

**What does poverty look like in Canada?
The Angus Reid Institute's Study of Poverty in Canada
A Response from the Canadian Poverty Institute, Ambrose University, Calgary**

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On July 17th 2018, the Angus Reid Institute released a report entitled “*What does poverty look like in Canada: Survey finds one-in-four experience notable economic hardship*” (Angus Reid Institute, 2018). At the Canadian Poverty Institute, we are committed to working tightly at the intersection of research and practice and are glad to have read this report. Simultaneously, we comment on the report in the interest of furthering our collective knowledge and practice around poverty and poverty issues in Canada.

It is notable that “*What does poverty look like in Canada?*” repeats the absence of an official definition of poverty in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016; de Boer, Rothwell, & Lee, 2013; Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2012). The report also notes that Canada draws on monetary measures to determine who is poor. Much as income-tested cut-offs are in popular use, for example, to determine eligibility for social services, Canada does not have an official poverty line (Cool & Campbell, 2009). Canada also relies on equivalized international income-based measures to help determine poverty rates in Canada (OECD, 2013).

Three points arise from this lack of an official definition of poverty as well as the reliance on monetary measures of poverty to address poverty issues in this country. Firstly, the lack of a formal, holistic definition of poverty in Canada constraints poverty discourse to the overtly material aspects of poverty. This means that, responses to poverty must fit within the dominant paradigms of evaluating and responding to poverty in order to maintain relevance. Secondly, economist Amartya Sen, has made seminal arguments for considering poverty beyond lack of income. In a nuanced manner, Sen argues that “poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities² rather than merely the lowness of income which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty” (Sen, 1999, p. 87); going on to suggest that in some circumstances, “relative income deprivation leads to absolute capability deprivation.” The logic of Sen’s perspective suggests that poverty in Canada (or anywhere else), should not be limited to lack of income as we are wont to do, but be thought of in terms of the risk of individuals being unable to attain certain basic capabilities as they go through life. Thirdly, this dual omission implies that the “hidden” aspects of poverty (systemic, social, emotional, psychological), although may be recognised at agency level as pertinent to addressing poverty, need an income-tested conduit to be validated, even though the OECD has indicated that poverty should be reconceptualised as a “well-being failure” that is “multidimensional and goes beyond material conditions” (OECD, 2013, p. 1). If Canada and Canadian agencies and practitioners continually point out the lack of an agreed definition of poverty within the backdrop of the inadequacy of relying on income-based measures of poverty, why is there inertia in terms of developing an official definition of poverty in Canada that moves us towards a contextualised, standardized view of poverty? Following from this, is it time to carefully consider the need for a Canadian standard for determining poverty in our society, and from a standpoint that institutionally normalizes poverty beyond the economic deprivation individuals may face?

It is subsequent to our first observation that the report’s focus on lived-experiences are a welcome addition to the conversation about poverty in Canada, whilst recognising that the ARI “sought to quantify economic struggles in a different way, relying on self-reported personal experiences to provide a sense of the relative ease or difficulty with which Canadians are able to make ends meet.” The ARI indicated that by “looking at the lived-experiences rather than income ... some striking results” emerged. This approach to understanding poverty in Canada is long overdue; at the same time, the ARI’s effort is still strongly tethered to income. During a study aimed at a holistic definition of child poverty, staff at the Canadian Poverty

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² The ability to satisfy certain crucially important functionings up to certain minimally adequate levels (Sen, 1993); see also the real opportunity to avoid poverty or to meet or exceed a threshold of well-being (“The Capability Approach”, 2016)

Institute had to look to Eitzen and Smith's (2009) "Experiencing Poverty: Voices from the Bottom" to inform our lived-experience approach. Not denying the sway of income in determining the poverty status of an individual or family — and there are doubtless studies of poverty in Canada that take into account lived-experience — the narrative power of the accounts recorded in "Experiencing Poverty" sharply amplify the intersectionality and multidimensionality of poverty, which does not appear to be adequately reflected in Canada's policyscape and responses to poverty. There is also a practitioner-level thirst for leverage to interact with funders, policy-makers, clients and the general public in a qualitatively driven way; and to make decisions about a person's poverty, the depth of their need and eligibility for services based on the totality of their circumstances and not on a specific monetary threshold. So much as the focus of the ARI on lived-experience is a step in the right direction, how can the lived-experience approach to poverty be harnessed to trigger more meaningful and sustainable responses to poverty in Canada?

A third major observation from the ARI report opens the door to an issue practitioners in poverty-allied roles grapple with. Explaining the methodology of the study, which is in accordance with good practice, the authors state that "because this study was conducted online, those living in extreme poverty are likely underrepresented in the sample." The ARI is spot on in pointing this out. The irony is that those living in extreme poverty are the demographic that need to be understood in order to craft policies and programs that take into account the multi-faceted circumstances of the neediest. They are also those who are either not reaching extant social services or are falling through the cracks. Many practitioners are aware of this paradox. Lacking is a response strategy that increases the chance that the neediest and most underrepresented will be roped into the national discourse on poverty and into the social safety nets designed to reduce the population of Canadians living in poverty. Is the time ripe for stakeholders to discuss strategies to increase access to social safety nets by the poorest in our society?

Studying Canadians according to economic hardship, the ARI came up with four categories: the struggling at 16%, those living on the edge (11%), the recently comfortable (36%) and the always comfortable at 37%. This probably reflects the underrepresentation of the underserved, struggling, and those on the edge that the study alluded to. More intriguing, though, is the report's detailing of scenarios where Canadians express their situations from an economic perspective. For example, "having to borrow money for essentials like groceries or transportation;" "living in a place that is too small or too far away from work or otherwise doesn't meet one's needs;" "being unable to pay for a tutor if their child was failing at school;" or "using a 'pay day loan' type service that offers access to cash but at higher interest rates;" attributing their poverty to "bad luck," low wages and choosing to self-identify as a "have" or "have-not". The Canadian Poverty Institute, came up with a multidimensional definition of child poverty that entails four separate, mainly intersecting domains. These are defining poverty from a standard of living standpoint, a structural standpoint, a relationship standpoint, from a self-perception standpoint as well as a composite definition of poverty — multidimensional poverty — that captures an experience of poverty in which a person has deficits in all four domains of their life (Yembilah & Lamb, 2017). Reading through the various scenarios from the ARI's report, a recurring question became, keeping in focus a similar multidimensional definition of poverty, what will poverty in Canada look like? And, how would responses to poverty shift based on this multidimensional view of poverty?

The ARI's study is an illuminating read, shedding light on how Canadians view themselves from an economic lens. It provides a space for continued dialogue about poverty in Canada. As we look forward to the second installment of findings from the ARI's poverty study, we hope that the questions raised here will add to the dialogue and research toward more holistic, creative and sustainable responses to poverty in Canada.

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