



Poverty Reduction or Poverty Management: Is advocacy pixelating?

JOHN STAPLETON

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Prelude to Pixelation

SERIAL DECLINE IN INCOMES OF THE POOREST: 1993 TO ?????

Income adequacy for the poorest has receded over the last 33 years

For the lowest income people in Canada, income adequacy has been steadily receding in general since the early 1990's.

In Ontario, the single welfare rate from 1993-1995 was \$663 a month. With price inflation protection, that rate would now be \$1,287 a month. But the rate is now 733 a month, a 43% decline in the 33 years since 1993.

Income adequacy of the poorest has receded over the last 33 years

- ▶ Benefits for people with disabilities now called ODSP in Ontario was \$930 a month but with inflation protection, it would now be \$1,805.
- ▶ But the rate now is \$1,408 + \$200 exempted CDB for those with the Disability Tax Credit, a 10.9% decline.

In 1990, the federal government put a cap on CAP

- ▶ The Canada Assistance Plan had shared 50% of income assistance programs from 1967 until 1992. After Canada won its case in court, Federal dollars began disappearing in real terms in 1993.
- ▶ Across Canada, income assistance rates began to recede in that year.
- ▶ Federal austerity increased – CAP was ended in 1996.
- ▶ The Lloyd Axworthy review of social security in the mid 1990's dissipated

The new Millennium

- ▶ By the new millennium, the federal government was completely out of the funding focused on the poorest
- ▶ Seniors and Children dominated the income security agenda
- ▶ Poverty reduction and discussions of a basic income or guaranteed annual income became the main focus of income adequacy.

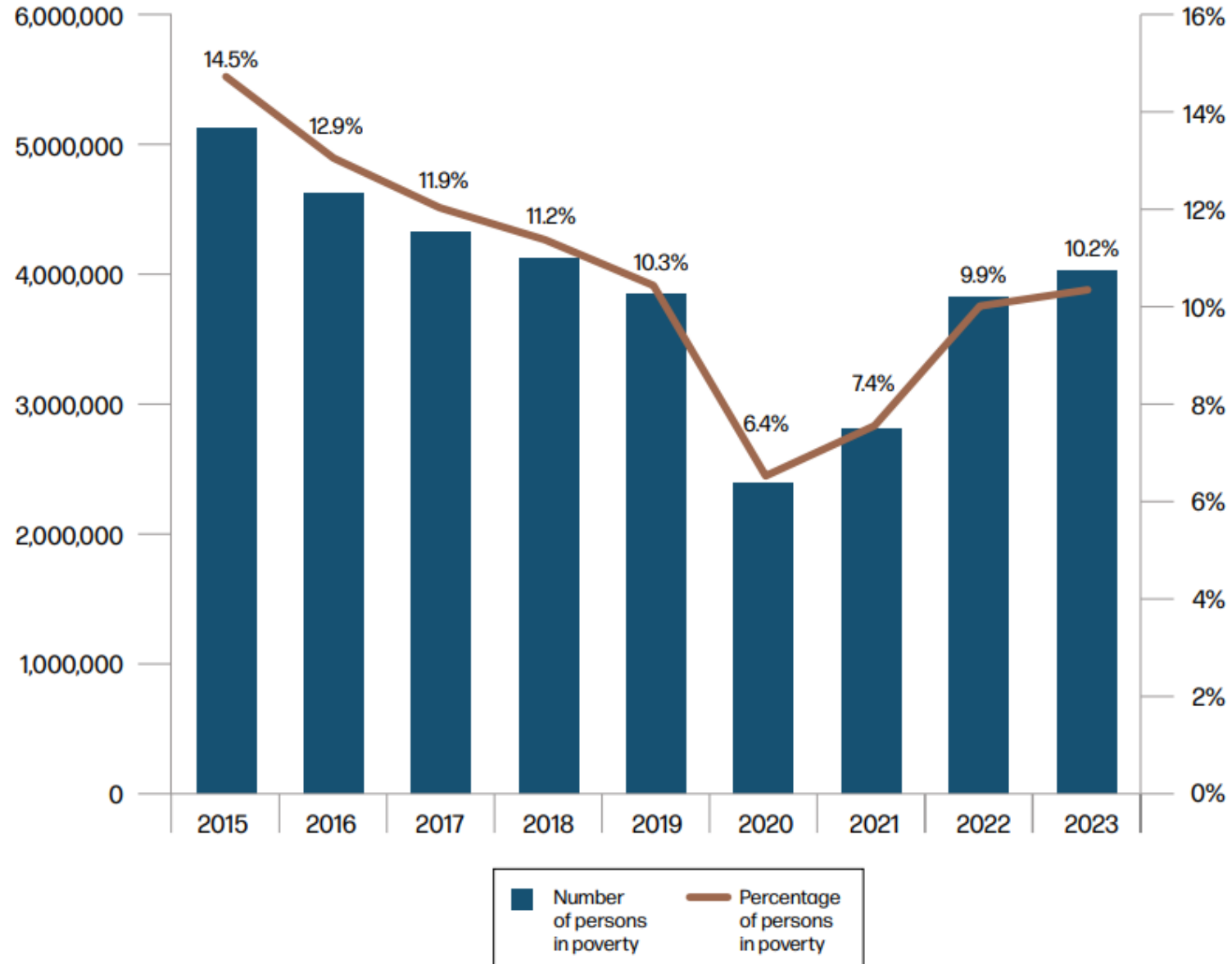
Poverty Reduction — Or Poverty Management in the new millennium?

- ▶ Over 25 years, something shifted.
- ▶ We stopped discussing income floors.
- ▶ We started talking about poverty in terms of food bank usage, food insecurity, shelters, tents, financial literacy and tax forms.

Pandemic and post pandemic

- ▶ By the time the pandemic hit, the federal government was claiming victory in the war on poverty. But it did not last as the graph in the following slide shows
- ▶ But change was in the air as we came out of the pandemic. And new forms of advocacy were dominating as poverty rates increased.
- ▶ Income adequacy is no longer centre stage.

Graph 1 Number and percentage of persons living in poverty in Canada based on the Market Basket Measure (MBM) for 2015 to 2023





The quiet pivot to new forms of advocacy

INCOME INADEQUACY ADVOCACY RECEDED

The Quiet Pivot

Poverty advocacy and poverty policy used to ask:

Do people have enough money?

Now it asks:

- Do they have enough food?
- Enough shelter?
- Enough help filling out forms?

Those are not the same questions. At the same time, income adequacy design skills designed at Fed level.

The Three New Centres of Gravity

1. Food security
2. Housing supply, shelters, homelessness, encampments
3. Financial empowerment/tax filing

Each important.

Together, displacing income adequacy advocacy? But they cannot replace government.

Why This Happened

Not because it's wrong.

Because they are:

- Visible
- Fundable
- Measurable
- Politically safer

Income adequacy is technical and design skills in this discipline began to atrophy. Big money and research going elsewhere.

Food Banks: The Perfect Politics

Food banks allow:

Governments to show compassion

- Corporations to donate
- Media to photograph
- Packing and sorting competitions among corporate donors

Hunger becomes logistics.

Not income failure.

Cash is more effective.

But less theatrical.

Housing: The Treadmill

Housing advocacy became:

- Homelessness
- Capital
- Financialization
- Encampments
- Shelters & Emergency response

But without income reform:

Rent supplements chase rents.

Supportive housing fills as incomes fall.

We build more.

Poverty stays.

Financial Empowerment: The Subtle Shift

Poverty becomes:

- Missed forms
- Poor navigation
- Weak skills

Automatic filing helps.

But it also normalizes a system

So complex that help is required just to survive it.

Structural failure becomes individual coaching.

The Political Economy

Large food banks:

- Millions in budgets
- CEOs, VPs, communications teams

Housing coalitions:

- Hundreds of millions in capital cycles

Financial inclusion initiatives:

- Stable multi-year funding

All three still not large compared to universities – research institutes

Income adequacy groups:

- <\$1–2 million
- Lean staffing – limited design infrastructure

Professionalization Upward

Poverty advocacy now speaks:

- To policymakers
- To donors
- To elites

Published in:

- High-paywall outlets
- Policy forums
- Closed consultations

Poverty becomes something explained to elites.

Not contested with them.

Then Journalism Changed

Poverty became visual.

- Food bank lines and competitive sorts
- Tents under highways
- Shelter cots and homeless sitting on grates
- Volunteers unloading pasta

Income security does not photograph well.

The Visual Bias

A tent city is instant narrative clarity.

A clawback rate requires:

- Charts
- Context
- Numeracy
- Time

Newsrooms have less time.

So, they film what they can see.

Advocacy Follows the Camera

Media covers food banks.

Advocates amplify food banks.

Policymakers respond to food banks.

Income adequacy slips off the page.

No conspiracy.

Structural drift.

The Moral Comfort of Charity

Food bank stories allow consensus.

Income reform forces conflict:

- Taxes
- Redistribution
- Work incentives
- Trade-offs

Charity feels good.

Adequacy feels political.

The Result

We now have:

- More sophisticated poverty management
- Larger nonprofit infrastructures
- Better emergency responses

And still:

- Insufficient income floors

Activity increased.

Adequacy did not.

The Core Reframe

The disease is insufficient income.

Food insecurity = income diagnostic

Housing precarity = income-rent
mismatch

Low take-up = system design failure

These are symptoms.

What We Lose and gain

When poverty pixelates into sectors - we lose:

- Structural thinking
- Income as infrastructure
- Entitlement as design

We gain:

- Services
- Programs
- Branding
- Measurable outputs

The Quiet Truth

Poverty reduction did not splinter into food, housing, and financial literacy because they were the best solutions. It splintered because they were the easiest politics.

The Real Question

Are we building:

A more compassionate management system?

Or a more adequate income system?

They are not the same.

The Challenge

Re-centre income without abandoning services.

Food banks are calling for better incomes.

Housing advocacy is important.

Financial inclusion is crucial.

But they are not the foundation.

Income adequacy is.

Huge need for design capacity - unfunded

Some final thoughts

Good policy does not
photograph well.

But it determines whether tents
appear at all.

► Design capacity marginalized.



Thank you!

QUESTIONS?