

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOLLOWED BY ANSWERS

Question 1. The “Experience Hunger” project seems pointless to me. How do you expect this to even work?

Answer: Many people have become “turned off” by the question of poverty and do not understand the struggles that are experienced by hundreds of thousands of Canadians. Many also believe that poverty does not exist in Canada or that the problem is minimal. That is not the case! In our province alone, one out of seven New Brunswickers is living in poverty (2006 Census from Statistics Canada).

During the “Experience Hunger” project, 19 well known participants will be able to speak up for those who often go unheard. They will bring the reality of poverty forth to their family, friends, co-workers and the public in hopes of sensitizing the public and reducing some of the prejudices that are present. It is through knowledge that changes can occur.

Question 2. How will these participants truly understand what living in poverty really is like?

Answer: We realize that the participants will only get a small taste of what being poor feels like but we hope that the experience will give them a better understanding of poverty, more compassion, and in turn, create social change. To try to make their experience as realistic as possible, we are asking them to eat at a soup kitchen if they can. There, they will meet people who struggle to eat on a daily basis.

The participants will also be able to sit down with individuals from an advisory committee who currently live on social assistance or on low income. They will be able to share stories and experiences and thus, bring together some of the other issues related to poverty besides hunger.

Question 3. What do you hope to achieve with the “Experience Hunger” project?

Answer: Firstly, we hope to develop awareness among the public as well as remove some of the stigmas and prejudices associated with being poor. Secondly, this project is part of our “A Plate Left Empty” campaign that was launched in May 2011. This campaign aims at lobbying for an increase in social assistance rates up to the Atlantic average as well as for an implementation of a food solidarity supplement of \$50 a month per household for those living on social assistance. Thirdly, we hope that the N.B. government will recognize that many poor people are getting poorer because their only income from social assistance is insufficient to cover their basic needs.

Question 4. Why should I care about poverty and social assistance?

Answer: The number of New Brunswickers relying on social assistance is on the rise. Since the 2008 economic crisis, there has been an increase of 2,020 citizens having to rely on social assistance to live. In September 2011, there were 25,083 households, totalling 40,887 individuals that depended on social assistance. N.B.’s social assistance rates are appallingly low. The majority of the recipients (76%) fall into the “Transitional Assistance Program”. These, if they are single, only get \$537 per month. This barely brings them up to 40% of the poverty line as defined by Statistics Canada. Many are out of food for a good part of the month so they have to go to food banks or eat at soup kitchens. These statistics are appalling, but more than

that, you must recognize that these statistics represent real people yearning for a more equitable society. Caring about poverty and social assistance means helping others obtain their right to adequate shelter, clothing, food as well as the many things that we take for granted.

Question 5. How do you define poverty?

Answer: There is no clear definition of poverty in Canada. Two frequently used measures exist: the *Market Basket Measure* and the *Low Income Cut-off*.

The *Market Basket Measure* refers to the actual cost of a set of standard goods and services needed for a family of two adults and two children to lead a comfortable life. Individuals whose income falls below what this measure are considered to be on an income too low to cover their basic necessities. As for the *Low Income Cut-off* measurement, it takes into consideration family size as well as the size of the community of residence. It is based on the fact that an average Canadian household spends **43%** of their income for food, shelter and clothing. When a household spends **63%** or more of their income on these three basic necessities, Statistics Canada deems that this household is below the Low Income Cut-off, generally called the poverty line.

Although there is no set definition for poverty, it is clear that it refers to the lack of access to the basic necessities required for people to be healthy, feel secure, and live independently.

Question 6. Isn't social welfare a free ride?

Answer: New Brunswickers and Canadians often have misconceptions about social assistance recipients. A recent report based on a sample of 1,025 Canadians states that about 50% of the population feel that a family of four could get by on \$10,000 - \$30,000 per year or less (The Salvation Army, 2011). Approximately half of all Canadians feel that if poor people really wanted to work, they could always find a job. Nearly 40% believe that people who live in poverty "still have it pretty good" and about 25% of Canadians feel that people are poor because they are lazy and have lower moral values. It is evident that prejudices do exist in our society

It is important to understand that several factors can explain why some people are poor. When one looks at the amount of money that social assistance recipients have to live on, one has to admit that they are not having a generous "free ride" The basic welfare rates in N.B. are at the bottom of those in other Canadian provinces. In 2011, for a single employable person, the annual income was \$6,444; for a person with a disability, it was \$7,416 per year (plus a supplement of \$1,050); for a lone parent with one child, it was \$9,708 and for a couple with two children, it was \$10,896. These N.B. basic welfare rates have not been increased since October 2008. This means that more than 40,000 citizens living on social assistance have seen their actual purchasing power diminish during the last three years. Keeping these facts in mind, one cannot say that being on social assistance is like taking "a free ride".

Question 7. Won't increasing welfare be a disincentive for people to work?

Answer: Many people who oppose raising welfare rates believe that increased welfare benefits will discourage people from moving into the workforce. The reality is that a quarter of recipients on social assistance are people with disabilities (*Extended Benefits Program*) so they can't work. Another high percentage have very serious health problems that prevent them from holding a job. A portion of social assistance statistics include thousands of children from poor households who are in school. Admittedly, there are some social assistance recipients who

would be able to work but chose to stay at home. We need to address the question of the barriers preventing them from entering the workforce. One of these is the unavailability of jobs. N.B. has one of the highest levels of unemployment in the country. Other obstacles include the low level of literacy, the high transportation costs, the scarcity of childcare services and their high cost, the lack of skills for certain jobs, etc.

Question 8. Isn't raising welfare expensive?

Answer: The political decision to freeze social assistance rates is bad for the economy of N.B. In 2008, the cost of poverty was estimated at 189 million dollars. (Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives). One can argue that not raising social assistance rates becomes more expensive for New Brunswick because poverty creates poorer health, therefore straining our health budget. It also restricts opportunities for individuals who could move out of poverty. Raising welfare rates would help individuals eat better and have lower stress levels. It would create more prospects for individuals to be productive.

Question 9. Isn't food a human right?

Answer: In 1976, Canada signed the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, which includes "the fundamental right of everyone to free from hunger." In N.B., the government has failed to live up to its obligations. Many people are without secure, fulltime, decent-paying work, and those on social assistance programs frequently go without the food they need to be healthy. Benefits have fallen so low that it is basically impossible for people on social assistance to afford the nutritious food that is recommended by public health units. Between 2008 and 2010, food bank use in N.B. has gone up 18%. Sixty percent of users were social assistance recipients and 35% of the demands were for children. Twenty-two percent of users had work-related income.

Question 10. What is usually given to one person at a food bank in NB?

Answer: The following list shows what is typically found in the food bags handed out to a single individual at the Moncton YMCA Caring Community Food Bank. The contents of the food bags may change, depending on the inventory of the food bank.

- 2 cans of soup
- 1 can of meat
- 2 cans of vegetables
- 1 can of fruit
- 1 can of beans
- 1 can of tomato sauce
- 1 juice
- 1 can of evaporated milk
- 1 frozen meat (if available)
- 1 box of dry cereal or oatmeal
- 1 pasta
- 1 box/bag of pasta or rice
- 1 box of crackers
- 1 box of cookies
- 1 bag of potato product (fries, hash browns, etc.)
- 1 loaf of bread

Clients can also pick up available fresh produce. The quantity and variety of produce varies from week to week.

For couples, the list is doubled. For families, depending on size and ages of the children, they get the list doubled, along with extra canned goods and pasta.

Question 11. What are some of the health impacts of poverty?

People who experience chronic food insecurity and a lack of access to a healthy diet suffer from numerous negative effects including higher risks of chronic illness, depression, heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Fighting poverty is the best medicine money can buy.

Question 12. What role can the government play in reducing poverty?

Answer: The government can play a huge role in the reduction of poverty. Provincial politicians have the power to increase social assistance rates, raise minimum wage, invest in social programs and services, and create jobs. However, for this to happen, government must recognize that poverty is real and financial resources must necessarily be allocated to alleviate it.

Question 13. How can I personally get involved in reducing poverty?

Answer: First of all, one way to become active is by spreading the message presented in the answers to these questions. Secondly, people can ask those in their network to actively follow the “Experience Hunger” project and the CFSJ campaign. Thirdly, they can play an active role by going to the CFSJ website, select the “Action Alerts” section, and send a message to Premier Alward, saying that they support our demands to raise social assistance rates. Fourthly, the general public can attend the provincial forum “Poverty, Hunger, and Poor Health – Let’s Eliminate Them!”. This event will be held on September 28, 2011 in Moncton. Finally, you can donate money to the Common Front for Social Justice and thus, help fund our campaigns and activities that aim at helping the poor. To make a donation, visit our website at www.frontnb.ca and click on *Creating a chain of solidarity, together*.