



the **DIGNITY  
PROJECT**



debunking myths about poverty in canada

SalvationArmy.ca/**dignity**

# overview

You may not come across poverty on a daily basis in Canada, but believe us, it's there. In fact, **one in 11 Canadians**, a number that has gone relatively unchanged over the past decade, live in poverty today. This year, to coincide with the launch of our new initiative, ***the Dignity Project***, The Salvation Army is releasing data to illustrate public perceptions of poverty and the poor.

One of the primary motivations for launching ***the Dignity Project*** is to educate the public about the reality of poverty in the 21st century — and underscore the point that everyone deserves fundamental human dignity. In order to achieve this, we felt it was first important to take stock and answer this question: **How do average Canadians feel about the poor living among them today?**

Our goal in releasing this data is to educate the public and address some of the misconceptions about Canadians living in poverty. The report findings reflect some good news and some bad news. The vast majority of Canadians do believe that everyone, despite their socioeconomic status, deserves dignity and most agree that the poor deserve a helping hand. The bad news is that many still believe that the poor have mostly themselves to blame and that poverty is a choice. This is contrary to The Salvation Army's experience serving the poor in Canada for nearly 130 years.

According to our survey, Canadians believe that **poverty is the third most important issue** facing the country today, behind the economy and health care.

Other key findings of the report include:

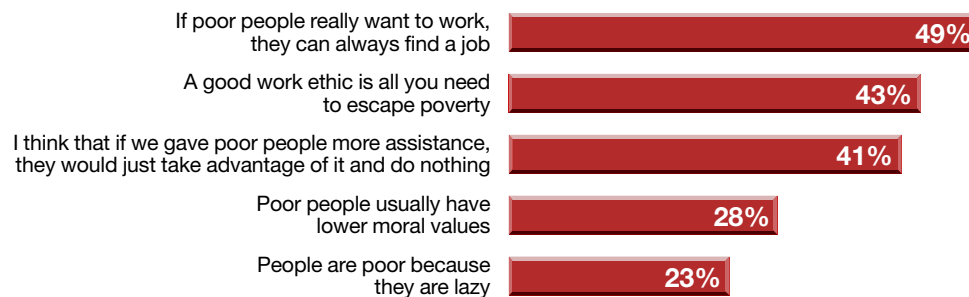
- About **50 percent of Canadians** feel that a family of four could get by on **\$10,000 – \$30,000 per year or less**.
- **Nearly half** of all Canadians feel that **if poor people really want to work, they can always find a job**.
- **Nearly 40 percent** believe people who live in poverty in Canada **"still have it pretty good."**
- **About a quarter** of Canadians feel that people are poor because they are **lazy** and have **lower moral values** than average.
- **96 percent** of Canadians believe that **everyone deserves a sense of dignity**, but only **65 percent** believe that **being poor can rob you of dignity**.

Today, approximately **three million Canadians live in poverty** and each year The Salvation Army serves 1.6 million people across the country with basic needs — many among the nation's poor. The Salvation Army takes a holistic approach to service and makes every effort to restore a sense of dignity to our clients. With the launch of ***the Dignity Project***, The Salvation Army is working to address the dehumanizing scourge of poverty and injustice and educate the public about what it means to live in poverty — and what they can do to help. With your support, dignity is within reach for all!

*Myth: Poverty is a choice and the poor are the problem.*

**Fact: There are systemic barriers that make escaping poverty difficult, if not impossible, for many.**

### Canadians' attitude towards the poor



Our report revealed startling perceptions about the poor. Many Canadians hold opinions that perpetuate the idea that “the poor are the problem” and that their decisions and choices led them to a life of poverty:

- **Nearly half** of all respondents agreed with the notion that, if poor people really want to work, they **can always find a job**.
- **43 percent** agreed that “a **good work ethic is all you need** to escape poverty.”
- **41 percent** believe that the poor would “take advantage” of any assistance given and “**do nothing**.”
- **28 percent** believe the poor have **lower moral values** than average.
- And **nearly a quarter** believe that “people are **poor because they are lazy**.”

Certainly, personal choice plays a role in all of our lives and some individuals make poor decisions that contribute to future problems. However, there are also significant systemic barriers that perpetuate a cycle of poverty. Many individuals that are living in poverty experience difficulty retaining stable employment, due to challenges such as mental health issues and addiction that inhibit their success, and with the Canadian unemployment rate currently at 7.8 percent, finding a job is easier said than done.

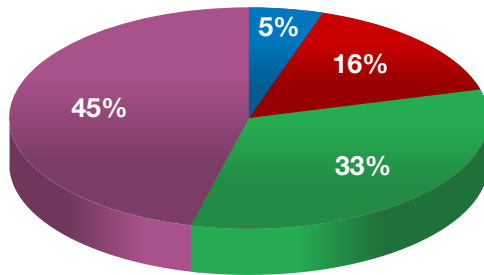
A 2009 study of men at Salvation Army shelters nationwide showed that **90 percent would prefer to live in permanent housing** and **51 percent reported making attempts to find permanent housing**. More than **one-quarter of these shelter users were actually employed** in some capacity — and yet were still utilizing the shelter system. As Canada continues to emerge from one of the most severe economic recessions in recent history, The Salvation Army is seeing many former donors coming through our doors to keep their families cared for and fed. Everyday, we witness people making strides to escape poverty.



*Myth: A family of four is able to live off of \$10,000 – \$30,000 a year.*

**Fact: It is extremely difficult to get by on this amount. For a family of four living in an urban area, the actual poverty level cut-off is nearly \$35,000.**

**What is the least amount of money a family of four can get by on in Canada?**



- < \$10,000
- \$10,000 – \$20,000
- \$20,000 – \$30,000
- \$30,000 +



Many Canadians underestimate the level at which a family of four qualifies as impoverished with **more than half of all respondents** pegging the "get by" level between \$10,000 and \$30,000. Specifically:

- **A third of respondents** felt that a family of four could subsist at **\$20,000 – \$30,000 per year**.
- **16 percent** believed **\$10,000 – \$20,000** was reasonable.
- **Five percent** suggested the family could live on **less than \$10,000**.
- On a positive note, **85 percent** of respondents recognized that it is **almost impossible to survive on minimum wage**.

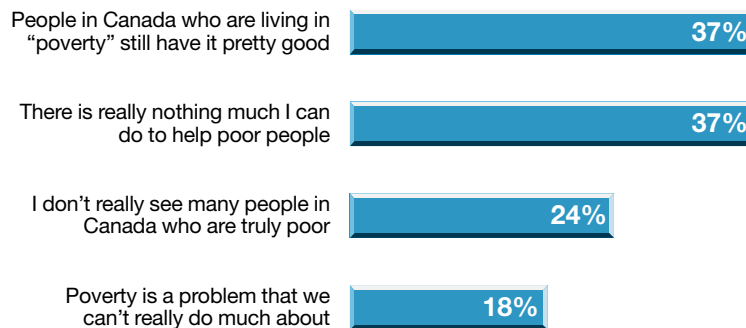
In fact, it is extremely difficult for a family of four to live on less than \$40,000 per year in an urban area. According to Statistics Canada, the average family of four, with two working parents, has an annual income of \$84,800. To qualify as impoverished, a family's total income needs to amount to \$34,289, less than half of this average. In a rural area, the poverty level is \$22,783. Often, The Salvation Army serves clients whose annual income is actually slightly higher than these cut-off rates, demonstrating that even these poverty levels may be slightly unrealistic.



*Myth: People in Canada who are living in poverty still have it pretty good.*

**Fact: A life in poverty is extremely difficult and can rob you of basic dignity.**

#### Canadians' perceptions on the poor.



Many Canadians continue to believe the myth that Canadians living in poverty still have it "okay" and that, even if it was a problem, there's not much they can do to help. A significant minority agree that:

- People living in poverty in Canada "**still have it pretty good.**" (37 percent)
- There is really **nothing much I can do** to help poor people. (37 percent)
- Poverty is a problem that we **can't really do much about.** (18 percent)

A life in poverty is far from good. According to a 2009 study of Salvation Army shelter residents, nearly half indicated that they were experiencing an ongoing health problem brought on by challenging living conditions. While many poor receive government assistance, research has demonstrated that this typically does not cover the cost of affordable housing.

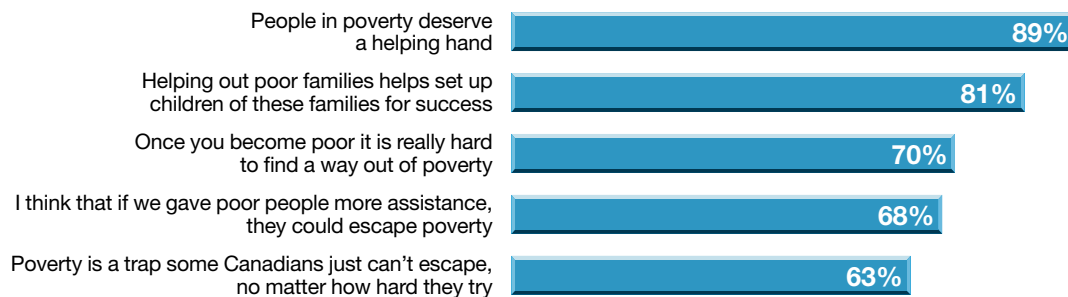
The good news is that, despite perceptions to the contrary, there is something you can do to help by donating to, or volunteering with, a variety of human service organizations across the country.



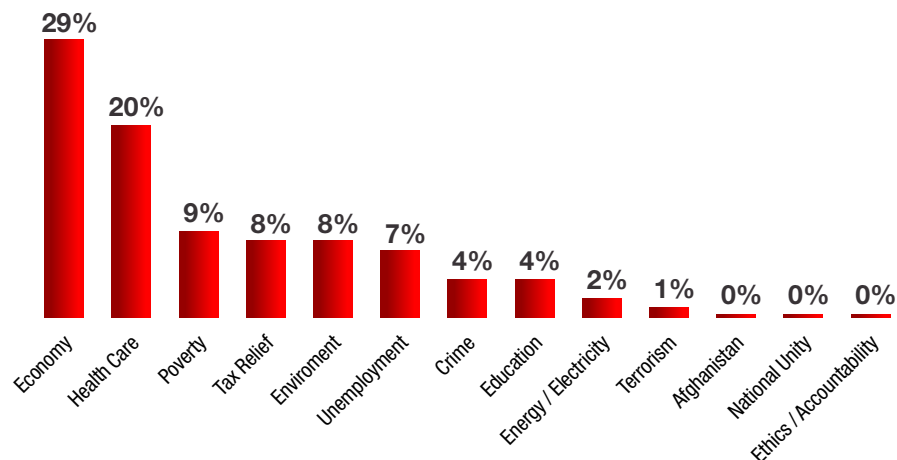
*Myth: Canadians are apathetic about the topic of poverty.*

**Fact: Canadians ranked poverty as the third most important issue facing the country today.**

### Perceptions on poverty



### The most important issues facing Canada today



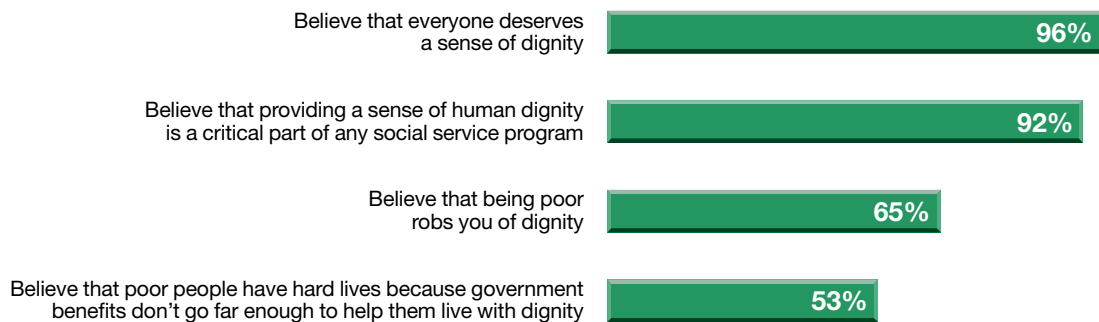
Now for the good news. Many Canadians recognize that poverty is a critical issue. In fact, poverty was ranked as the **third most critical issue facing the country** in our survey, with nine percent of responses. Coupled with related topics like **unemployment (seven percent)** and the economy (**29 percent**), Canadians clearly recognize the importance of an economically well-off populace. Most Canadians also agree that people deserve help to escape poverty:

- **89 percent** of respondents agreed that people living in poverty **deserve a helping hand**.
- **81 percent** agreed that helping out poor families helps **set up children of these families for success**.
- **63 percent** agreed that **poverty is a trap** that is hard to escape.

Canadians are far from apathetic about issues of poverty. While some may have misconceptions about what it means to be poor, there is a general understanding that poverty is an important problem that deserves the attention of society and individuals.

# conclusion

**Fact: Human dignity is a fundamental right for all.**



As the largest non-governmental direct provider of social services in Canada, The Salvation Army believes that everyone deserves dignity. Our survey respondents tend to agree:

- **96 percent** of respondents believe that **everyone deserves a sense of dignity**.
- **92 percent** believe that providing a sense of **human dignity is a critical part** of any social service program.
- **65 percent** believe **being poor robs you of dignity**, meaning more than one-third disagree with this fundamental fact.

For too many Canadians, the basic necessities of life required for human dignity are out of reach. Poverty is often the root cause, leaving three million Canadians without access to everyday resources such as food, clothing and shelter.

For The Salvation Army it is important to understand the public's perceptions on poverty. Breaking through misconceptions and moving towards facts are critical ways we can help break the cycle of poverty. This report demonstrates the road ahead to get the Canadian public to overcome false impressions of the poor and educate them on the reality of a life in poverty.

We have developed ***the Dignity Project*** to inspire and educate the public about the challenges facing society's most vulnerable people. We believe that together, we can address the dehumanizing nature of poverty and injustice. We are asking all Canadians to join ***the Dignity Project*** — let's restore dignity and hope for all!

## survey methodology

This study was conducted online by Angus Reid Public Opinion with a sample of 1,025 Canadians drawn from the Angus Reid Forum, a panel of 100,000+ Canadians who have agreed to participate in research. The survey was conducted January 26-27, 2011 in both English and French. The data was weighed by age, gender, region, language and past Federal vote, to ensure a representative sample of Canadian public opinion.

With a sample of this size, the data can be considered accurate approximately +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

# the DIGNITY PROJECT

SalvationArmy.ca/dignity



**The Salvation Army** is an international Christian organization that began its work in Canada in 1882 and has grown to become the largest non-governmental direct provider of social services in the country. The Salvation Army gives hope and support to vulnerable people today and everyday in 400 communities across Canada and more than 120 countries around the world.

The Salvation Army offers practical assistance for children and families, often tending to the basic necessities of life, providing shelter for homeless people and rehabilitation for people who have lost control of their lives to an addiction. When you give to The Salvation Army, you are investing in the future of marginalized and overlooked people in your community.