



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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A Just Recovery for Winnipeg's Inner City

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Cover image: Artwork by Jackie Traverse created for Red River College Polytechnic's Exchange District Campus Manitou a bi Bii daziigae building at 319 Elgin Ave. Collection of RRC Polytech.

While the COVID-19 pandemic shows no sign of ending anytime soon, public debates have shifted from emergency response to re-opening and returning to normal. As the recent truckers' convoy has made clear, some would prefer the re-opening happen immediately, with no regard for public health or science. But even assuming a more rational timeline, simply returning to "normal" is far from an adequate goal for Canada's recovery.

Prior to the pandemic, it was considered "normal" that 30 percent of people living

in Winnipeg's inner city fell below the after-tax low-income poverty measure, compared with 12.6 percent in the rest of Winnipeg. It was "normal" that 39 percent of renter households in the inner city lived in housing that was in poor condition, too small for the household, or that cost more than 30 percent of household income. Perhaps most shockingly, from 2012 to 2016, it was "normal" to have an 11-year difference in female life expectancy between the inner-city Point Douglas South neighbourhood cluster (the lowest in the city, at 72.5 years) and the Winnipeg

there is an alternative.

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Region as a whole (at 83.4 years). This may be “normal”, but is it what we want to return to?

The widespread economic impacts caused by the pandemic have sparked conversations about the role of government-sponsored supports and programs. Across Canada, advocates have called for a just recovery that addresses not just the crises created by the pandemic, but also socio-economic inequality and the increasing impacts of climate change. A just recovery is about moving beyond the pandemic through a transformation towards a more equitable and inclusive society.

Community-based organizations in Winnipeg’s inner city are already building resilience through their work on Indigenous self-determination, intersectional equity, and seven focus areas aligned with the social determinants of health: housing, food security, education and employment, healthcare, justice and safety, the built environment, and supports and connection. Any plan for the inner city must keep the community’s priorities at its heart. This can only be achieved through substantial community leadership in the creation and implementation of the plan.

However, it is important to note that there are limits to what community-based organizations alone can achieve. Too often, government policies exacerbate poverty and inequality. The government’s failure to provide for basic needs through adequate social assistance, healthcare, education, and social housing, and the failures of the child welfare and justice systems cannot be remedied at the community level. These issues require public policy reform by the federal and provincial governments, in partnership with Indigenous peoples and key stakeholders. For these policies to be effective and equitable, they must directly address the barriers arising from colonial and capitalist structures that shape the opportunities available to different groups in society.

Over the past 60 years, various funding agreements between federal, provincial and municipal governments have provided necessary public investment

and cooperation needed to address the challenges facing the inner city. These are complex challenges and will require complex, long-term solutions. Funding and policy reform from federal, provincial, and municipal governments, guided by community priorities and leadership, offer one way to address the root causes of structural inequality.

This moment may be ripe to finally gain large-scale government support: the pandemic spurred governments to think big in terms of the funds mobilized for crisis response and, more recently, about economy-wide recovery planning. Activists and a growing proportion of the general public are pushing for responses that address inequality, colonialism, and climate change. But this moment also holds tremendous risk for “shock doctrine” policies, where austerity policies are pushed through while the public is distracted by the crisis. These factors suggest that there is an opportunity to advocate for funding and investment in the inner city through community-based leadership and that doing so is crucial to counter the forces of neoliberalism.

The idea of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, let alone a just recovery, is still elusive and changing. While this may be daunting, it is also a reminder of a new reality: future pandemics, climate change and other potential crises are inevitable. Planning for the long-term wellbeing of inner-city communities, by members of those inner-city communities, is key to the work ahead. It’s time to do this work together with all the wisdom, skills, and gifts that exist in the inner city.

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Placing Community at the Heart of Recovery from COVID: The State of the Inner City Report 2022 is available at www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba

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References available upon request.

