



# IN FROM THE MARGINS: A CALL TO ACTION ON POVERTY, HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The Standing Senate Committee  
on Social Affairs, Science and Technology

Report of the Subcommittee on Cities

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# Executive Summary

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Assigned the task of studying social conditions in Canadian cities, the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology's Subcommittee on Cities chose to begin with people whose lives in those cities are marginalized by poverty, housing challenges and even homelessness. The most vulnerable among city-dwellers in Canada were our starting place.

We set out to determine how governments, businesses and the voluntary sector were able to help people escape poverty. To our distress, we found that decades of social policy making at different levels of government have had two possibly devastating results.

First, when all the programs are working, when the individual gets all possible income and social supports, the resulting income too often still maintains people in poverty, rather than lifting them into a life of full participation in the economic and social life of their communities. While the Committee heard from and met with a wide range of people with direct experience of poverty and homelessness, government officials, voluntary sector organizations, and analysts who described remarkable initiatives and results, these are generally small scale and exceptional, rather than usual and expected outcomes.

Second, at their worst, the existing policies and programs entrap people in poverty, creating unintended perverse effects which make it virtually impossible for too many people to escape reliance on income security programs and even homeless shelters. Their escape into employment should allow them to support themselves and their families with an income adequate to meet their basic needs. The programs that entrap people also provide too little income to meet those same needs.

The Committee does not believe that these outcomes are inevitable. In fact, the federal programs designed to bring older Canadians out of poverty have proven to be enormously, if not completely, successful, lifting many seniors out of poverty, and ensuring that none are in deep poverty. While federalism can result in complications in programming, it has also proved highly effective when there is a shared goal. For example, many provinces have tailored the Working Income Tax Benefit (a federal program) to build on existing or new initiatives to supplement the income of low-income workers, resulting in enhanced benefits to eligible people in those provinces. We know that the federal government can make a big difference, and that collaboration among government can enhance the benefits from federal programs.

Yet, this has often not been the case. There are federal instruments that supplement incomes of virtually all Canadians, except those who are adults and considered capable of earning a living. The National Child Benefit for children, the Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors, the Working Income Tax Benefit for low-income workers have all proven to be effective, though the benefits to children and workers are not yet sufficient to truly lift them from poverty.

The Committee has also noted that some groups are particularly disadvantaged, in terms of income and housing inadequacy: unattached individuals, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, some newcomers to Canada (recent immigrants and refugee claimants), and lone parents. They are over-represented among the poor, the homeless, high school dropouts and people with limited literacy skills. Despite an extensive array of programs targeted to assist them – especially newcomers, urban

Aboriginal peoples, and people with disabilities - the results being sought are not being achieved. Gender and race seriously complicate the challenges for these groups, resulting in even greater discrimination.

Particularly in the time of recession and economic upheaval, the Committee recognizes the urgency of providing remedies to these groups. The Committee seeks to ensure that the programs and policies in place serve to provide hope with a commitment to education, training and employment as a way out of poverty and into their place in jobs, schools, and communities where they can benefit from the opportunities that must be available to all.

## **Evidence**

In more than 35 hearings, five roundtables and site visits to 20 agencies in nine cities across Canada, the Committee had the opportunity to hear from more than 175 witnesses, some living in poverty and/or homeless themselves, others working for community agencies, and some analysts from universities, think tanks and national voluntary organizations. For each site visit and each hearing, the Committee also read syntheses of recent and seminal research on the three main themes.

We relied on testimony of personal experience, conversations with people living with these problems in Canadian cities, and policy experts, relying on up-to-date data and information. We considered how people are affected by current policies and programs, and we welcomed suggestions on how these could be improved to create real opportunity for those currently marginalized by homelessness and poverty, or the threat of these conditions.

In its research, hearings and site visits to agencies, the Committee learned of “promising practices”, programs and initiatives that were demonstrating remarkable success in taking people out of poverty and insecure housing or homelessness, and supporting them into economic and social security. The full report identifies these community responses in each section, and provides more detailed information about each in an appendix to the report.

The full report which this Executive Summary seeks to summarize provides the testimony, examples and data that support these recommendations.

## **Poverty**

As the Committee studied income security programs, including tax-delivered benefits, social assistance, Employment Insurance, and OAS/GIS, our focus was on adequacy, reliability, and effectiveness of these programs. Did people have enough money to live on? How did the policies and programs fit together? Did all Canadians have an opportunity to upgrade their education and skills, at any stage in their lives? Could people struggling with health and disability issues get the income and services they needed without giving up the possibility of returning to work or school? Did the programs and policies create opportunities or obstacles? Were parents of children in low-income households able to provide for their children’s needs, including their readiness for and completion of school?

An important observation, of particular interest to the Committee, was that many income programs sustain people in poverty, rather than lifting them out of poverty. The Committee therefore offers the following general recommendations with respect to poverty.