local indigenous groups and agencies across the country.

The United Church of Canada is a Sponsorship Agreement Holder and works with the Government of Canada to help support refugees from abroad when they resettle in Canada. Under the church's Sponsorship Agreement, the United Church works with congregations/pastoral charges that form a constituent group to sponsor refugees.

In 2015 the church produced a resource on child poverty called [Bread Not Stones](#) with tools to work toward eradicating child poverty. In 2015 the United Church Women (UCW) began a 3-year campaign [End Child Poverty](#) to raise awareness and advocate with government to eradicate child poverty in Canada.

The church produced a series of webinars on Poverty in Canada (2015-2017): [Poverty in Canada: 4 Stories](#) (2015); [Canada Without Poverty: A Focus on Charity & Justice](#) (2016); and, [Poverty & Housing in Canada](#) (2017).

Main reasons people struggle to make ends meet

Poverty is created by the political, social, and economic decisions of others. It is not a personal choice. Current academic research shows an increase in income inequality that is caused by structural phenomena independent of an individual's specific vulnerabilities (source: *Thomas Piketty*).

- The division of the middle class into those with labour and financial security and those without, specifically when referring to job situations. For example, more and more people have short-term contracts and no significant benefits.
- Wages and social benefit levels are too low, they do not cover the real cost of living in our communities today. In some provinces there are no rent controls and the cost of stable, affordable and safe housing is more than most can afford, and the quality of housing has been allowed to deteriorate.
- The lack of access to skills and training programs.
- The lack of healthy and affordable food creates food deserts all across Canada, leading to significant mental and physical health issues.
- Higher levels of automation affect the level of employment both for skilled and unskilled workers.

Poverty is also rooted in vulnerability which can include systemic barrier vulnerabilities, disruptive events, life stage, and personal vulnerabilities (source: *Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative*).

- Systemic barriers include: household debt, access to services, asset-stripping, discrimination and racism, stagnant or low wages, credential recognition, unequal funding or cutting essential programs, lack of cultural appropriate programs/services,

lack of Indigenous language, colonialism, child welfare/apprehension, lack of preventative programs, lack of human resources, remote community life, higher cost of living in northern communities, food insecurity, historical trauma, lack of housing/poor housing, unequal access to security/justice, lack of clean drinking water, flooding, lack of employment, legislation.

In particular, we uphold The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report released in May, [Shameful Neglect: Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada](#), by David Macdonald and Daniel Wilson, which finds that the worst poverty is experienced by status First Nations children. Too many Indigenous peoples in Canada live in conditions unimaginable for a wealthy nation like ours. Therefore, it is imperative that the federal government advance the process of reconciliation by implementing the calls to action outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

- Disruptive events include: migration, job loss, disability, family breakdown/violence, illness/chronic illness, recession, gender-based violence, trauma(s), lateral violence, lack of mentors/role models, loss of land/compensation, land exploitation, pollution, loss of community, trafficking, suicide clusters, and homelessness.
- Life stage vulnerabilities include: childhood, pre-teens, youth, young adults, seniors, pregnant mothers/parents, adults.
- Personal vulnerabilities include: education, skills, language, disability, mental health, addictions, identity, abuse, internalized colonialism, childhood trauma, normalized violence, suicide, no familial connections, and marginalization.

People also struggle due to the lack of political will to make poverty elimination – not reduction - a national priority, and to make hard decisions that will create economic equality.

To solve poverty in Canada the government must recognize that:

- a. poverty has systemic causes, that it is created and perpetuated by a vast array of decisions by governments at all levels, and across all sectors,
- b. poverty is perpetuated and entrenched by racism and the stigma and discrimination against poor people that informs many policy decisions, intentionally or not,
- c. Indigenous leaders and governments are partners in resolving poverty issues in order to promote prosperity, health and well-being.

Groups most in need of help

We encourage the federal government to adopt an approach that deals with poverty and processes of impoverishment as a whole, rather than just segments of the population. For example, over the years the federal government has made attempts to deal with family, child and senior poverty but in the process ignored the needs of 18-64 yr. old single people.

The greatest rates of poverty in Canada are found among people who are Indigenous, racialized, recent immigrants, elderly, impacted by disabilities, or living in a female-led lone-parent family. These individuals are at higher risk of homelessness, have an increased risk of poor mental and physical health and suffer great depths of anxiety and emotional struggles.

Indigenous peoples both on and off reserves, face systemic racism and greater barriers to educational and employment opportunities, as well as housing and the lack of access to clean drinking water, and clean, reliable energy. Racialized people (people of colour), also face systemic racism, and greater barriers to educational and employment opportunities. Any approach to poverty must address systemic racism and white privilege.

At most urgent need of help are the chronically homeless. From a Housing First perspective, if we can help those chronically homeless find safe and secure housing, we can then address the other factors resulting in poverty.

Families at risk of poverty is another group that needs urgent attention. We can prevent poverty and homelessness for families struggling to make ends meet. Other groups include:

- People with mental health issues
- Ageing women
- Migrants
- New Comers. One year is not enough to assist the New Comers in learning a language and getting a job that will allow them to house and feed their families.

How existing government programs can be improved to reduce poverty

In order to fight poverty, it is crucial that the federal government recognize that poverty is a human rights issue and anti-poverty measures need to be enshrined in law. The Quebec Bill 112, is a living example of such an approach. It is an act “to combat poverty and social exclusion.” It, defined poverty as: “... the condition of a human being who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain economic self-sufficiency or to facilitate integration and participation in society.” The primary objective of the law is to “...combat poverty, prevent its causes, reduce its effects on individuals and families, counter social exclusion and strive towards a poverty-free Québec.”

Based on such an approach we encourage the government to develop and operationalize programs from a “Human Rights Frame Work.”

In working with Indigenous peoples and communities, adopting the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)” is imperative to reducing poverty. Each article within UNDRIP is a response to the injustice that Indigenous peoples experience in their communities and provides a framework to assist in resolving these injustices such as the right to self-determination, the right to own and have control over lands and resources and the right to free, prior and informed consent with regard to decisions that affect Indigenous communities.

Solving poverty requires a commitment to human dignity and justice and it requires recognition that when people are denied adequate housing, income, education and food their human rights are violated. Solving poverty also requires seeking out indicators of

prosperity within Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities because these indicators demonstrate each community's resilience and innovative responses to existing barriers that will be invaluable to improving government programs.

We need to create easier access to human beings to talk to when trying to deal with any programs that strive to meet the needs of people – putting the “Human” back into “human service programs.” Although poverty is about money, it is also about treating all peoples cultural-appropriately, respectfully and with dignity.

The full commitment of all levels of government - federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal – is needed to make poverty elimination a priority when negotiating cross government agreements. Indigenous governments will also need to be included in this negotiation if we are to proceed in the spirit of reconciliation as well as to follow the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous peoples are the experts in their own lives and their voices are critical in ensuring the needs of their communities are met. The existing programs have to build in monitoring mechanisms to ensure the programs are actually having the intended impact on eliminating poverty as well as identifying and promoting the indicators of prosperity.

The federal government must ensure that federal monies going to provinces, territories and Indigenous communities have “Standards” attached to them that are culturally-appropriate to ensure that the federal, provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments are intentionally complying with the social and economic, cultural rights within the [International Covenant on Social and Economic Rights](#) and the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP).

Other ways to improve government programs include:

- Offer support for individuals to file taxes.
- Reduce barriers for individuals to find information about benefits and eligibility.
- Ensure benefits keep up to cost of living.
- Allow for training while receiving employment insurance.
- Consider guaranteed annual income.
- Regulate real estate development in a way that affordable and livable social housing is not an afterthought.
- Improve the water infrastructure for Indigenous communities to provide potable water.
- Initiate and or support affordable food delivery programs for people with mobility challenges.
- Social benefits, including those for seniors, have to cover the real cost of living in our communities. Also the indexing of benefits needs to be built into to the programs so benefits don't fall behind and keep up with the cost of living increases.
- Improve access to affordable, effective and culturally-appropriate mental health care.

Key services or types of programs that would make a difference

Many municipalities need to become more involved in developing services and programs that affect people living in poverty in their communities. Also, Indigenous communities have exercised control over some services and programs that affect people living in poverty such as child welfare but their efforts are undermined from chronic unequal funding and legislation that is contrary to their worldviews, cultures and languages. If Indigenous communities are to become prosperous, they must be free to be self-determining through equal funding and the elimination of culturally-inappropriate and racist legislation. Therefore the federal government has responsibility to provide support to provinces, municipalities and Indigenous communities.

Poverty is about more than just an economic measure. It's about dignity. It's about participation. It's about being appreciated and valued. It's about identifying and removing the systemic barriers that exist in society, especially how poverty manifests in Indigenous communities. Poverty elimination work cannot be done without the involving the voices of those with lived experience in poverty.

- Advance reconciliation by implementing the [calls to action](#) in education, child welfare, language and culture, health, justice as outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- Service and programs that are created and implemented with the true intent of eliminating poverty in our communities – with long-term intent, not short programs that end.
- Subsidize food costs in northern communities and promote food security services and programs. Include support for the high cost of traditional hunting activities and training young people to hunt.
- Increased housing options for families, seniors and single people, including affordable housing, permanent supportive housing, and rental subsidy programs. Increase housing and re-conceptualize homeownership in northern communities. Assistance with damage deposits. Social housing. In some provinces the governments are selling off their public housing that would benefit low-income people. Rent controls.
- Decriminalizing poverty. Currently community members cannot afford to pay small fines for minor infractions such as breaking transit bylaws – this inability to pay turns into warrants for arrest. People are then reluctant to access systems for support for fear of arrest. People are pleading guilty to get out of jail because they can't afford bail and just want to get the case over with. This means they carry a criminal record that may limit their future job opportunities.
- Ensure mandatory training for public servants, especially those who work with Indigenous peoples, with regard to white privilege, Indigenous history and contemporary issues and trauma informed practices.
- Liveable incomes – consider guaranteed annual income.

- More programs that create opportunities for people who may need help in educational and skills building. Ensure all Indigenous communities have access to education in safe and healthy buildings. Programs that are culturally-appropriate and give people hope for a better future.
- Transportation – making transportation affordable and making all areas of a community accessible for employment, education and other opportunities. Increase sustainable transportation to northern and remote communities or subsidize travel.
- Child care – making child care more accessible, flexible, affordable and culturally-appropriate so families can work.
- Affordable food delivery programs to people with mobility challenges.
- Ensure safe drinking water in Indigenous communities now.
- Reasonable funding to hire community and social workers instead of relying solely on volunteers. Also recognize traditional helpers and healers in Indigenous communities rather than limiting employment to those with academic credentials.
- Adequate, effective and culturally-appropriate physical and mental health care, including access to affordable medication (e.g. medicare and pharmacare)

To close we wish to acknowledge and add our complete support to the brief submitted by Citizen's for Public Justice, [Flourishing Together: A Public Justice Approach to the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy](#), as well as Dignity for All's "[National Anti-Poverty Plan for Canada](#)."