

# EDITORIAL

## Defining poverty

by Allan Carter

Trying to grasp the meaning of poverty is a tricky business. It is a loosely used word in North America and the concept of "poor" is relative to who you are and your position in society. For instance, an economist will predict a "poor" year for a large and powerful corporation. Many will argue that the word "poor" in this context is not misused. But if we were to compare a corporation's worries of financial instability to one individual who has no financial means whatsoever, it is apparent that the word poor has become extremely desensitized.

Another example is the general Canadian view of poverty in other countries. Fund-raising, non-profit organizations will inform Canadians about the dire situations in other countries and many Canadians will quickly conclude that real poverty is apparent in countries like Somalia and Ethiopia where individuals are dying from malnutrition. Such an observation is obviously true. Thus, do these same Canadians view their next door neighbor who has children who are experiencing hunger pains as being poor? One would certainly hope so. In other words, poor is a very relative term. That is why it is important for people who can count their numerous blessings to be careful about how they use the term poor and how they view those they know who are poor.

But the question still remains. Who is poor in Canada? In a country with such diversity in cultures and many geographical differences the question is indeed a challenging one. Furthermore, after we pinpoint every type of poverty, what problems do these people face?

Poor is the man who is crippled with learning disabilities and has spent his life trying to survive off the waste of others in a small, rural area because the workforce does not possess the patience or grace to consider him as an employee.

Poor is the male teenager who has finally found rest in a shelter where he is sharing a warm place to rest with five other men. In the darkness each evening, he wonders if he is safe with the strangers.

Poor is the elderly man who, living in the city, finds that his Canadian pension can only provide him with a one room apartment. Having no kitchen in his room and having no living family, he eats at soup kitchens to fill his stomach and also to meet others.

Poor is the man who having worked hard all his life, finally finds himself without a job and not enough money or hope to make an attempt to move and look for work elsewhere.

Poor is the child who tries to get food at a soup kitchen, but is gently turned away, because by law the volunteers at the kitchen cannot feed her without a parent or other adult relative present. They phone the police or the respective government organization so they can come and take the young girl home.

Poor is the female teenager who waits eagerly every evening for a van where friendly, concerned people give her hot coffee to warm her body and tell her that they can help her get off the streets if she would only leave prostitution. She is terrified for her future.

Poor is the mother who has three children to care for and wonders if she can get a job if she lies about her educational and job credentials.

These are only a few examples which illustrate the poverty that exists in Canada. Many Canadians look at these examples and immediately try to find blame. Volunteer organizations are blamed for giving people in poverty "crutches" so they are never given opportunities to change. Governments are blamed for having expensive bureaucratic programs which only aid a very small segment of poor people. But most of the time the poor themselves are blamed.

Roman Catholic Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Michigan recently noted that "people who deal with the poor can tell a hundred stories about how they waste money and opportunities." But are the opportunities, within the actual context of poverty, truly realistic as a solution for those who are poor? Many times the opportunities are short sighted. As Untener states, many

people in poverty "can't get enough together to even get started - a down payment, transportation, protection from an abusive husband, an education."

Untener decided that perhaps the root of the problem with society's attempts to help the poor is the fact that many have not honestly considered how they really feel about poverty. Moreover, he also wondered if people were actually considering how their own actions may affect poverty in their area. In order to investigate these aspects, Untener asked various parishes to begin their meetings with: "How shall what we are doing here affect or involve the poor?" The results of Untener's project were indeed interesting.

For starters, many of the people involved in the meetings had to first term poverty because they never really had done so before. Once some definitions were created, each individual had to come to terms with their presupposed notions of people in poverty and deal with the contempt which some of them felt for poor people. Untener says the project really has not ended, because now the people involved have honestly taken a look at their lack of involvement with the problem of poverty; or/and have realized that their prejudices are an example of why society has yet to truly come to terms with ways to eradicate poverty.

Thus, in attempting to offer opportunities to the poor, society must be sensitive and acutely aware of their situations. If government programs, non-profit organizations, and aid from various churches and other institutions do not keep in mind the many problems which the poor face, any action by such groups may be effective - but only temporary. Until we honestly face the changes which need to be made to society in order to allow the poor to maintain their respect and dignity, then any planned solutions by such well-intentioned groups will only be band-aid solutions and very little change will take place. As Untener states: "Direct assistance is good; tackling the causes is better." The causes are many, wide spread and, at times, difficult to discover, but they must be tackled.



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brunswickan

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The Brunswickan, in its 126<sup>th</sup> year of publication, is Canada's oldest official student publication. The Brunswickan is generally published every Friday during the school year by Brunswickan Publishing Inc with a circulation of 10,000. Membership is open to all University of New Brunswick Fredericton students, but all members of the university community are encouraged to contribute.

The opinions contained in this newspaper are those of the individual writers, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brunswickan.

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The Brunswickan is printed with flair by Maritime Web in Moncton, and impeccably delivered by Tiny.

Subscription rates are \$25 per year. Second class mail is in effect #8120

National advertising rates are available from Campus Plus at (416) 362-6468.

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