



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

May 19, 2020

Critique systems, not people: EIA, CERB & COVID-19

We are living in unprecedented times - as we battle a global pandemic, resources have become increasingly scarce and often more expensive. Panic buying and supply chain disruptions have made it difficult for people to meet their most basic needs. While it is true that we are all struggling to manage in this new reality it is also true that living in poverty adds a layer of complexity that many don't often consider. Same storm, different boat.

People who are living on fixed and limited incomes are the hardest hit during times of crisis. People living on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) were already living far below the poverty line prior to the pandemic and things have only become even more difficult for them in our current circumstances. Those who depend on social services have found many of the doors they usually rely on closed or offering only limited services. Winnipeg Transit has reduced bus service, in turn reducing people's ability to get what they need. A lot of shopping options have moved online. Many people reliant on social assistance do not have credit cards, phones nor access to the internet. This, in addition to the cost of delivery fees makes online shopping inaccessible to folks living in poverty. Small local stores are the remaining option, but they are often far more expensive.

Recent news articles, including in *CBC* on May 4, 2020 "Unintended consequences as homeless collect emergency benefit, anti-poverty advocates warn" or a *Winnipeg Sun* article on May 12, 2020 "Homeless camp has local business owner seeing red" shared some startling perspectives on folks living in poverty. The *CBC* article suggests that people living in poverty and experiencing homelessness are accessing the federal CERB benefit when they are not eligible and that this is resulting in increased substance use. To link folks living in poverty accessing this federal benefit directly to an increased substance use falsely perpetuates the stereotype that when we give people in poverty money, it's spent on drugs or alcohol. This is not only harmful and untrue, it is rooted in colonialist thinking. Most people living in poverty spend every cent they receive on the same basic necessities we all require.

A relatively small number of people living in poverty have substance use issues. For those that do, their reliance on substances is often related to deeply rooted and complex issues that don't go away during a global pandemic - they intensify. People don't use substances because they have money, they use them because they have trauma. We currently don't have sufficient resources invested in trauma recovery or substance use recovery in this province. We do not have enough invested in safe, affordable,

there is an alternative.

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accessible housing to move people off the streets. The Manitoba government has cut back on important poverty reduction programs like Rent Assist, and it has frozen EIA rates at the same time that the cost of a safe place to live continues to rise. This deepens people's poverty and it is this that we should be most concerned with. The reality is that all of us are seeking comfort in these troubled times - but only the poor are asked to account for how they are spending their limited resources.

Our critiques should be focused on systems that since their inception have worked to further marginalize people, not on the people trapped within these systems. Perhaps the question that we should be asking is why aren't folks living in poverty always receiving a minimum of \$2000/month to meet their basic needs? The approximately \$800 provided by the provincial welfare

system entrenches people in poverty. It is barely enough to rent an apartment, never mind purchase other basic needs like food. There has never been a stronger case for investing in a Universal Liveable Basic Income alongside robust public services like social housing and mental health supports than what we are witnessing right now. The CERB was set up to get money in the hands of people who needed it as quickly as possible - and rightly so. It's called an Emergency Benefit and people who are living on social assistance have long been living in a state of emergency that has only been exacerbated by this crisis. Why shouldn't they be eligible to also receive an additional financial benefit?

Make Poverty History Manitoba has been calling on the provincial government to provide social assistance recipients with an additional \$300 per month during the

pandemic. In the absence of a provincial response, many people on social assistance can be expected to instead apply for the CERB, as what they are currently provided is not sufficient to meet their basic needs. This will result in many being removed from social assistance, and can potentially cause them to lose their housing as their rental assistance also gets taken away. There is further risk that the federal government will require them to pay back the CERB when it determines they were not eligible for it in the first place. In the end, as a result of our systems not working well to support people living in poverty, many of them are at risk of being worse

off than they currently are. This is an unintended consequence that must be prevented through strong advocacy and systems change.

Difficult times call for solidarity not division. We have heard many politicians and leaders say we are "in this together." But if we are truly in this together then this is not the time to reinforce stereotypes of the most

vulnerable in our community. This should be a time for all of us to work together to lift each other up. It is an opportunity to finally set up a society that allows everyone to feel loved and safe in their community. And it is a chance to begin to reverse the damage of an economic system that was always designed to deliver inequity.

*By Make Poverty History Manitoba,
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