

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace

POVERTY IN CANADA

ENSURING SAFE, SECURE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING



POVERTY IN CANADA: ENSURING SAFE, SECURE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Poverty is a serious issue not only in developing countries, but also in Canada. This short informational leaflet has been prepared with the help of Canadian individuals and organizations who are dedicated to combating poverty in our country. It provides a snapshot of the problem of poverty in Canada, with a particular focus on the issue of safe, secure, and affordable housing.

POVERTY IN CANADA TODAY

Depending on the index used, between 3.8 million¹ and 4.8 million² Canadians were living in poverty in 2017. This is in part caused by an economic environment of precarious or part-time employment leading to unstable work and income. In an economy that perpetuates poverty, Canadians also face a social assistance system that can be difficult to access when in a position of poverty. These dangers are more prominent among women, as well as Indigenous people, of whom about one quarter currently live in poverty.

Although only financial, these figures provide a glimpse of what poverty in Canada is. Poverty is not a purely economic deficiency. Persons in need may also require emotional and spiritual support, in addition to social and financial support. Some are already trapped in the cycle of poverty, while others need help to avoid falling into this cycle.

Assistance to people in need can easily be reduced to material help such as providing food, clothing, accessories, or furniture. However, assistance can also involve direct contact with persons in need – in various and complex ways and circumstances – that could include lending an ear, offering guidance, or keeping them company. Regardless of what type of assistance is provided, persons in need must be treated with respect and dignity.



Photo: Eric Buermeyer / Shutterstock.com

With some of the most expensive housing in the world, a Canadian is forced to live in a tent as the construction of nearby condos explodes.

HOUSING AND THE CHALLENGE OF POVERTY

Despite the efforts of many charitable organizations, poverty in Canada continues to be an inescapable cycle for some people, and accessing safe, secure, and affordable housing is still a challenge for many Canadians. This is due in large part to the state of housing in Canada. Approximately 5% of Canadians face a housing crisis, with their homes being inadequate or unaffordable.³ These Canadians cannot always improve their situations on their own. They struggle to provide shelter, food, and safety for themselves and their families; they are unable to spend time or money on education or

financial planning. Another 25,000 Canadians are chronically homeless.⁴ These individuals become exiles within their own society, and social exclusion itself can be a form of poverty. Because they lack an address, the homeless are often unable to access social programs, send their children to school, or obtain gainful employment. This leads to them living hand to mouth or shelter to shelter.

The Canadian government has taken notice of this housing and homelessness problem and recently developed a [National Housing Strategy](#). The goal is to strengthen the middle class economically and provide stability for families which will in turn strengthen Canada's overall economy, making it easier for families to provide for themselves.⁵ Access to safe, secure, and affordable housing can reduce stress on families, allowing them to devote time to strengthening their family life, growing spiritually, and participating in the life of the community. Pope Francis highlighted the urgent need of responding to this social and spiritual imperative:

In today's world, voices are being raised which we cannot ignore and which implore our Churches to live deeply our identity as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. The first of these voices is that of the poor. In the world, there are too many women and men who suffer from severe malnutrition, growing unemployment, the rising numbers of unemployed youth, and from increasing social exclusion. These can give rise to criminal activity and even the recruitment of terrorists. We cannot remain indifferent before the cries of our brothers and sisters. These ask of us not only material assistance – needed in so many circumstances – but above all, our help to defend their dignity as human persons, so that they can find the spiritual energy to become once again protagonists in their own lives. They ask us to fight, in the light of the Gospel, the structural causes of poverty: inequality, the shortage



An example of rundown apartment buildings where living conditions can be inadequate, overcrowded, and even unsafe.

of dignified work and housing, and the denial of their rights as members of society and as workers. As Christians we are called together to eliminate that globalization of indifference which today seems to reign supreme, while building a new civilization of love and solidarity.

(Pope Francis, Address at the Patriarchal Church of St. George, Istanbul, Nov. 30, 2014)

Human dignity is respected when we actively listen to those in need and respond generously. Denying people adequate housing, however, is a contradiction of their inherent dignity as children of God and members of the human family. This is why affordable housing is so important. It allows Canadians to stand on their own two feet, to support their families, and to provide for those closest to them. As Christians, we see it as our duty to support safe, secure, and affordable housing which will in turn recognize the God-given dignity of each

person and contribute to the building of a more just, fair, and healthy society as a whole.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 2444 teaches that

“The Church’s love for the poor . . . is a part of her constant tradition.” This love is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, of the poverty of Jesus, and of his concern for the poor. Love for the poor is even one of the motives for the duty of working so as to “be able to give to those in need.” It extends not only to material poverty but also to the many forms of cultural and religious poverty.

We are likewise challenged by these words of Pope Francis:

While encouraging the development of a better world, we cannot remain silent about the scandal of poverty in its various forms. Violence, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, restrictive approaches to fundamental freedoms, whether of individuals or of groups: these are some of the chief elements of poverty which need to be overcome. Often these are precisely the elements which mark migratory movements, thus linking migration to poverty.

(Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Aug. 5, 2013)

In order for the overall housing situation in Canada to improve, there must be collaboration between charitable organizations, local governments, parishes, and the individuals these programs target. This will allow for initiatives to focus their efforts strategically while avoiding unnecessary overlap. Through collaboration and communication, the dignity of the human person can be recognized and promoted.



Photo: Andriy Popov / Alamy Stock Photo

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The following is a list of some national and regional Catholic organizations that work to alleviate poverty in Canada:

Diocesan Charities and Social Services

Many Catholic dioceses administer charities and social service organizations that help the poor. Check your diocese's website for more information.



Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

<https://www.ssvp.ca>

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a lay Catholic organization whose mission is to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, and joy.



Catholic Missions in Canada

<https://cmic.info>

Catholic Missions in Canada funds the work of missionaries as they proclaim the Word of God across the nation, even in the most remote and in-need areas.



Mission chez nous

<https://www.missioncheznous.com>

Mission chez nous, a Quebec organization that operates in French, has the following objectives:

- Assist the dioceses of Canada's North and Indigenous communities of southern dioceses;
- Support initiatives for Indigenous people in urban centres (pastoral and other services);
- Increase awareness among the general public and local Christian communities around Indigenous realities;
- Facilitate understanding between cultures by promoting dialogue and working to overcome prejudice.

Published on the occasion of the Third World Day of the Poor, the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 17, 2019.

Readers may also wish to consult the message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the Third World Day of the Poor, entitled "[The hope of the poor shall not perish for ever.](#)"

ENDNOTES

1. "Canadian Income Survey, 2017," Statistics Canada, February 26, 2019. This figure uses the Market Basket Measure. Accessed May 9, 2019, at <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190226/dq190226b-eng.htm>.
2. "Poverty Trends 2017," Citizens for Public Justice, October 2017. This figure uses the Low-Income Measure. Accessed May 9, 2019, at <https://cpj.ca/poverty-trends-2017>.
3. "Canada's National Housing Strategy: A Place to Call Home" (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2018), 3, <https://www.placetocallhome.ca/-/media/sf/project/placetocallhome/pdfs/canada-national-housing-strategy.pdf>.
4. "Canada's National Housing Strategy", 3.
5. "Canada's National Housing Strategy", 3.



Poverty in Canada: Ensuring Safe, Secure and Affordable Housing

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