The faces of poverty

Neighbour. Friend. Family.

In rural Haldimand and Norfolk Counties, Ontario, Canada, more than 6,000 people, or one in 17, live in poverty (5.7% of the population). Almost 2,000 children and youth, or one in 13, live in poverty (7.4% of the population aged 17 and less). Between 2007 and 2011, the Ontario Works (OW)—welfare—average caseload increased by 34.4%.

A message from the Poverty Reduction Working Group of Haldimand and Norfolk

"We work daily with growing numbers of individuals and families who live in poverty. In their struggle to survive under harsh conditions, they have been shunned, put down, and bullied by those around them. Such experiences just add to their burden, and show that few people know, understand, or care about them.

"Many have asked us to tell their stories. They want the community to see what poverty is really like—and to treat them not with cruelty, but with kindness and respect. In response to their pleas, this paper profiles some low-income residents who have agreed to speak out. We also share with you some shocking statistics that reveal the extent of poverty in our area. Finally, we list local resources that support those living in poverty, and provide ideas for how the community can help.

"We believe that by painting a true picture of life under the poverty line we can open many eyes and minds. We hope that these insights will inspire all of us to pull together to reduce poverty in our neighbourhoods—and make our Counties a better place for all."

WHAT IS POVERTY?

Poverty starts with money but affects all parts of life. It means not having enough income to meet the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and health. It means not having choices. Low-income individuals and families spend their days struggling just to survive, too busy with that to hope and dream about luxuries or the future. Their lives rarely include extras such as car and home ownership, regular healthy meals, proper medication, new clothes, or leisure travel. And these hardships often plunge them into mental or physical illness.

Rural poverty

In rural areas such as Haldimand and Norfolk Counties, those living in poverty face even more barriers to survival and growth. Towns that offer health care, shopping, and other services are few and far between. With no money for car purchase and almost no public transit, the only choices are to hitchhike or beg a ride. Paying work is hard to find, since farm jobs depend on the weather and seasons, many employers are closing down, and competition for part-time jobs is fierce. And in an area averaging only 38 people per square kilometre, those under the poverty line can be even more isolated and prone to depression or addiction.

The poverty line: LICO

One way of determining poverty is using Low Income Cut-offs (LICOs). If a family’s annual income is below the cut-off, all individuals in that family are considered to have a low income. The current LICOs in Haldimand and Norfolk by size of family are:

- 1 person $11,264
- 2 persons $13,709
- 3 persons $17,071
- 4 persons $21,296
- 5 persons $24,251
- 6 persons $26,895
- 7 + persons $29,539

What’s inside:

- Speaking out: The voices of poverty
- Resources for those living in poverty
- 3 myths debunked
- 5 ways community members can help
made it impossible to find or keep a job, so he is on ODSP. “I met 21-year-old Chris McEvoy. His learning disability has impaired his ability to work, and other medical conditions have limited his ability to lift and do any lifting. As a result, he has been unable to hold a job. Chris gets help with his clothing and other needs from his family and friends.”

The Bergens — Johan (top right), Katharina (bottom right) and their children — may live in poverty but feel better off than they did in Mexico. They were also billed for some medical services that they did not receive or need. “I was very upset when I found that ‘living in poverty meant not having choices.’”

Larry Hart has spent much of his life on top of the world. He joined the navy, got his chef’s papers from George Brown College, and graduated from Mohawk College with electronic drafting credentials (AutoCAD). He now works in the food bank and Ontario Works (OHIP), the Bergens needed $8,000 for one child’s education, and Chris McEvoy needs $8,000 for his college education. They were billed for some medical services that they did not receive or need. “I was very upset when I found that ‘living in poverty meant not having choices.’”

“Living in poverty means not having choices.”

Lena Reid

One day, her neighbours painted white and threw them at Lena Reid’s house. Another day, they came to her front yard and threatened her mixed-race children with bodily harm. Others have called the Children’s Aid Society and the police to report her for suspected abuse and other fictitious crimes. Each day, the girls are bullied at school. “I don’t smoke, drink, or do drugs,” says the 55-year-old who works at a local meat packing plant. “I am on the ‘welfare diet.’”

“I’m on the ‘welfare diet’—once a week I must get to eat for a week.”

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Denise Schweertman

The last time Denise Schweertman remembers buying new clothes was a decade ago. Her wardrobe is mostly handouts and used clothing from thrift stores. “I’m on the ‘welfare diet’—once a week I must get to eat for a week.”

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Christine Aldridge and Chris McEvoy

Christine Aldridge’s life changed forever in 1996 when she took her children and fled an abusive marriage with a broken leg, internal injuries, and a mound of debt. Since then, she has lived below the poverty line. Now, at age 58 with a pension of $14 a month, she has applied for benefits from ODSP and Canada Pension Plan Disability. But she has little hope that her life will improve. “You can’t see internal damage such as torn ligaments and fractured bones,” she says. “People think I’m ‘stupid.’”

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3 myths debunked

Many false impressions exist about those living in poverty. Here are three common ones.

**Myth #1:** Haldimand and Norfolk don’t have homelessness like the big cities, where people sleep over subway grates, in cardboard boxes, or in tent towns. **Truth:** The problem here may be worse, since our homeless are virtually invisible. We don’t see them because they’re “couch-surfing” in others’ homes; living in old tobacco kilns, greenhouses and barns; or surfing in others’ homes; living in old cardboard boxes, or in tent towns. We don’t see them because they fit into these stereotypes.

**Myth #2:** The poor are lazy and uneducated; addicted to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco; and want to feed off the system and taxpayers. **Truth:** For the most part, low-income residents do not fit these stereotypes. Most are constantly looking for well-paying work, but it’s just not available. Many have educations and jobs, but the pay is so low they can’t make ends meet or escape the poverty cycle. These are the “working poor.”

**Myth #3:** People living in poverty still have it pretty good. **Truth:** A life in poverty is extremely difficult and can rob you of basic dignity. Social services and other support are not easy to get. Those with low incomes must prove they qualify for various benefits. This means filling out countless forms, talking to many people, and then waiting for answers. And with poverty growing every year and government funds shrinking, resources are being stretched farther than ever.

### 5 ways community members can help

1. **Be a good neighbour.** Take the time to understand what it’s like to live in poverty and treat the less fortunate with care. Even saying “hello” with a smile, offering someone a ride to an appointment, sharing some fresh fruit or vegetables, or buying your neighbour a coffee can turn a bad day into a good one.

2. **Promote good nutrition.** If you’re donating groceries to a food bank, try to give as much protein, fruit, and vegetables as possible rather than starchy foods. Call the food bank in advance to find out what they need.

3. **Become a volunteer or donor.** Offer your time to various organizations that provide services to low-income families and individuals. If you want to help financially, find an organization doing the kind of work you’d like to support and make a donation.

4. **Talk to your politicians.** Ask your Municipal Councillors, Member of Provincial Parliament, or federal Member of Parliament to make poverty a priority. This means asking the government for more funding, more social housing, more social assistance programs, and more poverty awareness initiatives.

5. **Join the fight against poverty.** Several Canadian anti-poverty organizations have been formed, including the Poverty Reduction Working Group of Haldimand and Norfolk (www.hnhu.org). **Others are:**

- Canada Without Poverty (cwp-csp.ca)
- Make Poverty History (makepovertyhistory.ca)
- Faith Communities in Action Against Poverty (faithtoendpoverty.ca)

The need for subsidized (geared-to-income) housing has never been more critical. For example, there are more than 300 qualified applicants on the Central Waiting List for geared-to-income housing in Haldimand and Norfolk in the first quarter of 2012. There are approximately 850 geared-to-income housing units in Haldimand and Norfolk Counties. There were 24 families, singles and senior applicants housed in geared-to-income housing in the first quarter of 2012.

Several new privately owned affordable housing projects built with provincial government assistance are slated to open by the end of 2012 with rents that are set at 80% of the market rent for the community. In total 54 one and two bedroom units of affordable housing have already been built or are under construction in the two Counties. This total also includes 21 supportive housing units for senior citizens that are under construction at Grandview Lodge in Dunnville.

For updates, visit www.haldimand-norfolk.org