

REPORT ON SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION ON POVERTY REDUCTION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Date: 17/03/2018

10318 WHALLEY BLVD

Community: Surrey

1. Discussion Participants

Number of participants: 12

Number of organizations that participated: 5

Number of individuals with lived experience who participated: 9

Gender of participants: 10 females, 2 males

Age profile of participants: 24-68

General demographics: Youth, Single Mothers, Recipients of Income Assistance

Our definitions of poverty.

Introduction

Participants are not used due to confidential

Poverty reduction training workshop took place at the office of Afro-Canadian Positive Network of BC in Surrey, BC where participants were actively involved in discussion on poverty reduction strategies in British Columbia. Participants were divided in groups to reflect on their personal definitions of poverty (through an ice breaker activity). The facilitators discussed the structure of the workshop prior to the ice breaker activity by explaining confidentiality and mentioning the importance of creating a safe and respectful place for all participating. Furthermore, the workshop outlined the questions that were provided in “Reducing Poverty in BC Small Group Discussion Toolkit” regarding poverty reduction including- “What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?” and “What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?”

Participants showed enthusiastic and passionate attitudes in the discussions as many were able to personally connect with the topic of poverty reduction. Notes were taken by facilitators that also took part in the discussions and will be included in the report to signify the ideas and strategies talked about in the workshop. Overall, the workshop was a successful event which allowed a plethora of opportunities for participants to share their personal and professional experiences to contribute to the poverty reduction strategy in British Columbia.

There were five organizations that took part in the workshop with 12 participants involved in the discussions. The participants included 10 females and 2 males –9 of the participants has had lived experience relating to poverty. Many of the participants were single mothers and had been accessing income assistance. The stories of the participants are illustrated as examples in the report to give insight on the struggles faced by individuals living in poverty.

. What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?

1. Price of housing: This tends to put people into homelessness and life in transition homes tend to lack security, privacy, space, medical care, healthy food with a tendency towards acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases.

Without housing, depression and desperation take over and could lead to thievery, crime and drugs.

1. Lack of nutrition/ healthy food and its affordability issues. Organic food is for the rich while President's choice is for the poor.
2. Lack of standardized/ universal policies around international education. New immigrants who are English-proficient but whose previous credentials are not accepted for any jobs or those who cannot speak English cannot get jobs at all. Doctor's degrees, Teachers, Engineers are not recognized in Canada but meet better acceptance in the UK.
3. Lack of education/ Information about how to change their lives Versus "privileged education
4. Regression for skilled entry migrants who come with money but fall into poverty when they can't get jobs to support their families. It's not enough to give multicultural access to others to migrate to Canada, their integration should be equally important as well. Out of desperate need to cater for their families may turn to crime.
5. Government Assisted Refugees (GARS) are often considered helpless which is not necessarily the case. They often have skills that aren't recognized and should be trained in whatever prior skills they had- plumbing, carpentry. Poverty should be avoided if it were easier to use prior skills as it would make the refugees or better credential recognition for professionals fell more useful. African migrants usually leave their homes to be more productive, not to be a societal burden or to be poor.
6. Discounts on insurance and others are not accessible because one must have letters from home which is not always easy to get.
7. Taxes: what receipts need to be saved? Newcomers often miss deductions
8. Family breakdown- separation, divorce, domestic abuse.
9. Social isolation and lower status due to separated homes, illness could lead to depression/ anxiety.
10. Incarceration, gangs, theft, prostitution
11. Migration in Canada has tended to encourage establishment of multicultural communities not integration,, e.g. East Indian/ African/ Chinese/ First Nations. Because it encourages racial profiling.
12. Poverty has tended to encourage selling of human parts for money and prostitution

13. Adoption breakdown as African children become westernize and made to forget their culture/ identity/ cultures. This causes an identity crisis and poverty in the long run
14. The opioid epidemic in Vancouver/ Surrey is the direct result of poverty particularly mental poverty and feeling of hopelessness for tomorrow.
15. People living with chronic “disabilities” (illnesses)- HIV, Hepatitis B, Cancer, diabetes, autism, parents of children living with disabilities not getting enough emotional and psychological support.
16. Lack of education, Taboo’s, misinformation and ignorance on how HIV is transmitted. People end up in hiding and not accessing treatment, that results in people dying from AIDS. Lack of funding is a factor.

Stories from Participants (Real names not used)

Sarah's story

Sarah immigrated to Canada from Democratic Republic of Congo in 2017 with a refugee status. She brought her two children aged 5 and 7 and currently resides in Surrey, BC. Sarah has a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS and displays signs of PTSD and anxiety. She has trouble communicating when she is in the community due to language barriers, so she often only goes out to drop and pick her children up from school. Due to Sarah being on welfare, she is not able to afford the basic needs for herself and her children. Sarah pays \$950 for a 2-bedroom basement and there is often very less money left for nutritious food, hygiene products, and getting her children’s basic needs met. Sarah has no family residing in Canada and each day she is worried whether there will be enough food on the table for her children. Due to Sarah’s HIV status, she has lost hope that things will ever get better. Due to the high stress Sarah continues to face, the children often feel as if they are at fault. There are no organizations nearby Sarah’s home that can help Sarah (and her children) meet her physiological and psychological needs. Due to this, Sarah is feeling a loss of belonging in the community and feels that she wants to go back to her country although the conditions are poor and unsafe there.

Adam's story

Adam came from Kenya on September of 2017 with his wife in hopes to get better career opportunities in Canada. Adam and his wife started working at a grocery store at the beginning of February when his wife suddenly left him for another man. His wife told co-workers at work about Adam's HIV status caused him to face discrimination at work. Adam would get called names for not treating his wife right and his HIV status. Adam finally resigned from the job and started staying home. The stigmatization and discrimination continued to impact Adam's mental health. Adam is also struggling to make ends meet as he is not working anywhere and has lost some hope in future. He has stopped taking his daily medications and called the suicide helpline telling the operators that he is under tremendous amount of stress and does not see a point in

living anymore. The operator mentions some of the resources that Adam can access in the community. Adam declines and hangs up the phone.

Winona's story

Winona is a 14-year old youth who has just immigrated to Canada with her family from South Africa. Her mother and father work above 16 hours/day to make ends meet in Vancouver, BC. Winona goes to the local high school and has started to face bullying due to her accent. She refrains from telling her family as she feels they are under a lot of stress already. Winona wakes up early to help her mother with food and then goes to school. When she comes back from school, she has to cook and clean the house. Winona has tried to make friends but no one sticks around. She often spends lunch time alone sitting in the corner of her school hallways as other students continue to make fun of her. Winona cries about how she does not feel a sense of belonging in Canada and wants to go back to South Africa to her own friends. One day, Winona's teacher saw her crying in the hallway and has sent her to the school counsellor. The counsellor tells Winona that things will get better but she needs to keep working hard. Winona ends up taking drugs and marijuana because of depression.

2. What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?

Possible Solutions

1. Policies on education to address immigrant professional and educational acceptance. Possibly through acceptance of education at high school and degree certifications for work or postgraduate education. It is retrogressive for the individual to be asked to write GRE for masters admission after graduating from a medical or engineering school elsewhere especially English-speaking countries.
 - Job shadowing scheme for professionals to enhance integration
 - Assess skills of new migrants/ refugees then train them in those areas of skilled labour
 - Review of student loan facility to reflect for loans for children of families living at or below poverty line (Norway? Sweden has a free education scheme and it is one of the countries with the lowest poverty rates in the world).
 - Information for refugees on Refugee/ Asylum laws prior to landing: they should be educated on the debt associated with it before they come or integrate them in to work immediately they come to pay off those debts.

It is ruthless to draw skilled professionals from their home countries and then fail to utilize them and it becomes too late for them to go back. The government needs to really evaluate the success of the scheme and improve it by directly evaluating professionals for service to fit into direct need areas if the individual chooses to accept the conditions.
2. Mental wellness/ Health
 - Understand the role of mental health

- Differentiate mental health from mental illness: working 2-3 jobs to avoid starvation is not a state of mental wellness

3. Housing

- Affordable housing should be provided for those who need it by providing accessible government subsidized decent housing. BC Housing takes too long missing the times of desperate need. Depending on the quality of the homes, most people would leave to more comfortable settings as soon as they can.
- Various cities have found that it is cost-effective for the society as a whole to provide free housing even e.g. Utah, Medicine Hut.

4. Food

- The Success by 6 feeding programme leaves what hope for children after 6? After 6 is school age and thus brain power. Therefore, beneficiary age should be extended to 18 so the children can get through college with adequate nutrition.
- The concept of organic versus non-organic raises concerns as to the nutritious value/ disease association of the “inorganic” food. The presence of these food items clearly indicate that there is something wrong with them and since the low income classes cannot always afford the expensive organic food, they are constantly under threat of disease from eating these foods.
- Thus it would be a great relief if the organic foods are less expensive or in more supply.
- Engage people in their respective communities to establish social and professional networks.
- People on low income cannot afford to buy African food and that results in taking medication on an empty stomach..
- Train PLWHIV to be train the trainers. (Nothing about us without us)
Promote the Ministry of Social Housing and Poverty Reduction

People need to know this ministry exists, its roles and how it can help alleviate their suffering.

SUMMARY OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Solutions and Actions That Can Make a Difference (a) Looking at the list of issues and solutions generated, what types of solutions did the individuals who participated in your meeting identify as most important to them ?[Each participant should receive four (4) sticky dots to put on the solutions that from their perspective are most important]. Your summary report should include any of the solutions that received a dot from those that received the most dots to those receiving only one dot. • • • •

Solution	Number of dots
Affordable housing	12
Food	12

Policies on education/ International educational acceptance/ skills integration	6
Promote Ministry of Social Housing and poverty reduction	4
Mental wellness/ Health	8

(b) What emerged as the top 3 solutions or ideas based on the conversations and the individual priority setting?

1. International credential/educational acceptance/ Skill integration
2. Affordable accessible housing
3. Mental wellbeing

Meeting ended at 5.30 pm.