

## **The Health Consequences of Poverty in Canada**

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It is natural to think that the health of a community is largely dependant on its health care. As it turns out, our health is determined to a much greater extent by social and economic forces than by the health care we receive.

The huge gradients in life expectancy and infant mortality between more industrialized and less industrialized countries is largely a function of the poverty, and the associated inadequate nutrition, sanitation, and the overcrowding in poorer nations. The dramatic decrease in life expectancy in the former Soviet union that followed the fall of the communist regime is largely a result of a deterioration in the social and economic situation. Poverty does not by itself lead to poor health. The health of a country is more closely related to the gradient of wealth between rich and poor. For instance, Cuba, one of the world's poorest countries, but a country in which the limited resources are relatively equitably distributed, has a life expectancy rivaling the fully industrialized western countries.

The effect of poverty on health is seen not only in comparisons between countries, but within countries. People living in American ghettos such as Harlem, do receive poorer health care, but it is their social situation that is largely responsible for life expectancy and infant mortality that are closer to African rates than to those of affluent Americans.

A recent report in the Canadian Medical Association Journal highlights the adverse health consequences of poverty in our country. The data show that 1.2 per cent of Canadian families did not have enough food during 1994. The adults from these families suffer from chronic medical conditions at rates far higher than well-fed Canadians. In addition, they were 4 times as likely to report their children's health as fair to poor (rather than good to excellent) than other Canadians.

While the figures are old, since 1994 welfare rates have been slashed, minimum wages have stalled, and use of food banks has increased. Even in the last year, with the economy booming and the wealthy becoming much wealthier, food bank use across the country has increased by 1.4 per cent.

The MRG calls on the Canadian media to raise awareness of the links between poverty and ill health. We call on provincial and federal governments to bring forward policies that will reduce poverty and inadequate housing, and the adverse health consequences that ensue.