



Poverty Trends 2020: Rights & Realities in Canada

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CITIZENS FOR
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What does it mean to be “poor” in Canada?

Poverty is experienced in many different ways, depending on the unique and intersecting identities of each person, their community, and where they live

Poverty involves **material deprivation** (not having the physical things we need) and **social exclusion** (barriers to participating in economic, political, or community opportunities). Both are related and have profound impacts on individuals’ and communities’ physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Adequate income is an essential factor in addressing poverty, but the root causes and experiences of people living in poverty in Canada go far beyond these numbers.

At its core, **poverty is a violation of people’s rights**. In a country as rich as Canada, poverty represents a failure of our laws and systems to uphold and protect the rights and inherent dignity of each person. Disturbing trends emerge when we study people’s experiences of poverty through an intersectional lens, considering how overlapping identities of race, gender, and disability, for example, impact health, economic, and social outcomes. What becomes clear is that Canada has failed to protect the rights of specific groups of people who are disproportionately affected by poverty because of ongoing colonial, racist, heteropatriarchal, classist, and ableist systems and practices.

“We conclude, therefore, that poverty in Nunavut is a condition of colonization. It is the broad outcome of the troubled shift from living with self-reliance and resourcefulness on the land to being settled in permanent municipalities where dependency on a money-based economy and assistance from outside the community could not be avoided.”

**The Makimaniq Plan 2 : A Shared Approach To Poverty Reduction, 2017-2022
—Nunavut Roundtable for Poverty Reduction¹**

“‘The first thing when I wake up each morning, I think of what I’m going to eat,’ says Irene. She’s hungry all the time and drinks coffee to help her go without food. ‘I can’t afford to eat healthily.’ Her medical problems require her to eat a healthy diet but the Special Diet Allowance that supplements the Ontario Disability Support Program ‘gives me about a quarter of what I need.’ She gets \$15 a month; one bag of lactose-free milks costs \$10.”

—Give us a Chance to Succeed: Voices from the Margins. The report of the April 2016 Hamilton Social Audit²

“To be poor means to be obsessed with securing the necessities of survival, denying you the opportunity to even contemplate the full realization of your innate potential. Poverty coerces you to act as a passive observer to your community’s social, cultural, legal and political institutions and activities. In sum, it denies the afflicted the ability to exercise personal, political, legal, cultural and financial choices consistent with a dignified existence.”

—Deniqua Leila Edwards, 27, Toronto

Rights vs. realities in Canada

Canada's laws and systems are legally required to protect people's right to an adequate standard of living. Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [or herself] and of his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

Unfortunately, this is not the reality for millions of people in Canada. Poverty both causes, and is caused by, these human rights violations, as well as the denial of Indigenous rights, specifically. Poverty also intersects with other systems of oppression like colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, classism, and ableism. These systemic inequities prevent specific people and communities from accessing the opportunities, services, and resources they need, leading to multi-generational cycles of poverty. They also exclude people from the decision-making processes that create the very laws and systems that affect them most.

We all have the right to food,³ but...



1 in 4
single-mother households
were food insecure in
2017-2018.⁴

- There were **4.4 million people** (including more than 1.2 million children under the age of 18) living in food-insecure households in 2017-2018.⁵
- **57%** of households in Nunavut were food insecure, 21.6% in the Northwest Territories, and 16.9% in the Yukon.⁶
- **57%** of respondents to the Daily Bread Food Bank's annual survey reported having a disability that is continuous and expected to last one year or longer.⁷

We all have the right to education,⁸ but...

- Students with disabilities living **on reserve or in rural settings** do not have access to the same level of supports and services as their peers living off-reserve in urban settings.⁹
- Despite being as likely as other youth to have graduated high school, **Black youth** were less likely to have a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree, even after accounting for socio-economic status and family characteristics.¹⁰
- **Education and training received outside of Canada** continues to be underrecognized, causing many immigrants to be working outside of their fields of expertise, despite labour shortages in these areas.¹¹
- Postsecondary students with **chronic or episodic disabilities** often need to pursue their studies part-time, which can often disqualify them from scholarships, other funding, and placement opportunities that can have an impact on employment opportunities.¹²



We all have the right to health,¹³ but...

- In 2018, **11.2%** of people 12 years or older reported not receiving health care when they needed it.¹⁴
- First Nations children and families living on reserve and in the Territories receive public services funded by the federal government. Since confederation, these services have **fallen significantly short of what other Canadians receive**.¹⁵ On January 26, 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that Canada discriminates against First Nations children in its provision of the First Nations Child and Family Services Program and by failing to implement **Jordan's Principle**.
- Four in ten (**38%**) persons with disabilities living in poverty, aged 15 years and over, reported an unmet need for an aid, device, and/or prescription medication due to cost. This was particularly an issue for women living in poverty, among whom four in ten (**41%**) had unmet needs due to cost, compared to one-third (33%) of men. While unmet needs due to cost were lower for those living above the poverty line, one-quarter (24%) still reported unmet needs due to cost.¹⁶
- The rate of **deaths by suicide** First Nations people was three times higher than the rate among non-Indigenous people. Among First Nations people living on reserve, the rate was about twice as high as that among those living off reserve. The rate among Métis was approximately twice as high as the rate among non-Indigenous people. Among Inuit, the rate was approximately **nine times higher** than the non-Indigenous rate.¹⁷



Jordan's Principle is a child-first principle named in loving memory of Jordan River Anderson, a First Nations child from Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba. Born with complex medical needs, Jordan spent more than two years unnecessarily in hospital while the province of Manitoba and the Canadian government argued over who should pay for his at-home care. Jordan died in the hospital at the age of five, never having spent a day in his family home. Jordan's Principle makes sure that First Nations children get the services they need when they need them.¹⁸

We all have the right to safe and fair employment conditions,¹⁹ but...

- In 2014, **13%** of Black Canadians reported experiencing discrimination at work or during hiring, compared to 6% of non-Black Canadians.²⁰
- Gaps in median wages between **Black men** and other men have persisted from 2000 to 2015, while the gap between **Black women** and other women widened.²¹
- More than **2 in 5 women** with disabilities in Canada report part-time employment, which impacts income and access to disability benefits like Employment Insurance.²²



African-born immigrants have the lowest employment rate and highest unemployment rate of all immigrant groups.²³

We all have the right to safety & security,²⁴ but...

- **Indigenous women** reported experiencing violent victimizations at a rate 2.7 times higher than that reported by non-Indigenous women in 2014.²⁵ Additionally, the rate of victimization of women who identified as **homosexual or bisexual**, was more than 3.5 times that of women who identified as heterosexual.²⁶
- In 2017/2018, Indigenous adults accounted for **30%** of adult admissions to provincial/territorial custody and 29% of adult admissions to federal custody, while representing approximately 4% of the Canadian adult population.²⁷ Black people made up 8.6% of the federal prison population, despite the fact they make up only 3.4 percent of the population.²⁸
- The Ontario Human Rights Commission found that a Black person was more than **20 times more likely** to be shot and killed by the police compared to a white person.²⁹
- Between 2007 and 2017, Indigenous peoples represented **one third** one third of people shot to death by RCMP police officers.³⁰



39%

of self-reported violent crimes in 2014 involved a victim with a disability, 45% of which represent women with disabilities.³¹

We all have the right to adequate housing,³² but...

- **46%** of women who report having been homeless also have a disability.³³
- Members of racialized communities are overrepresented among homeless youth in Canada at **28.2%** compared to the Canadian average of 19.1%.³⁴
- Indigenous youth are extremely overrepresented, making up only 4.3% of the Canadian population but **30.6%** of the youth homeless population.³⁵



40%

of youth experiencing homelessness in 2017 identified as LGBTQ or Two-Spirit.³⁶

“Inadequate access to housing means that we often make major life decisions based on getting or keeping housing, rather than on other important needs, such as personal development, education, and work. Sometimes limited housing options make it nearly impossible for some of us to leave unsafe conditions and have autonomy over our daily lives.”

—Nunavut Roundtable for Poverty Reduction³⁷

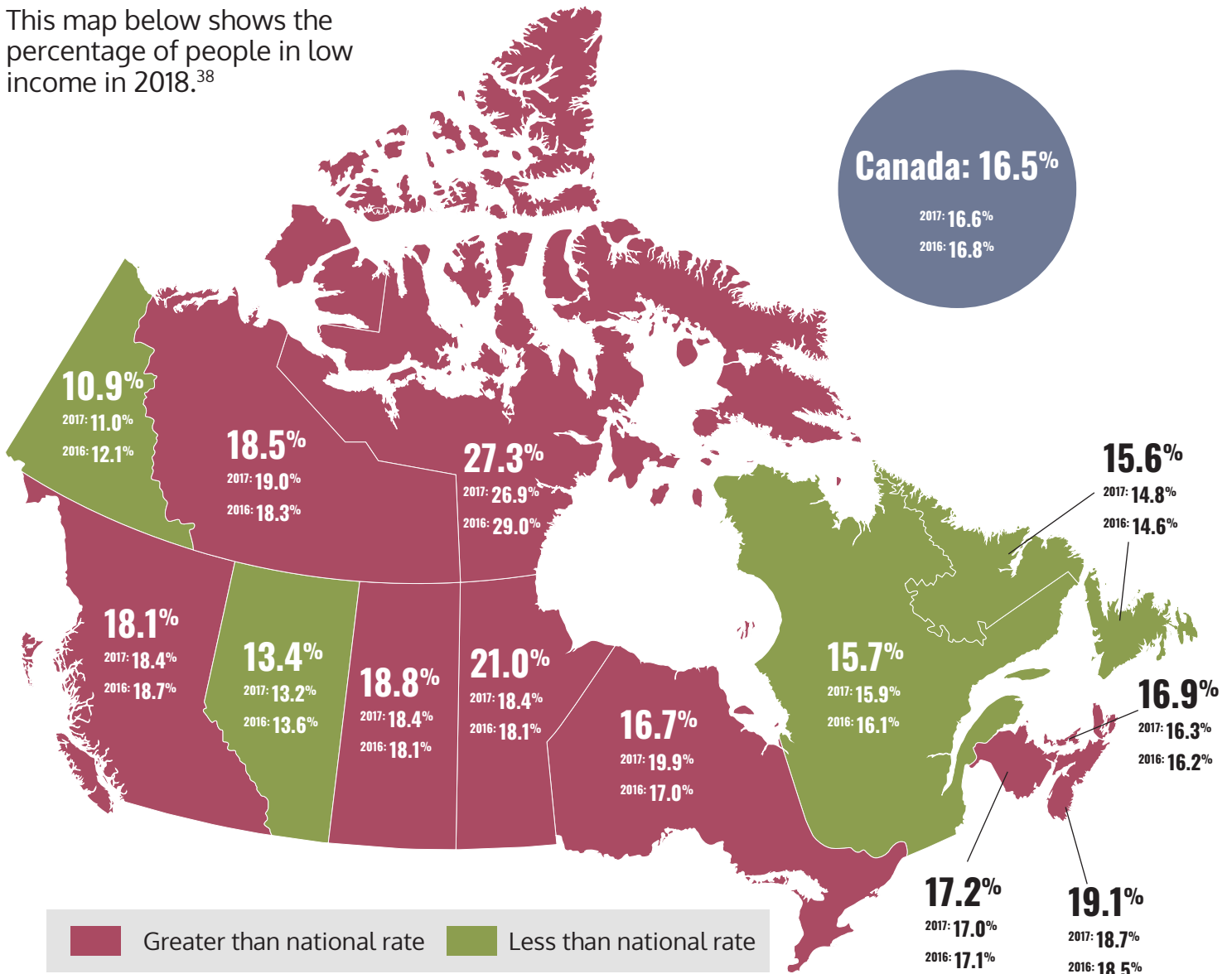
What is the extent of poverty in Canada?

Often, poverty is defined by how much money (income) a person or household has. According to Canada's official poverty line, the **Market Basket Measure (MBM)**, **3.2 million people** in Canada were considered "low income" and living in poverty in 2018. This means they are unable to afford the cost of a modest standard of living, including shelter, food, clothing, transportation, and other basic necessities. The selection of this measure as Canada's official poverty line provokes many question, however, in that this estimate does not include people living in the territories, on reserves, or other remote communities, where we know people experience disproportionately high rates of poverty.

Many advocates instead use the **Low Income Measure (LIM)** to estimate poverty rates using information from tax files. This measure estimates how many people have less than half the income of most people in Canada. The LIM estimates that **5.9 million people** in Canada were living in poverty in 2018. Because of gaps in the data collected for both measures, these are most certainly underestimates.

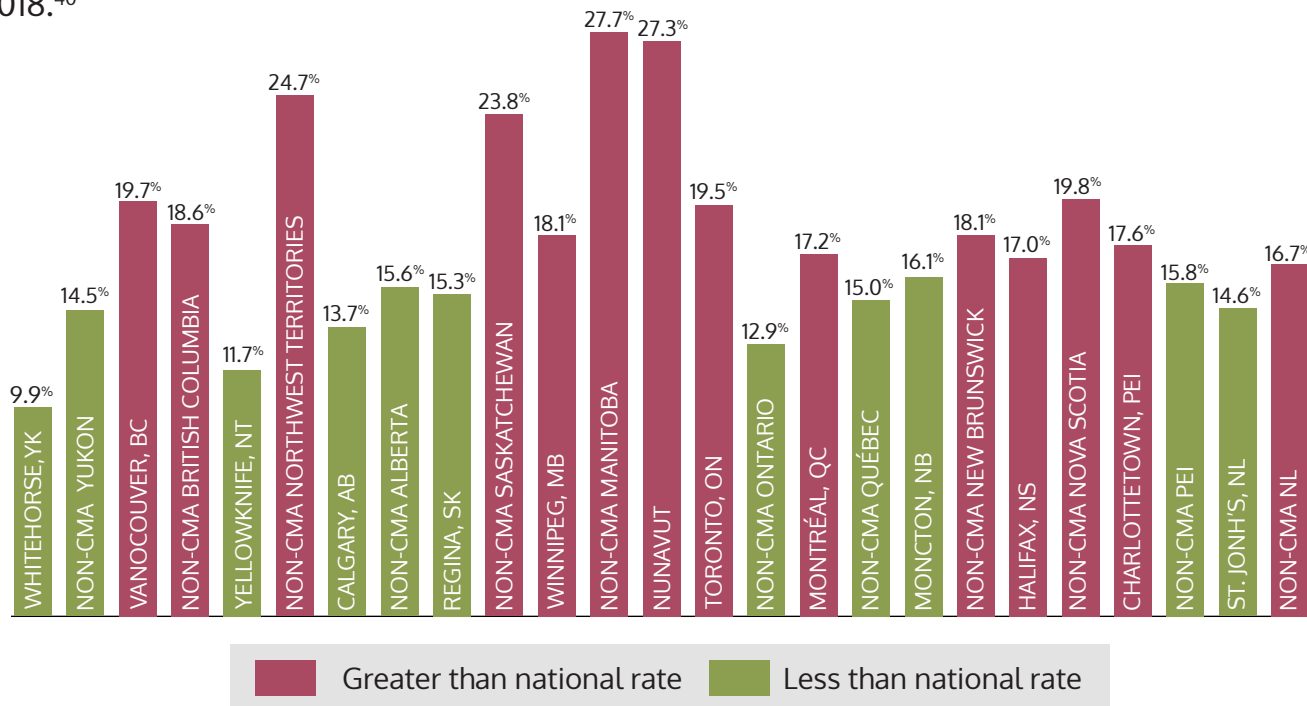
Poverty rates in Canada

This map below shows the percentage of people in low income in 2018.³⁸



Poverty rates in select regions

This graph shows poverty rates for Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs)³⁹ and non-CMAs regions in 2018.⁴⁰

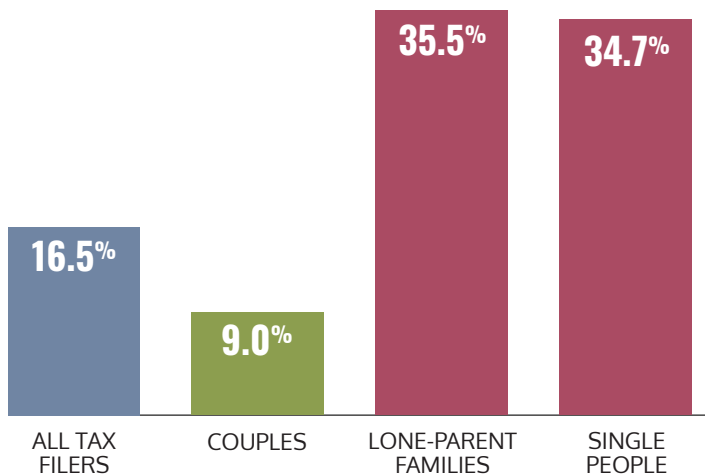


Disparities in low income

While these overall poverty rates are useful to give us a sense of just how many people are experiencing poverty in Canada, they can mask significant disparities in poverty rates among specific groups of people. This is not always easy to tease apart because of a lack of disaggregated data – information that can be analysed on the basis of ethnicity, gender identity, disability, or immigration status, for example.

Using the LIM for 2018, however, we can show the following differences in overall poverty rates experienced by different types of households.

Poverty rates by household type⁴¹



Other data sources provide further insights into disparities in poverty rates among certain communities. According to Statistics Canada:

- In 2016, **81.3%** of all lone-parent families were headed by women. These households had half the median income of male lone-parent families.⁴²
- **20.8%** of racialized people experienced poverty in 2016, compared to 12.2% of white people.⁴³
- **23.6%** of Indigenous peoples experienced poverty in 2016 compared to 13.8% for non-Indigenous people.⁴⁴
- In 2014, **23.2%** of people with a disability lived in poverty, compared to 8.6% of those without a disability.⁴⁵

COVID-19 and poverty in Canada

The COVID-19 pandemic has made existing problems of inequity and poverty in Canada worse. The same people and communities that were already facing greater barriers to wellbeing because of intersecting forms of systemic oppression now face the additional risks of coming in contact with the virus itself, losing income and/or access to services and supports, and being left out of emergency and recovery plans. These people and communities are the worst off during the pandemic, and will face the most barriers to recovering from it, suggesting an ever-widening gap of social and economic inequity in Canada unless we take meaningful action to stop it.



Financial stability

- A majority (52%) of LGBTQI2S households have been affected by lay-offs and reduced hours as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This compares to 43% of overall Canadian households. Members of the LGBTQI2S community who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour report the lowest levels of confidence in their current financial situation (60% compared to 72% nationally).⁴⁶
- Over one-third (36%) of Indigenous participants in a crowdsourced study by Statistics Canada reported that COVID-19 had a strong or moderate impact on their ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs, compared to 25% of non-Indigenous participants.⁴⁷
- The differences between most visible minority groups and White participants in the financial impact of COVID-19 remain large even after taking into consideration their differences in job loss, immigration status, pre-COVID-19 employment status, and other demographic characteristics.⁴⁸

Caregiving

Since the pandemic has closed schools, daycare centres, and recreational programs, women continue to take on the majority of care work and domestic burdens.⁴⁹ Women living in poverty and ethnic and racial minorities were more likely to suffer economically because of these increased unpaid care responsibilities. Indigenous (49%) and Black (55%) Canadians reported greater challenges due to increased house and care work caused by COVID-19 than their white peers (34%). Indigenous respondents were three times as likely as white respondents to say they have had to give up looking for paid work as a result of increased care responsibilities.⁵⁰

Domestic violence

During a pandemic, quarantine policies can produce traumatic situations, with many survivors having no choice but to self-isolate with an abusive partner. The United Nations is referring to the global rise in domestic violence as the 'shadow pandemic.'⁵¹ Domestic and intimate partner violence disproportionately affect women (including trans women) and gender diverse people, particularly those who are Indigenous, members of the LGBTQI2S community, and/or those with a disability.⁵²

Making rights a reality in Canada

Falling on hard times, being born in a particular place, or being born with a particular body or brain should not be a life sentence – we have the means and methods available in this country to offer prevention, intervention, and ongoing support to ensure all people’s rights become their lived reality.

Recommendations for government

CPJ is calling on the Government of Canada to do what is legally and morally required to uphold and protect the rights of people experiencing poverty and other forms of systemic oppression in Canada:

- 1. Fulfil legal obligations to protect people’s rights to an adequate standard of living and end poverty in Canada by 2030.** Governments must honour the dignity of each person and community experiencing poverty and other forms of systemic oppression by putting their rights and well-being first in budgets, legislation, and programs.
- 2. Set specific targets to reduce poverty and improve measures of well-being and equity among communities experiencing systemic oppression.ⁱ** This includes, but is not limited to, people who are Indigenous, Black, or People of Colour; who are women, transgender, or gender nonconforming; people with disabilities; newcomers to Canada; people with precarious immigration status; people who are single; and people who are LGBTQQIA+. These targets should meet or exceed the requirements of existing human rights obligations, including the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Sustainable Development Goals. Targets, methods for data collection and analysis, and accountability mechanisms should be co-developed with people and communities experiencing poverty and other intersecting forms of systemic oppression in Canada to ensure meaningful, equitable impact.
- 3. Prioritize funding for strategies that reduce poverty and improve measures of well-being and equity among communities experiencing systemic oppression.** Engage in ongoing collaboration and consultation with people and communities experiencing poverty and other intersecting forms of systemic oppression to understand the impact of existing laws, programs, and policies on their physical, mental, social, and economic well-being. Mandate the collection of data disaggregated by sociodemographic identitiesⁱⁱ to better measure and understand the impact of government policies on poverty. Reallocate funding from systems that contribute to poverty and inequality and invest in those that close the gap between the rich and the poor. This should include fairer, more redistributive tax policies and federal regulations,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as funding for both universally accessible public systems^{iv} and local, community-led strategies.

i This includes, but is not limited to, people who are Inuit, First Nations, or Métis; Black or People of Colour; women, transgender, or gender nonconforming people; people with disabilities; newcomers to Canada; people with precarious immigration status; people who are single; children and youth; people who are LGBTQQIA+; and people living in Northern and remote areas.

ii For example, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, age.

iii For example, rent controls, employment equity policies, minimum wage and labour standards.

iv For example, universally accessible, publicly funded health care, including pharmacare, dental care, vision care, mental health, physiotherapy; childcare; education; subsidized housing; guaranteed basic income.

Take Action!

Poverty is not inevitable or unavoidable. We can and must change the laws and systems that create and perpetuate poverty and inequity in Canada to building a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient society.

Ensuring government feels the “will” to find a “way” is where you come in!

Systemic change takes changes of hearts and minds

Do your own inner work and find a community to help you do it. Keep learning and listening to diverse voices to find ways to practice anti-oppression, solidarity, and self-care in your own life. Talk about what you’re learning and share your experiences and insights with others. Ask questions (of yourself and of others) about where certain ideas, perceptions, or political positions come from.

Systemic change takes community and collaboration

Work collaboratively across sectors and communities – there is strength in numbers, and a richness to learning from one another’s experiences. Find ways to stand in solidarity and present a united front when reaching out to elected representatives. Connect with other advocates and campaigns like **Chew on This!** to add your voice for change at the community, provincial, territorial, and national levels.

CHEW ON THIS!

Every year, Citizens for Public Justice co-leads the Dignity for All campaign, *Chew on This!* calling for a rights-based, comprehensive plan to end poverty in Canada. Our actions take place on or around October 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Visit www.chewonthis.ca for tools and resources and be part of Canada’s largest anti-poverty campaign.

Systemic change takes political pressure and accountability

Make sure your elected representatives know you expect meaningful change to end poverty and systemic inequity in Canada and in your community.

- Write a letter, make a phone call, or tag them on social media (see www.chewonthis.ca for examples that you can personalize).
- Invite elected representatives and local media to participate or listen in on a meeting or event featuring people with lived experience of poverty or other intersecting forms of systemic oppression.
- Organize a march, demonstration, arts night, or other local event to raise awareness in your community and invite your local representatives and media.
- Ask questions at town hall meetings, during canvassing, or public debates, especially at election time (but please don’t wait for an election to show you care)!

Together, we can end poverty in Canada!

Endnotes

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Learn more at cpj.ca.

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