

What is Social Cohesion, and Why Do We Care?

By

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Social cohesion is a new expression coined to address an old issue – how to maintain social order. Let’s begin with the definition created by the French Commissariat du plan in 1997: Social cohesion “is a set of social processes that help instil in individuals the sense of belonging to the same community and the feeling that they are recognized as members of that community.”

In practice, these social processes exist at work, at play, in public life and community affairs. Do all citizens have the chance to work to earn their own living and support their families? Do all citizens have the right to vote and to have a voice in community affairs? Do all children have access to schools, to recreation? Do all citizens feel safe when they walk the streets and respected by the people they meet?

Social cohesion is not a utopia where all is peace and tranquility. Instead, it describes a society that accepts diversity and manages conflicts before they become fights. It requires a society where workplaces are fair, where the voice of workers is respected, where people can express their views without fear of acrimony or reprisal.

Why is this important?

Canada and Quebec have become diverse, pluralistic societies exposed to highly competitive, global markets.

One challenge to social cohesion comes from the growing role of markets in our lives. Competition offers opportunity of great rewards as well as risk of unemployment and insecurity. These possibilities, unfortunately, increase income inequality and create greater social distances within communities. Cities like Montreal and Toronto, for example, have seen increasing concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods, where many young men do not work, and where high school drop out rates are still remarkably high. They may only live a kilometre away from privileged families where a high percentage of the young people are headed for universities and good jobs. Such contrasts, if not addressed, pose a real threat to social cohesion.

Indicators of Economic and Social Disadvantage

Poverty

Certain groups in our largest cities are especially vulnerable to poverty.

% of residents with low income in selected cities in 1995

	Montreal	Ottawa	Toronto	Vancouver	All Cities
	(average)				
Children under 15	50	40	37	36	30
Youth 15-24	51	43	33	41	31
Recent immigrants	68	64	53	53	52

Concentration of poverty

Poor families in Montreal and Toronto are more likely to live in very poor neighbourhoods than are poor families in most other Canadian cities.

% of poor families living in very poor neighbourhoods

	1980	1995
Toronto	15	30
Montreal	30	40
Vancouver	7	14
Ottawa	28	28

Income inequality

The wealthiest families in Toronto and Montreal have 4 times as much income as the poorest. The ratio is lower, but still significant, in Vancouver and Ottawa.

Ratio of income of top 5% of families to bottom 5% in 1995

Toronto	4.1
Montreal	3.9
Vancouver	3.0
Ottawa	3.0

Diversity, an Opportunity and a Challenge

The coincidence of inequality and diversity complicates the challenge of social cohesion. The diversity of our people greatly enriches our life, but it also introduces different value systems, many more languages, and different ethnic and religious traditions. Even second and third generation minority groups are still being treated as strangers. Many of them do prosper in this country. But too many are stuck in the poor neighbourhoods where their economic and social prospects are severely limited.

The changing political culture is also creating greater distances between citizens and their governments. People no longer defer to authority, they have lost patience with political institutions which are not accountable for their actions, are slow to respond to the needs of the population, or seem to be out of touch with the lived experience of ordinary people.

If citizens are to gain a sense of solidarity and common purpose, they must trust their political institutions to represent them fairly, to serve their needs, and to reflect a basic understanding of the turbulent changes they experience in their daily lives.

In this context of competition, diversity, and greater inequality, people yearn for a sense of belonging and common purpose to anchor their lives and to define their identity. They are looking for respect and reciprocity in workplaces, schools, community spaces, and political institutions.

The most successful societies, going forward, will be those that create those social connections and foster a sense of mutual responsibility, even as they strive to compete head on with the industrial might of the global economy.

This is our shared challenge – a challenge we each face in our own neighbourhood, our city, region, province, and country.

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Sources: Kevin K. Lee, *Urban Poverty in Canada*, www.ccsd.org ; J. Myles, et al, *Neighbourhood Inequality in Canadian Cities*, www.statcan.ca; Michael Hatfield, *Concentrations of Poverty and Distressed Neighbourhoods in Canada*, www.hrdc-drhc/arb.gc.ca

Note: The 2001 census will provide more recent income data, but it is not yet available for this kind of detailed analysis by city and age group. The economic recovery since 1997 has probably improved the position of some poor families in all cities.