



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

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## Poverty: Not Present this Election Campaign

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If you're following the federal election campaign you would think that poverty in Canada has been eliminated. Politicians, guided by their ever-cautious advisors and thinking only of short-term electoral advantage, rarely if ever utter the word, and creative anti-poverty strategies are largely absent from electoral platforms.

Yet poverty continues to be a major problem in Canada. It is deeply rooted, often racialized, and much more complex and destructive than is generally recognized. In a wide variety of ways it damages, and in some cases destroys, the lives of those who experience it.

Although not generally recognized, poverty is about much more than a shortage of income. It is also about poor housing, poor health, low educational outcomes, social exclusion, racism and colonialism, all of which interact with and reinforce each other, making the serious problem of a shortage of income much worse. This complex poverty is often internalized, with those who experience it blaming themselves for their problems, resulting in low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence and in many cases a lack of hope for a better future. The self-blame and lack of hope — reinforced by the “blame the victim” understanding of poverty that is so widespread in Canada — have the effect of trapping people in a web or cycle of poverty. This kind of complex poverty is particularly damaging.

Not only is it damaging to those who experience it, but also this complex poverty damages us all. It is very expensive. For example, endless high quality research

studies demonstrate clearly that poverty correlates strongly with poor health. Being poor makes us sick. The incidence of almost every health problem — heart disease, various forms of cancer, accidents, infant mortality, to cite but a few — is higher in Winnipeg's and Manitoba's low-income areas than in higher-income areas. It follows that reducing the incidence of poverty would hold down our ever-rising health care costs. We would all benefit.

There is also a wealth of evidence, for Canada and internationally, that poverty correlates strongly with poor educational outcomes. Children and youth living in poverty do less well in school, on average, than their better-off peers. That costs all of us, because when large numbers of young people are not succeeding in school, we lose the skills they would otherwise have developed. They are less likely to become carpenters or architects or teachers or business innovators or surgeons. They are more likely to be earning low incomes or no incomes, thus contributing much less to tax revenues and in many cases adding to a wide range of social costs.

If we were to take a view only slightly longer than the election cycle, it would be obvious that a significant reduction in the incidence of poverty would be beneficial to all of us.

Significantly reducing the incidence of complex poverty in Canada will not be easy. There are no quick, easy or one-dimensional solutions. But there

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are solutions. To reduce the incidence of complex poverty requires a multi-faceted response that would include, among other things: job creation strategies with specifically designed programs for good jobs; specially tailored educational strategies to promote improved educational attainment, of which there are outstanding examples in Winnipeg's inner city; early childhood education, especially in low-income areas; a national housing policy aimed at supporting the production of low-income rental housing; and legislation that would make it much easier for the working poor to form or join a union.

There are also many smaller, community-level anti-poverty initiatives that are working well, and Winnipeg is a leader in this respect. Our inner city is full of creative and effective anti-poverty initiatives driven by local communities — the Urban Circle Training Centre, neighbourhood renewal corporations, women's centres and Aboriginal organizations are just a few examples of the many that do outstanding work. But they are too few and too small to have a fully transformative effect. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that change is possible, and that large numbers of those who are poor are prepared to take risks to build a better future for themselves and their families.

We need substantial public investment — and it must be seen as investment — in those anti-poverty initiatives that have proved to work well. Much higher levels of public investment will have to be maintained consistently year after year over a generation or more. The Province of Manitoba has been quite effective in this respect in recent years, and the benefits are starting to show. But nothing like that is happening today at the federal level, and it is the federal level of government that has the fiscal capacity to make a real difference. We know what to do, but the political will to do it is lacking, especially and most importantly at the federal level. And so we are forced to

endure a dull silence on the crucial issue of poverty in this federal election campaign. It is important that we appreciate the complex character of today's poverty, and that we appreciate that while there are no quick and easy solutions, there are indeed solutions. It is perfectly possible to significantly reduce the incidence of complex poverty in Canada. We would all be better off if that were to be done.

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