Tackling Urban Poverty: Finding the Right Policy Mix

January 31, 2003 – A national strategy to enhance the quality of life and competitiveness of Canada's cities must grapple with the growing challenge of urban poverty.

Poverty has increased in Canadian cities in the past two decades. It has also become more concentrated. Without a joint effort by governments at all levels, these trends could become self-reinforcing. The recipe for that joint effort is the subject of a new report from CPRN's Family Network.

Urban Poverty: Fostering Sustainable and Supportive Communities, by Anne-Marie Séguin and Gérard Divay of the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Urbanisation, Culture et Société, looks at what is needed to foster supportive, socially sustainable communities in poor neighbourhoods in major cities across the country.

In the early 90s, the poor population in the largest cities grew by almost 34%, compared to slightly more than 18% outside metropolitan areas. Single-parent families, Aboriginal people, recent immigrants, visible minorities, elderly women and the disabled are more likely to be poor.

Despite the bleak picture, Séguin and Divay find Canada's social programs have helped to mitigate the tendency towards extreme social polarization witnessed in U.S. metropolitan areas. There is considerable variation, in fact, between neighbourhoods and cities in terms of the social mix, degree of deprivation and persistence of poverty.

Those variations, the authors argue, call for fine tuning of anti-poverty measures. They require a mix of "aspatial," general, social programs that benefit all individuals, and more targeted programs to meet the needs of specific communities.

"Social sustainability involves a complex of conditions – monetary resources and access to employment, good quality public services (e.g. health, education, recreation), and community institutions that support and sustain participation in the life of the city. The mix will vary from community to community," says Séguin.

As a result, Divay maintains "this demands a high level of collaboration between all levels of government and the private and community sectors."

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The authors present case studies from Montreal to illustrate the ways in which targeted interventions can reinforce the positive effects of general programs, especially where they involve partnerships among governments and community level actors.

The current work is the fourth and final paper in a CPRN series on the federal role in cities edited by Family Network Research Associate, Leslie Seidle. Other previously published papers in the series deal with urban Aboriginal people, immigration, and housing.

In ***The Federal Role in Canada's Cities: Overview of Issues and Proposed Actions***, also released today, Seidle reviews the recent debate about the role of the Government of Canada on urban issues, and draws together the arguments and recommendations of all four papers.

The papers are based on the premise that the economic strength of cities is linked to the state of the urban social fabric, to issues such as inclusion and access to equitable life chances, to the availability and quality of social services and, ultimately, to their appeal as places to live.

"The authors demonstrate that the success of Canada's cities depends on enhancing the life chances of their residents," says Seidle. "This means support for individual citizens through general policies and programs, targeted initiatives for vulnerable neighbourhoods, and efforts to build networks and bridges to foster inclusion and participation."

"The federal government's role in this may take many forms. It is important that they all be informed by a collaborative spirit, openness to innovation and responsiveness to local concerns."

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