

PREFACE

It has been known since the mid 19th century that living conditions are the primary determinants of health and well-being. The term poverty has come to stand for the situation whereby these living conditions are so materially and socially deprived as to severely threaten health and quality of life. It has also been known over this time that the incidence of poverty is primarily a result of how a society organizes and distributes its economic, social, and political resources. A century and a half of research and lived experience have confirmed these understandings. There exists no research study that demonstrates that living in conditions of poverty is good for individuals, communities or societies. Indeed, thousands of accumulated studies have come to the same basic conclusion: The incidence of poverty is a severe—if not the most severe—threat to the health and quality of life of individuals, communities, and societies in wealthy industrialized societies such as Canada.

This obvious truism is recognized by decades of Canadian government and public health association statements, resolutions, and reports. It is found in many international covenants on human rights, and human and social development to which Canada is a signatory. Indeed, an all-party resolution on child poverty—passed unanimously by the House of Commons on November 24, 1989 stated: *“This House seek(s) to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000.”* More than 15 years later, Canada’s child poverty rate continues to be amongst the highest in the developed world.

According to UNICEF, Canada’s child poverty rate during the late 1990s was 14.9%. This is the case even though Canada is a wealthier nation—using the total value of goods and services or GDP—than most other developed nations. As an example, Denmark is not as wealthy a nation as Canada, yet its child poverty rate during the 1990s of 2.4% represents a virtual elimination of child poverty. This is also the case in many other European nations. There is evidence that Canadians appreciate that eliminating poverty is a worthwhile goal. Politicians and elected governments of every political stripe assure the public that poverty reduction is a worthwhile goal, and promise to address it. Why, then, is so little being done?

An increasing body of research finds that poverty rates cannot be attributed to failings of individuals who are living in poverty. There are personal characteristics that make some individuals more susceptible to falling into poverty than others. These characteristics include being Aboriginal, having less education, living with a disability, being female, being a recent immigrant to Canada, being a person of colour in Canada, or being a lone-parent. But these characteristics do not by themselves create a situation of poverty. Poverty is more likely because the political and economic system does not provide employment wages or social assistance benefits at a level for these individuals that allow for a life outside of poverty. And these situations are worsened when public policy does not provide affordable housing,

childcare, and health and social services, thereby straining the resources available to these vulnerable groups.

Poverty rates do not even depend upon the presence or absence of well-meaning intentions of policymakers. Rather, rates reflect the general operation of the economy—heavily influenced by the politics—of a nation. Some indicators of these processes are minimum wages, the percentage of low-paid workers within a nation, and the percentage of national resources or revenues invested in health and social services, supports for education, employment and training, and other social infrastructure. In international comparisons, Canada performs poorly on all of these indicators.

More specifically, poverty rates reflect how a nation addresses key public policy issues of income distribution, employment security and working conditions, housing, income, and food security, and the creation and preservation of a network of health and social services. This basket of issues has come to be known as the social determinants of health. But once such an analysis is done and Canada is found to be lacking, the question arises, *Why is this the case?* And to answer this, we need to understand the politics and economics—the political economy—of a society.

The title of this volume, *Poverty and Policy in Canada: Implications for Health and Quality of Life*, provides a roadmap for this exploration. First, I examine the nature and meaning of poverty in a modern industrialized nation such as Canada. Second, I consider the lived experience of poverty and what it means to those who are poor. Third, I answer the question of how poverty comes to influence the health and quality of life of individuals, communities and societies. Fourth, my analysis focuses on how the incidence of poverty—and these health and quality-of-life outcomes—result from public-policy decisions made by governments.

Central to this exploration is analysis of how Canada's political economy supports these public-policy decisions. Also important is the extent to which the public holds attitudes and values consistent with this political economy and the public-policy decisions that result from it. All of these factors will determine whether alternative visions for Canada and the means of implementing these visions are possible.

Recent political developments provide some grounds for optimism. Minority federal governments may become common in the decades to come. There is growing interest in proportional representation as means of sending elected officials to Canada's legislatures. Both of these phenomena could lead to the enactment of progressive public policy in Canada to address the issues of poverty. Canada may be on the verge of adopting an alternative societal vision that will reduce—if not eliminate—poverty in Canada. The opposite—institution of policies that will maintain or increase present levels of poverty—is also possible. Hopefully, this volume will assist in adoption of the former course of action.

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