

ON POVERTY

EDITORIAL BY THE DIRECTOR OF SSHQ, ELENI FAKOTAKIS

Gandhi said that, “Poverty is the worst form of violence”. I could not agree more! That poverty still exists in Canada when our country is one of the richest is unacceptable. It is more noticeable in the central boroughs of the city and less evident in the outskirts. It seems not to preoccupy most people but for those who suffer in poverty’s clutches and wrath, it most certainly causes them great anxiety and emotional pain. Particularly those who have to make trade-offs with respect to whether they will feed their children or pay the rent. As food banks may be accessible, low income housing is much less accessible, due to limited units and long waiting lists, priority is given to single mothers with children.

Poverty is very difficult to measure because it is complex. I guess in Québec, we have tried to at least define it with the introduction of Bill 112 (An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion). To people like Gandhi and others who have tried to analyse poverty, it is not just about the lack of financial means and insufficient food. In addition to the inability to meet one’s basic needs, it is also about the lack of opportunity that an individual may experience, or that society can provide. For example did the individual grow up during a period of war, or during an economic or social-political crisis or in a part of the world where girls or women are not encouraged to go to school? These are very important factors that affect one’s choices and their personal development or (the lack of choices limit one from developing as one should). The burden therefore, is also on society to correct the socio-economic obstacles to personal growth and to growth as a society. The definition of poverty in the bill,

‘Poverty is to be deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and to maintain economic self-sufficiency and participation in society’.

Thus to measure poverty, is quite a challenge indeed. Particularly because **Statistics Canada** does not define “poor” nor does it estimate the number of poor families and individuals in Canada. In the past 40 years poverty has been measured by calculating after-tax income and market-basket values depending where in the city one lives. No measure is perfect and official statistics have varied at any given point in time, citing that the population that is living in poverty is anywhere from 9% to 16% of the population. While other statistics, depending on who is conducting them, measure poverty between 14% and 20% of the population.

After visiting food bank sites, as well as, **Statistics Canada** and looking through a multitude of studies and reports out there, the following statements and statistics are quite astonishing and hard to miss:

- **3 million Canadians are affected by poverty, 1 in 5 are children (600,000 children)**
- **1 in 3 or 33% of children had at least one parent who worked full time throughout the year in 2008 and still lived in poverty, (Statistics Canada 2008)**
- **3.1 million households pay more than 30% of their income on housing**
- **450,000 – 900,000 Canadians represent the hidden homeless, (Wellesley Institute 2010)**

- **Poverty costs the Canadian health care system 7.6 Billion \$ per year, (Assoc. of food banks)**
- **There is a 21 year difference in life expectancy between people living in the poorest neighbourhood and the wealthiest neighbourhood, (Hamilton Ontario, 2010, McMaster University study)**
- **\$1 invested in a child before the age of 6, saves \$9 in future spending on health, (report on public health in Canada)**
- **In 2012, 872,379 Canadians used food banks each month (Association of Food Banks)**
- **In Québec, 5% are homeless and sleep on the street**
- **24% of Quebecers received help from a food bank or charity during the year**
- **Moisson Montréal allocates to the various boroughs of Montreal between 336,000 kg to 945,000 kg of food annually through non-profit organisations and food banks (2010)**

When compared to some other countries, Canada ranks relatively low in terms of doing something concrete to eradicate child poverty (the Early Childhood Education and Care Services “ECEC” measure).

There are many ways that society can help get rid of poverty. Education and a quality of life for all is certainly very important and making sure that there is equal employment opportunities; and equal remuneration for men and women for equal work, which goes without saying for profit and not-for-profit organisations; By giving low income employees more tax benefits; ensuring better compliance measures are in place with respect to child support after separation or divorce; ensuring more daycare spaces so single parents or moms can work; giving greater child supplements to low income families; increasing social housing units; higher supplements to the elderly and to individuals with intellectual and or physical limitations; giving more money to non-profit organisations who seem to know and to help their clients more effectively; combating corruption, thereby making more money available for social programs, to name a few.

Thanks to Moisson Montréal, to the donations from the students of École Socrates-Démosthène and to some private food donations, since 2005, **our service – the Hellenic Social Services of Québec of the Hellenic Community of Greater Montréal** – is contributing to the fight against poverty through our two weekly food bank distributions in Parc-Extension and in Chomedey, Laval. We take this responsibility very seriously, especially when we see very young adults tangled in the web of poverty. We do our utmost to get them back on their feet right away and not to rely on the food bank for long. When I met Isabelle (not her real name), my heart sank. She came to me in tears. At 21 years of age with no hope in her eyes, she was overwhelmed and tired and alone. She could have been my daughter... she was definitely someone’s daughter. Each member of my team and I listened intently to her story, then we all helped her to deal with each one of her particular challenges. Within two months Isabelle had found a job and was back on her feet, paying her rent and dealing much better with the loss of her friend and her economic challenges. We were there for her and believed in her ability to help herself. She has since come back to volunteer her services from time to time to give back to others some of the wellness she achieved with our help.

This kind of support is absolutely necessary in helping to get people back on their feet and out of poverty. Through our food-bank service, we offer non-perishable food to low income families and individuals of all origins. We serve approximately 221 individuals or 109 homes yearly. About 34% or **76** are children, 22% or **30** are elderly and 3% are students. In the Montreal food bank the clients are **mostly male beneficiaries (64%)** who address our services, while in Laval, they are **mostly female beneficiaries (53%)**. Most of the beneficiaries of both food banks are people **who live alone (70%** in Montreal, in comparison to **54%** in Laval).

In **Montreal 65% of households** come for food every week, while in Laval most recipients come for food between one and three times in a month. For more statistics see chart on the right.

The families change somewhat from year to year, some stop using the food banks and **about 8% new families** address our food bank services yearly. For example we are helping three new Syrian families, who recently immigrated to Canada and live in Laval.

Refer to the table below for more statistics:

Stats are in numbers & not in a percentage % 1 unit per home	MTL	LAVAL	Total
Recent immigrants	14	21	35
Single-parent family	4	5	9
Bi-parent family	13	12	25
Couple, no children	5	1	6
People living alone	48	21	69
Work PT	9	4	13
EI	1	5	6
Welfare or no income	45	14	59
Old Age Security	15	10	25

Invalidity	0	3	3
Rent	54	31	85
Social housing	15	3	18
Other (live with friends or *own house)	1	5(3*)	6

We are reaching out to the community for perishable food items such as milk, eggs, fish and poultry. We are also seeking volunteers to help out during food-bank activity and are appealing to the general public for the donation of a van that is necessary in order to collect food donations, as ours broke down beyond repair. We have been unable to obtain any government or regular private funding in order to stabilize and to guarantee our food bank distribution services in Montreal and Laval.

This is where YOU come into the picture, we need your help!

Nelson Mandela said “...**that it is in our hands to change the world and to make it a better place...**”