More than just a number: A Visual Representation of Poverty in Cape Breton

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Introduction

Using photography, I chose to humanize the social and political issues surrounding poverty in my community, by taking quantitative data and presenting it in a qualitative way.

I was born and raised in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, an island known for beautiful scenery but also staggering poverty created by influences that are beyond the community's control and that have resulted in a high population of vulnerable or at-risk youth. Having worked within my community for several years, spending most of my time volunteering with at risk youth, I can now look at data for poverty and truly put a face to it. In a way, this personal connection is both a blessing and a curse. It allows for a profound sense that "this is real" while at the same time allowing the stories to weigh heavy on my heart.

Structural Inequalities

Inspired by The Long Walk to Freedom, (Mandela, 2013) the biography of Nelson Mandela, I have come to understand that far too often, people are judged because of the circumstances they come from. This can happen in South Africa, India, China, and even right here in Cape Breton, Canada. Equality of opportunity, or the lack thereof, is something that affects everyone.

When you are the one giving children meals, when you talk to the people that are in need, when you hear their stories, something changes in your perspective. Just because a young person is born into a specific context, are they destined to live a life in poverty, are they doomed? Yet this is what children and youth in contexts of poverty hear all the time. How can you break the cycle if all you ever hear is that you are doomed? Poverty is so much greater than the numbers

we see in the reports. There are actual people behind the numbers. This is something that cannot be forgotten. My work seeks to highlight the humanity connected to poverty.

The Name: More than Just a Number

The Government of Canada 2025 poverty report speaks of individuals “feeling infantilized, dehumanized and stigmatized by systems and supports, unable to speak up for themselves and judged when they do.” (Goverment of Canada , 2025) It raises the question how is someone supposed to ask for help if all they face on the other end is judgment. Margret

Wheatley explains “Oppression never occurs between equals” (wheatley, 2002). While volunteering, I had someone say to me “all they see us as is numbers” I could not help but think, where have we gone wrong? As a society where did we go wrong to which people are treated as just a number? Again, as Wheatley notes, the systems that are created to help “create and perpetuate inequality and injustice.…we heard about the people that are benefiting from these systems and the poverty they create.” (wheatley, 2002). It is important to teach our youth that they are more than just a number, more than what dehumanizing systems create, and that they can break the cycle of poverty. Individuals that are accessing these services are not seen as anything more than the number on their client card service and then you leave. I have volunteered in this sector, a considerable number of years and when.

My Community: The importance of first voice

It was important for me to conduct my research in my own community. This is where I grew up, but more importantly, it is where I learned to advocate for individuals who do not have a voice. I have memories of sitting in the parking lot there with my grandfather, listening to music or watching the boats come in. This is not a luxury you would have in a province that is landlocked. My grandfather, uncle, and multiple other family members have worked on the water in some capacity. When I first began this project, I thought it was only my generation of youth that heard that we must leave Cape Breton to be successful. As I have spoken to individuals, even those younger than myself, continue to hear that to be successful you must leave.

One of the best quotes I have heard about Cape Breton is one I heard from my father. My father and I have volunteered hundreds of hours in my community. When he is asked, "Why do it?" he simply looks at the person and says, "Last time I checked, we are from Cape Breton, right?" Cape Bretoners, we help people just because we can. If you can help, then you help. Such a simple statement, yet with so much meaning. Growing up so immersed in my community, and with these values I have volunteered with many organizations that support at-risk individuals in my community, especially youth and girls. When I walk around town, I cannot go far without running into someone I know.

Why pictures and what was the goal of this project?

The blessing and the curse of my time volunteering in the community is my ability to see a number and put a human picture to it. In Nova Scotia, one in five children live in poverty (Frank, Saulnier, & Harrington, 2024). So, for example, if you look at a class of thirty children,

six of them live in poverty. Six five-year-olds with hungry bellies. How is this okay? With the use of pictures, I wanted to make a tangible version of how I look at poverty statistics. I wanted to humanize it. More than this though, I wanted to show the strength of individuals that live in poverty, the determination of so-called ”at-risk” youth. I want to challenge the narrative that surrounds my community, that if you are from Cape Breton, you will not get anywhere. I wanted to change “you can’t,” to “watch me.”

Human Rights and Poverty

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that certain fundamental rights should be available to all individuals; these are not privileges but essential for a life of dignity. When people live in poverty, their basic human rights are often unmet. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his 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" (United Nations, 1948).

The book Ending Homelessness in Canada: The Case for Homelessness Prevention highlights that "35% of Canadians have either experienced homelessness or know someone who has" (Hughes, 2024). The book attributes this, though not exclusively, to "housing markets becoming increasingly inaccessible to extremely poor people"., it notes that "exasperated by COVID-19, youth homelessness is clearly on the March across Canada in both bigger and smaller cities" (Hughes, 2024). Ensuring access to affordable and safe housing for every individual in Canada is paramount, especially given the numerous risks faced by those who are homeless. Hughes states that "homeless people are at increased risk of dying prematurely and suffering a wide range of health problems, including seizures, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, muscular skeletal disorders, tuberculosis, and skin and foot problems" (Hughes, 2024). (Hughes, 2024)

Hughes indicates that "Unintentional injuries, including falls or being struck by a vehicle, are the leading cause of morbidity and mortality among men experiencing homelessness". (Hughes, 2024). Hughes also points out that "Death due to an unintentional overdose of drugs or alcohol

or both, are also common" (Hughes, 2024). Lastly, exposure to the elements poses a major hazard. In wintry weather, the risk of frostbite and hypothermia is substantial, with deaths due to freezing being common. Conversely, in hot weather, severe sunburn and heat stroke can occur. (Hughes, 2024)

Canada's Poverty Reduction Pillars

The Canadian Government introduced a significant initiative in 2018 with the establishment of three core pillars to measure progress towards its overall goal of poverty reduction. These pillars were designed to articulate the essential requirements for an individual to thrive across Canada, irrespective of their location. This framework provided a foundational baseline, which had not previously existed.

Under these three pillars, it is asserted that every individual residing in Canada is entitled to dignity, opportunity and inclusion, and resilience and security.

Dignity

The concept of Dignity is defined as "Lifting Canadians out of poverty by ensuring basic needs— such as safe and affordable housing, healthy food, and health care are met" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024). This pillar encompasses far more than financial support. The initial poverty reduction strategy highlights that this involves addressing the fundamental needs of all individuals, specifically mentioning access to healthcare, affordable and nutritious food, and appropriate housing.

Opportunity and Inclusion

The pillar of Opportunity and Inclusion is described as "Helping Canadians join the middle class by promoting full participation in society and equality of opportunity". (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024). This dimension focuses on fostering the inclusion of all individuals, irrespective of their circumstances, into a functional bracket of the economy, through equal opportunities of access to social determinants such as education, employment, and recreational supports.

Resilience and Security

The final pillar is Resilience and Security, centered on the principle that every individual should have access to social support designed specifically to help. The definition of the Resilience and Security pillar is stated as "Supporting the middle class by protecting Canadians from falling into poverty and by supporting income security and resilience". (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024). It is through the collective implementation of these three interconnected factors that the strategy aims to support the development of a more sustainable future.

Why Focus on Dignity?

I chose to look at my project from the lens of seeing individuals with dignity. The 2024 Government of Canada poverty report explains that “dignity is meeting people where they are and treating them as humans” (Goverment of Canada , 2018). When the report was being written, participants in the focus groups stated that government services, benefits, and programs are often not designed with dignity in mind. “People are required to lose everything in order to access help” (Goverment of Canada , 2018). Oftentimes, when people are trying to access these services, more emphasis is placed on catching individuals who are taking advantage of the system and stopping individuals from potentially abusing the system. This approach is used rather than appropriately responding to those who are accessing the system for its intended purpose or responding to where individuals are in their current situations and what has brought them to the service providers in the first place.

Poverty in Canada

As stated in the 2025 Annual Canadian Poverty report, poverty is not the failure of one individual person nor about lack of money (Goverment of Canada , 2025). Poverty is a systemic issue that has been manufactured by individuals rooted in policies and structures that serve as an advantage to some while remaining a disadvantage to others. No one person has the key to ending poverty; it is a multi-system failure that requires a multidisciplinary approach to initiate

the start to poverty reduction therefore hopefully creating a future without poverty and creating more sustainable and resilient communities in the years to come.

Longitudinal research out of Massey University in New Zealand, has demonstrated the benefits of having supportive community resources and how these supports can contribute to positive outcomes for youth seen as being "at risk," broken or beyond help (Sanders & Munford, Youth-centred practice: Positive youth development practices and, 2014). Using the lens of Positive Youth Development Theory results from this study show these youth as being capable of learning the foundational skills necessary to become productive members of their community. The Youth Transitions study understands that the vulnerability of youth is because of their exposure to risks in their environment and it is because of these risks that they are believed to no longer be able to thrive because of circumstances beyond their control (Sanders & Munford, The Youth Transitions Study Final Report, 2019). Through the Lense of positive youth development theory we look at the adolescence years as a period of growth rather than a problem that be.

Picture Examples

Introduction

It was especially important for me to be able to get photographs from across my community. I also wanted to be the one that took the photos so that they would reflect my own perspective and the way I see things in the community. The following are highlights of the photographs that I took, and the stories behind the ones that meant the most to me.

INQUISITION (NOUN)

IN·QUI·SI·TION¸

IN-KW -ˈZI-SH-N

In 2024, one in five children in Nova Scotia lived in poverty (Frank, Saulnier, & Harrington, 2024). Consider a group of five young children, under the age of ten, represented by their five pairs of feet. One of those children would be living in poverty. Poverty means being deprived of the essential resources needed for a basic standard of living. This means that one of these children lacks the necessities that every human being should have, regardless of their background. This challenges us to ask: how do we decide which child does not get enough food to curb their hunger, or which child gets to sleep with extra blankets because their heat is turned off? Millions of people across Canada are experiencing poverty, and many feel unseen, unheard, and at the mercy of decision-makers who do not live with or see poverty firsthand daily.

It is vital that we challenge negative narratives around poverty. Are individuals born in places like Cape Breton automatically destined for a life of poverty, misconceptions, and negative stories? Adults significantly influence how children see themselves and their place in the world. It is up to us to change the narrative. Instead of telling children what they cannot do because of circumstances beyond their control, we should start helping them figure out what they can do, who they can help, and what they are able to do to create a stronger, more sustainable future for themselves and their communities.

FRAGMENTED (ADJECTIVE)

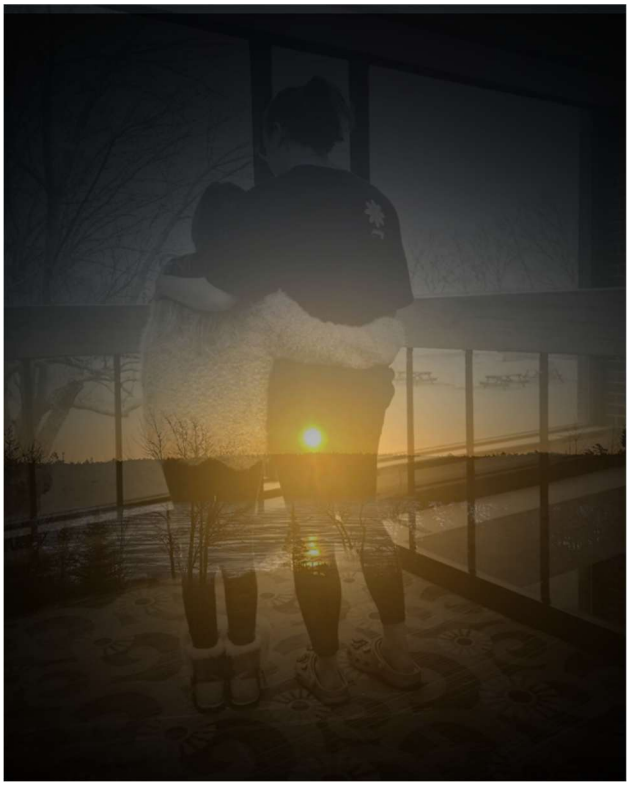
frag·ment·ed

ˈfrag-ˌmen-t d

Can Band-Aids be used to fix a crack in the pavement? Something that is meant to hold together a laceration on your skin can also close a crack in the pavement. If you said this to someone, they would say that you are crazy. Yet we often talk about Band-Aid solutions. The Cambridge dictionary defines a band aid solution as a solution that does not address the root problem. Throughout my project I looked at so many workable solutions for poverty. But so many of the systems are interdependent on one another, yet do not work together. So, when you solve one problem, another soon pops up. Through this picture I wished to present an attempt to fix a big problem (poverty) with small solutions (Band Aids) to show that to truly get to a place where we are working towards a world where there are no individuals living in poverty there must be collaboration across all sectors. Something like poverty is not just one person's problem, or one department's program. It is a global and intersecting problem.

Poverty is a challenging word. It is a word that can make you vulnerable. But in terms of strength, I do not know of any other stronger people than the women I meet with every day. They do not define it as strength. They just see it as living. We are at a point in time where we are hyper-focused on the happenings in our own life rather than what is happening around us. It is not our fault; we want to be sure that our people are taken care of. This is why until you start talking to individuals you never know about the parents that have chosen to feed their children themselves. The parents that have old, tattered clothing so that their children can have some of what they need. Individuals living in poverty are often faced with decisions that as a collective we would like to think do not happen. At the end of the day, seeing" hidden poverty" is a key component in the total eradication of poverty. And doesn't that start with individuals taking the time to listen to one another and treat people with kindness?

Call to Action:



Poverty itself is a widespread issue across the country, and its presentation varies significantly by location. How it manifests in Nunavut would differ from Cape Breton, and how it presents in Cape Breton might differ from Vancouver. It is crucial to confront the reality that some children do not have enough food to get them through the day.

Some children are forced to sleep with extra blankets because their household's heat has been shut off, or a parent must skip a meal so their child can eat. Many factors contribute to these circumstances, but fundamentally, no child should have to go without basic human rights. As a worldwide community, we should actively pursue ways to fulfill the promise made in 1989 for the eradication of child poverty across Canada.

To further support the 1989, promise from the Canadian government the following are things that I feel would be beneficial:

A multidisciplinary approach to poverty reduction: One discipline cannot solve poverty. It is a multifaceted issue that requires insight and input from multiple and diverse disciplines. Many support systems and sectors go into breaking the cycle of poverty. Relatedly, there needs to be communication at all levels of government and social service agencies to ensure that no one, or no one factor, is left out of the decision making.

Humanization of Poverty: When we are faced with statistics, they can easily be just numbers. But they are not. Each statistic is connected to a human life, a community. This is something that must be expressed in every aspect of poverty reduction, bringing in

both the lived experience of individuals that are living in poverty as well as the front-line workers that see this every day. It becomes easier to disconnect from what is happening when there are no humans attached to it. When you attach humans to statistics like “1 in 5” the information goes from being just a number to in a class of thirty children, there are six that are deprived of basic human rights. Six is too many.

Fostering Community Resilience: Children that are born into poverty are more likely to live in poverty as they age. They are also more likely to raise their own children in poverty. Resilience is commonly looked at as being an individual characteristic, something that can be achieved within oneself, to cope with adversity. However, the ability to bounce back from challenges, and to thrive, is influenced by the individuals around the youth, and the resources that they have access to. Therefore, rather than focusing on individual strengths, fostering community resilience ensures that the community around the child is stronger, impacting on how they see themselves.

The eradication of poverty requires a multidisciplinary approach, tackling various issues across multiple sectors. As other countries such as ?? have already shown, reducing the child poverty rate is possible, but when there are holes in the social safety net, individuals will fall through. We all must work together to create a stronger, more sustainable future for the generations to come, because what we do does not just affect us; it affects our broader communities and many people for years to come. Ending poverty is possible, but one person can only do so much; through community and collaboration, we can create a better future for all.

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