

Policies to Boost the Income, Security and Productivity of Canada's Vulnerable Workers

Ottawa – The final report in CPRN's research series on vulnerable workers presents the most comprehensive analysis of the subject to date. It also proposes measures to overcome this threat to Canada's well-being and competitiveness.

Risk and Opportunity: Creating Options for Vulnerable Workers, by Ron Saunders, Director of CPRN's Work Network, provides a synthesis of the findings of six previous research studies, as well as other recent literature, with an emphasis on their implications for public policy.

Vulnerable workers are those whose participation in the labour market leaves their well-being at risk because of difficulty accessing work that is decently paid and/or that offers conditions of work that meet basic social norms. Two million Canadian workers fit this description..

"Individuals feel the impact most, but the roots are social," says Saunders. "Workers are vulnerable because of external circumstances, not because they lack the capacity or will to better their lot."

Vulnerable workers typically earn low pay, lack the opportunity to upgrade skills, lack legal protection or are handicapped in terms of defending their rights, don't qualify for programs like Employment Insurance, lack access to non-statutory benefits like medical insurance or dental plans, have difficulty obtaining affordable housing or affordable child care, and rarely belong to unions.

"Our underlying principle," says Saunders, "is that working people deserve the opportunity to live decently, to realize their potential for personal development, and to contribute to our economy and society."

Saunders' recommendations address the following objectives:

- *Adequate Income* – market wages, plus any government income supplements for the working poor should ensure no individual working full-time is in poverty.
- *Basic Protections Regarding Conditions of Work* – all employees should have real access to protections like minimum wages, overtime and vacation pay, public holidays and maternity and parental leave.
- *Basic Social Benefits* – all workers should have access to supports like catastrophic drug coverage, affordable housing and quality, affordable child care.
- *Opportunities to Move Up* – low-paid workers or those able only to find part-time work should be able to improve their job prospects by upgrading their skills.

Among immediate priorities for federal and provincial action, Saunders recommends:

- Increased minimum wages and regular increases over time.
- Ensuring compliance with employment standards.
- Support to community organization that support vulnerable workers.
- Improving access to affordable child care and affordable housing.

In the medium- to long-term, he calls for:

- A federal program of modest income supplements for the working poor.
- Expanded access to unemployment benefits under EI, especially for non-standard workers and entrants and re-entrants to the labour market.
- Catastrophic drug coverage and basic dental care on a “progressive universal” basis to ensure low and modest-income workers coverage at reasonable cost.
- Enhancing the high school curriculum to provide occupational qualifications as an option for young people.
- Opportunities for low-paid workers to upgrade their skills.
- Improved programs for immigrants to help them succeed in the labour market.
- Removal or reduction of asset-based clawbacks in government programs so that poor families have a real opportunity to save.
- Measures to improve protections for non-standard workers (e.g. temp agency workers).

“What we propose is a redistribution of the risk inherent in an economy that must be globally competitive, where skills and training are critical to decent work, and where non-standard employment is on the rise,” Saunders says.

The report’s proposals would shift some of that risk from vulnerable workers to employers (higher minimum wage, compliance with employment standards, access to training opportunities) and governments (earnings supplements for the working poor, a more universal approach to basic social supports, more resources for skills upgrading programs). The recommendations are intended to work together to ensure that they “support competitiveness while giving vulnerable workers a real opportunity to improve their well-being,” says Saunders.

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