



A Deep Dive Into Poverty

**An Exploratory Analysis of the Root
Causes of Poverty and Possible
Pathways for Systems Change**

Monica Da Ponte

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Canadian Poverty Institute

The Canadian Poverty Institute
150 Ambrose Circle SW
Calgary, Alberta
T3H 0L5

PovertyInstitute@ambrose.edu

www.povertyinstitute.ca

Toronto, Kingston and Mississauga have all declared food insecurity an emergency.^{1 2 3} This is shocking, disheartening, and deeply frustrating. How can this be possible in a country so rich in resources and potential? More urgently, how might we reimagine and build a society where everyone is food secure, housed and thriving? This is not only necessary – it is possible.

This analysis is exploratory in nature. It aims to clarify the systemic factors at play and illuminate potential pathways forward – pathways that lead to an inclusive, socially just, and flourishing society. Challenges and differing opinions are welcome and essential for a constructive dialogue and collective action.

At the heart of this discussion lies an uncomfortable truth: poverty and inequality are not accidents. They are outcomes – products of systems we have built. As a society, we have long upheld a financially driven vision of progress. We consistently measure success through GDP growth, corporate profit, return on investment, and quarterly earnings.

In pursuit of these goals we have developed and reinforced systems – policies, legislation, funding models, incentives – that prioritize financial metrics over human well-being. These choices have shaped the reality we now face: a nation where food and housing insecurity have reached emergency levels.

It is important to acknowledge that this system was not designed with malice – but it was designed. The outcomes we are witnessing are not random; they are the predictable results of the priorities we have collectively chosen. Half of Canadians now live bill to bill⁴. This is not an individual failure. It is not something that can be solved by simply expanding direct support services. We must look upstream. The issue is not the person drinking the water – it is the water.

This analysis will examine key factors that have led to a reality where 1 in 10 Torontonians are relying on food banks⁵. It will explore the underlying choices, systems and societal mindsets that have enabled the conditions to persist. The analysis will conclude by identifying possibilities for transformative interventions that can enable the building of an inclusive, socially just, and thriving society.

¹ Daily Bread Food Bank. (2025, January 27). City of Toronto Declares Food Insecurity Emergency. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/city-of-toronto-declares-food-insecurity-emergency-861887755.html>

² Pringle, J., Richardson, J. (2025, January 14). Kingston, Ont. Declares food insecurity an emergency. CTV News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/ottawa/article/council-in-kingston-ont-to-debate-motion-to-declare-food-insecurity-an-emergency/>

³ City of Mississauga. (2024, November 13). Mississauga City Council declares food insecurity an emergency. Retrieved July 4 from: <https://www.mississauga.ca/city-of-mississauga-news/news/mississauga-city-council-declares-food-insecurity-an-emergency/>

⁴ Little, S. (2025, January 23). "Financially Paralyzed": Half of Canadians living bill-to-bill, poll finds. Global News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://globalnews.ca/news/10974410/poll-canadians-financially-paralyzed/>

⁵ Cheese, T., Draaisma, M. (2024, October 28). Record food bank numbers nationally felt "on the ground" in Toronto, expert says. CBC News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/food-banks-canada-hungercount-2024-report-toronto-1.7366156>

Systemic Factors Enabling Food Insecurity

Food insecurity in Canada is a result of systemic structures and macro-level trends that affect broad segments of the population. In the interest of conciseness, this analysis will discuss five factors that can provide a foundation for identifying meaningful interventions:

1. The commodification of food for economic value creation
2. Rising living costs
3. Structural economic shifts
4. A profit-at-all-cost business culture
5. Outdated and poorly designed government policies, programs and supports

1. The commodification of food for economic value creation

Historically, food was produced to nourish communities. This has shifted. Food is now treated primarily as a commodity – produced, priced and distributed for economic value.⁶ This shift underpins a food system where 23% of Canadians now experience food insecurity.⁷

The industrial food system is dominated by a handful of multinational corporations that control everything from inputs and machinery to processing and distribution.⁸ Despite increased productivity and crop value, Canadian farmers, remain “price-takers”, squeezed between powerful suppliers and dominant corporate buyers.⁹ Meanwhile, grocery retailer profiteering prevails through high prices¹⁰ and efforts to keep wages low by positioning minimum wage increases as a driver of rising food prices¹¹. These dynamics serve to deepen food insecurity.

2. Steep rise in living costs

We are seeing a steep rise in living costs and inflation. This is making financial insecurity the norm, especially for low and fixed-income Canadians. More than half of Canadians say they can't keep pace with the high cost of living.¹² In 2024 alone, average food prices increased 11%¹³ while rents increased 21% in the last 2 years.¹⁴ Low and fixed-income Canadians are particularly vulnerable to insecurity because they are required to spend a much larger portion of their budgets on necessities such as shelter and food and tend to have low net worth and high debt-to-asset ratios.¹⁵

⁶ Smolski, A. (2017, March 29). Capital's Hunger in Abundance. Jacobin. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://jacobin.com/2017/03/food-production-hunger-waste-agriculture-commodity-capitalism>

⁷ Community Food Centres of Canada. (2024, April 30). Food insecurity and poverty in Canada. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.cfccanada.ca/CFCC/media/assets/Food-Insecurity-Poverty-in-Canada-April-2024.pdf>

⁸ Food Secure Canada. Building Resilience and Amplifying the Power of Diverse Voices in the Food Movements: Strategic Plan 2024 = 2027. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: https://foodsecurecanada.org/docs/strategic_plan20242027-3.pdf

⁹ National Farmers Union. (2023, March). The Competition Act as a Tool for Democracy: Fairness for Farmers. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://nfu.ca/policy/the-competition-act-as-a-tool-for-democracy-fairness-for-farmers/>

¹⁰ Saba, R. (2024, February 23). Grocers face uphill battle to regain customers' trust, experts say. Global News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://globalnews.ca/news/10312644/food-inflation-big-grocers-canada/>

¹¹ Powell, C. (2021, May 11). Minimum wage hike likely means higher grocery prices: CFG. Canadian Grocer. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://canadiangrocer.com/minimum-wage-hike-likely-means-higher-grocery-prices-cfig>

¹² Benchetrit, J. (2022, August 22). 56% of Canadians say they can't keep pace with high cost of living, according to survey. CBC News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/angus-reid-survey-aug-2022-1.6558248>

¹³ Stanford, J. (2023, February). Statistics Canada Aggregate Data on Food Retail and Food Processing Profits. Centre for Future of Work. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Stanford-for-Agriculture-Committee-on-Food-Prices-and-Profits.pdf>

¹⁴ The Canadian Press. (2024, March 11). Canada's average asking rent umped to almost \$2,200 in February. Global News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://globalnews.ca/news/10352202/rent-prices-february-2024-canada/>

¹⁵ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00002-eng.htm>

3. Structural shifts in our economy

The structure of work is changing – and for many, not for the better. There has been an aggressive shift towards precarious employment – such as Uber Eats and short-term, contract jobs with no security, lack of protections and benefits. Over 1/3 of Canadian workers now hold precarious jobs.¹⁶ For some individuals with assets, valued skills, strong relationship networks and or partners who have access to benefits, precarious work can provide significant value with flexibility and unique opportunities for growth. For most individuals, precarious work is a fast lane towards financial insecurity. It is a constant teetering on the edge of survival with no safety support. Alarming 18% of food bank clients report employment as their main source of income.¹⁷ Given that precarious work enables companies to reduce their “human resource costs” and increase their profits, it is expected this trend will only grow.

At the same time, rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, automation and virtual work are transforming labour markets. Technology is moving fast. It is and will continue to have significant impacts on the availability and composition of employment. Thirty-one percent of employees aged 18 to 64 are in jobs that may be highly exposed to AI and relatively less complementary with it”.¹⁸ This means that many individuals will need to find the time, resources and training to transition. This is just not possible for those already living on the edge of insecurity. These shifts reinforce cycles of exclusion and economic marginalization.

4. A profit at all cost business culture

Across sectors, we see a business culture myopically focused on profit. This leaves little room for consideration of possible implications and negative impacts on citizens. This manifests in:

- Misleading sales practices: A recent CBC investigation found bank employees misleading customers, pushing products that help sales targets, and providing illegal advice.¹⁹
- Rampant shrinkflation: Reducing the size of goods while maintaining the price is misleading consumers and, in many cases, adding up to 15% of the sale price of products.²⁰
- A proliferation of hidden fees: Unexpected and unclear fees including processing, administrative, booking and change fees also serve to mislead consumers, maximize profits and erode citizen financial resiliency.²¹
- Aggressive, highly targeted advertising: There are vast amounts of dollars spent on the unyielding marketing of products and services. Egregious recent examples include sophisticated and personalized techniques ranging from deposit matching and payout

¹⁶ <https://jacobin.com/2023/07/canada-precarity-gig-work-skills-labor-data>

¹⁷ Food Banks Canada. Overall findings – HungerCount. Retrieved July 4, 2025, from <https://foodbankscanada.ca/hunger-in-canada/hungercount/overall-findings/>

¹⁸ Mehdi, T., & Frenette, M. (2024, September 25). Exposure to artificial intelligence in Canadian jobs: Experimental estimates. Economic and Social Reports (36-28-0001, No. 4). Statistics Canada. Retrieved July 4, 2025, from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024009/article/00004-eng.htm>

¹⁹ Johnson, E., McDonald, J., McNair, M., Ivany, K., & McCann, M. (2024, March 15). Hidden cameras reveal how big banks are upselling you [Video]. CBC Marketplace. CBC News. Retrieved July 4, 2025, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/marketplace-hidden-camera-banks-1.7142427>

²⁰ Blanchette Pelletier, D. (2023, July 18). The hidden face of shrinkflation. CBC Radio-Canada Info. Retrieved July 4, 2025, from <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/info/2023/reduflation/en-produits-epicerie-aliments-encadrement-surveillance-donnees-impact-facture-portefeuille/>

²¹ Switzer, J. (2024, December 6). As inflation, cost of living soar, Canadians are getting 'justifiably angry' about junk fees. Financial Post. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://financialpost.com/personal-finance/inflation-soars-canadians-angry-about-junk-fees>

boosts to free credits for online gambling sites²² and tv, social media, billboard, transit and e-mail advertising for the weight loss drug Ozempic.²³

The above examples demonstrate how business profit maximization focus consistently eats away at citizen's ability to focus on and build their individual financial resiliency.

5. Outdated and poorly designed government policies, programs and supports

Public policy, program and support design are historically rooted in colonial structures and fail to recognize the systemic nature of financial insecurity. This is evident in:

- A minimum wage vs living wage system: Focusing in on and legislating a minimum wage leaves low-income workers unable to afford the costs of daily living. "For a number of provinces, workers in large cities would need an increase of more than 30 per cent to the minimum wage in order to make ends meet".²⁴
- Inadequate and poorly designed government support: The current support structure falls drastically below the poverty line and creates disincentives to work or save. Ontario Works recipients would need another \$17,000 to reach the poverty line²⁵ and design flaws work to "lock recipients in an endless cycle of scrutiny and dependency without adequate resources or even access to resources to leave".²⁶
- An increasingly regressive tax system: Since 2004, Canada's tax system has become less progressive.²⁷ Low-income households struggle to keep food on the table while the "highest-income households benefit from several sources of untaxed or lightly taxed income".²⁸ Canada has an estimated corporate tax gap of \$30 billion driven by a variety of factors including corporate tax avoidance, low corporate tax rates and capital gains loopholes.²⁹
- Government policy that continues to prioritize economic growth over citizen well-being: Billions are spent to subsidize corporate profits while chronic underinvestment persists in health, education, housing and food systems. This puts strain on government coffers and further incents corporate lobbying creating a positive feedback loop for the design and implementation of legislation, policies and programs suited to those with resources and power to influence. For example:

²² Milton, A. (2024, October 10). The Online-Betting Boom Is Ruining Sports—and Lives. Macleans. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://macleans.ca/society/the-online-betting-boom-is-ruining-sports-and-lives/>

²³ Ireland, N. (2023, June 20). Rise of Ozempic ads in Canada raising concern. What are the risks? Global News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://globalnews.ca/news/9779972/ozempic-ads-canada-concerns/>

²⁴ Yalnizyan, A. (2024, September 23). New report shows major gap between minimum and living wage in Canadian cities. The Toronto Star. Retrieved July 4, 2025, from https://www.thestar.com/business/new-report-shows-major-gap-between-minimum-and-living-wage-in-canadian-cities-here-s/article_66ebddd2-8c1b-5456-bf87-0c6126d5eeee.html

²⁵ Eschner, Kat. (2023, August 15). Social-assistance rates in Ontario should 'set off alarm bells': Report. TVO Today. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.tvo.org/article/social-assistance-rates-in-ontario-should-set-off-alarm-bells-report>

²⁶ Stapleton, J. (2024, October 23). Help is not on the way: Why we need to rethink social assistance in Ontario. Open Policy Ontario. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://openpolicyontario.com/help-is-not-on-the-way-why-we-need-to-rethink-social-assistance-in-ontario/>

²⁷ Lee, M., Cochrane, DT. Canada's shift to a more regressive tax system, 2004 to 2022. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/canadas-shift-to-more-regressive-tax-system_2024-04-29-225120_mhdu.pdf

²⁸ Lee, M., Cochrane, DT. (2024, May). Bolder moves needed for taxing the rich. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.policynote.ca/taxing-the-rich/>

²⁹ Cochrane, DT. (2022, October). Unaccountable – How did Canada lose \$30 billion to corporations?. Canadians for Tax Fairness. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: https://www.taxfairness.ca/sites/default/files/2022-10/oct-2022-tax-gap-report_0.pdf

- Canadian taxpayers are increasingly bearing the social, environmental and economic costs of activities that generate corporate profits. On the environmental front, Canada continues to subsidize fossil fuels – providing \$18.6 billion to the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries in 2023.³⁰ This is despite the existing climate crisis and record profits for the oil and gas industries. On the health front, over 25% of Canadian adults are now classified as obese³¹, resulting in an estimated \$5.9 billion in incremental healthcare costs³². Diet plays a significant role in obesity and ultra-processed foods which are strongly linked to obesity, account for 45% of the average adult's daily caloric intake.³³ While manufacturers, retailers and restaurants profit from the sales of these foods, it is citizens who are facing the health consequences and taxpayers who shoulder the associated healthcare costs.

Understanding the Choices and Mindsets Behind the Systemic Factors

The structural drivers of food and financial insecurity, ranging from precarious employment and hidden fees to regressive taxation, are not the result of a single policy failure or decision. Rather, they reflect billions of individual choices made by millions of actors, across sectors and over time. These choices span a massive range: from individual companies adopting precarious employment models or prioritizing aggressive sales tactics, to government agencies designing wage policies, taxation systems and support programs. It would not be possible to direct such a wide range of decisions made by individuals working across sectors, industries and governments.

Each of these choices was made by individuals, teams, departments, organizations and governments based on the roles they occupy, the incentives they face and the goals and values they hold. Taken together, these choices reflect a dominant set of shared mindsets, rooted in beliefs about economic growth, individualism, and the efficacy of the free market. These mindsets have led to the development of systems and structures that collectively enable and sustain high levels of food and financial insecurity.

A widespread sense of disconnection, from nature, from each other, and from the consequences of our actions, combined with our focus on economic growth and belief in the free-market system, has encouraged us to collectively focus on bettering our individual lives while those of our communities degenerate. Our faith that self-interest and the invisible hand are best positioned to meet our current and future needs is catalyzing the choices we are collectively making and the insecurity we are seeing.

Given this, what might some alternative mindsets, values and goals look like? And how might we embed them within our governments, businesses, schools and civic institutions? How might we infuse them deep into our culture, so the decisions we make, individually and collectively, prioritize thriving for all?

³⁰ Environmental Defense. (2024, March 27). As the Climate Crisis Worsens, the Federal Government in Canada Continues to Give Billions in Funding for Fossil Fuels. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://environmentaldefence.ca/2024/03/27/as-the-climate-crisis-worsens-the-federal-government-in-canada-continues-to-give-billions-in-funding-for-fossil-fuels/>

³¹ Statistics Canada. (2018). Overweight and obese adults. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-625-x/2019001/article/00005-eng.htm>

³² Obesity Canada. (2025). Cost of Inaction in Treating Obesity. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://obesitycanada.ca/the-cost-of-inaction/cost-of-inaction-in-treating-obesity/>

³³ Nardocci, M., Leclerc, B., Louzada, M., Monteiro, C., Batal, M., Moubarac, J. Consumption of ultra-processed foods and obesity in Canada. Canadian Journal of Public Health. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6964616/>

Encouragingly, many individuals and organizations already operate with a mindset of collective well-being. They believe in the power of community, and in designing systems, programs, and policies that enable everyone to thrive. They have mindsets of collective interest. They believe we can design policies, programs and systems that enable collective wellbeing, that the economy should serve life and that individuals, through their actions and choices, can contribute meaningfully to building a better society.

Canada has a proud history of individual and collective action built on values of equity, interdependence, inclusion, responsibility and solidarity. From Tommy Douglas' vision of universal healthcare to national programs like employment insurance, parental leave, social assistance and RRSP matching, we've seen what is possible when the collective is prioritized. More recently, we've made important progress with initiatives like the Canadian Dental Care Plan³⁴, our shift towards \$10 a day childcare³⁵, and innovations like Employee Ownership Trusts which create incentives for business owners to sell their companies to employees³⁶.

These are meaningful, community-oriented policy milestones which directly support financial resilience and food security. Building on these, we see a sophisticated nonprofit sector making strategic investments in food banks, shelters, settlement services, entrepreneurship accelerators, mental health support, youth initiatives, community hubs, land trusts, and home services for seniors.

Cross-sector collaborations are also prevalent. These collaborations are mobilizing resources, piloting solutions and scaling impactful models. One example is the United Way's Inclusive Local Economic Opportunity initiative which focuses on closing economic prosperity at the neighborhood level and has spurred the creation of Aecon-Golden Mile which is a construction joint venture³⁷.

In addition, advocacy efforts continue to push for deeper systems change, championing interventions such as living wage, decent work, well-being indices, wealth taxation, affordable housing strategies and social innovation. Deep gratitude is owed to the leaders, organizations, and communities who continue to advance this transformative work.

The issue is that despite these efforts, too many communities are food insecure, and this insecurity is growing. Our societal focus on economic growth, profit and financial self-interest has proven highly effective at generating profits and wealth for those with capital. But this dynamic also concentrates resources in the hands of a few. This results in a landscape where those with resources have the power to continuously influence the system to their benefit.

This imbalance is particularly visible in the funding landscape for nonprofits. Much of the work to advance social progress is led by the nonprofit sector. The Ontario Nonprofit Network describes the sector as "running on fumes", headed into unprecedented territory with trends revealing a sharp increase in demand for services, a downward spiral of financial situations and a crisis

³⁴ Government of Canada. Canadian Dental Care Plan. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/dental/dental-care-plan.html>

³⁵ Government of Canada. Toward \$10-a-day: Early Learning and Child Care. Retrieved July 4 from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/campaigns/child-care.html>

³⁶ Lupton, A., (2024, December 12). New rules help more Canadian businesses be sold to workers. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/new-rules-help-more-canadian-businesses-be-sold-to-workers-1.7407590>

³⁷ United Way Greater Toronto. Inclusive Local Economic Opportunity (ILEO). Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.unitedwaygt.org/our-work/ileo-initiative/>

level shortage of human resources.³⁸ This reality stands in stark contrast to the resources available for the private sector – take for example the \$1.26 billion raised in Canadian venture capital in the first quarter of 2025³⁹, or the \$16 billion in public funding provided to Volkswagen to support an electric vehicle battery plant.⁴⁰

I have witnessed this disparity firsthand. After seven years at Procter & Gamble (P&G), I transitioned to the nonprofit sector to work on environmental conservation at WWF-Canada. Taking a 50% pay cut was just one aspect of the shift. The true shock came from the scale of available resources. At P&G, the marketing budget for one of the top brands hovered around \$30 million. This was roughly equivalent to WWF's entire annual budget to tackle environmental challenges, including climate change, one of the most urgent crises facing humanity.

This structural mismatch in resource allocation is not just inefficient, it is deeply unjust. It is a system that enables heartbreaking levels of financial insecurity for everyday Canadians, while also accelerating a broader polycrisis encompassing social, environmental and economic issues.

Exploring Possibilities for Intervention: How Might We Enable All Communities to Thrive?

If we want a Canada where all communities can thrive, that vision must be woven into the fabric of our national identity. It must serve as a guiding priority – shaping our choices, informing our success metrics, and grounding our collective accountability. Only then can we begin to make the millions of aligned decisions needed to design legislation, programs, policies, and practices that foster shared well-being.

At a macro-level, achieving this vision requires two things: a broad-based individual and institutional commitment to collective well-being, and the strategic allocation of resources that reflect the scale and urgency of the need.

Herein lies a central challenge. Our current systems of resourcing are fundamentally different in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. For-profit businesses generate revenue and profit that enable them to incentivize employees, customers, and suppliers to make hundreds of thousands of choices that support the growth of their business. They sell products, earn revenue and can choose where to allocate financial resources to grow their businesses. The more effective they are at selling products, the more revenue they earn and the greater the investments they can make in hiring people, research, innovation, and lobbying to influence policies that further support their business growth.

By contrast, there is no parallel model that naturally incentivizes the co-creation of a socially just and sustainable society. No system currently exists to consistently encourage, resource, and sustain the collective design, testing, and refinement of interventions that enable all Canadians to thrive.

³⁸Ontario Nonprofit Network. 2023 State of the Sector: At a Tipping Point. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: https://cdn.theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-State-of-the-Sector-Policy-report.pdf?_gl=1*p78yan*_ga*OTixOTY3MDIzLjE3MTY5MDg2MzQ.*_ga_39QHEJX2GL*MTcxNjkwODYzNC4xLjAuMTcxNjkwODYzNC4wLjAuMA..

³⁹ Silcoff, S. 92025, May 27). Market sends mixed signals on state of play for Canadian startup funding. The Globe and Mail. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-canada-venture-capital-startup-funding/

⁴⁰ Raycraft, R. (2023, June 14). Volkswagen battery plant to cost Ottawa over \$16B: budget watchdog. CBC News. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/volkswagen-plant-pbo-1.6875848>

Relying solely on government spending and philanthropy to build such a society is not merely insufficient – it is fundamentally misaligned with the scale and nature of the challenge. These approaches focus on managing symptoms while the deeper structures of our socio-economic system continue to produce harm. We are directing resources to the periphery while the system's core logic, its incentives, priorities, and power dynamics, continue to generate the inequities we are trying to solve. To make lasting progress, we must redesign that system so it naturally produces equity, resilience, well-being and sustainability.

What might that model look like? How might we get there? And what interventions can we begin investing in today to move toward a socially just and sustainable future? These are complex and ambitious questions. I do not claim to have the answers to these questions. But I believe this is the root issue we must confront if we are serious about addressing the crisis of food insecurity, deepening inequality, and the breadth of systemic issues we are currently facing. As the saying goes, we don't need to see the whole staircase to take the first step. What follows are what I believe are enablers of success and potential interventions that can help us begin to build a society in which everyone can thrive.

Enablers of Success

1. A bold, genuine vision of a Canada where all Canadians can thrive. This must be a guiding imperative not a vague aspiration. It must be something we actively imagine, collectively demand, and intentionally build.
2. Values based behaviour that can be incentivized through concrete and measurable goals that reflect collective thriving. These must move beyond GDP and toward holistic indicators like those in the Canadian Index of Well-being.⁴¹
3. Policies, processes, programs and supports designed and resourced to meet today's community needs and collective ambition. Real change means real shifts – for everyone. It requires reallocating resources to invest in collective needs and priorities including food access, community resiliency, and the structural transformation needed to build equity.
4. Accountability mechanisms that track and reward meaningful progress on the collective vision and goals. We must measure our shared well-being and hold institutions, communities, and governments accountable for outcomes – not just interventions and intentions.

Possible Interventions to Advance Systemic Change

To create lasting impact, we must look upstream at the deeper structures and systems that are shaping our current outcomes. Drawing on systems thinking, particularly the great work of Donella Meadows on high-leverage points⁴², we can focus on shifting mindsets, redefining the goals that guide our systems, and enabling the structures that allow them to evolve. Meaningful progress requires continuing to invest in essential direct supports today, illuminating the systemic nature of the issues and in parallel advancing systemic interventions that address the root causes of food and financial insecurity.

⁴¹ University of Waterloo. Canadian Index of Wellbeing. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/>

⁴² Meadows, D. Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System. The Donella Meadows Project Academy for Systems Change. Retrieved July 4, 2025 from: <https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

Here are a few possibilities to provoke thought and spark action:

- What if we invested in a collective vision? Imagine if governments, funders, and institutions prioritized a national vision for collective well-being and embedded that vision in all policies, departmental strategies, programs. What if we collectively paid attention to and celebrated changemakers instead of billionaires? Could this begin to realign and reshape what we value as success?
- What if company boards represented the communities they impact? Requiring that 50% of board members include employees and social justice champions could create greater understanding, accountability, and empathy. This is like co-determination practices in several countries including Germany and can provide significant value to organizations and workers. Would this help shift power and expand the influence of historically, persistently, or systemically marginalized populations?
- What if companies were taxed based on their social impact? How might our system evolve if we recognized that business activities have externalities whose costs are being borne by citizens. As such, firms paying living wages, providing decent work, maintaining equitable pay ratios, offering employee ownership and reducing negative externalities pay the standard level of tax while those failing to meet established indicators pay an additional premium. We could reinvest this premium into community-led initiatives to further rebalance power and build local capacity. Distribution decisions could be made by rotating groups of leaders and community champions. Would this help shift power structures and increase the influence of citizen organizations?
- What if well-being became a shared responsibility? By leveraging the work of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, we can set measurable wellbeing targets, establish rotating citizen-led leadership councils who can steer implementation and require contributions from individuals and organizations with wealth and income above a certain level? How might systems and structures develop then?
- What if 25% of tax revenue was citizen-directed? Participatory budgeting on a national scale could reorient public spending toward real, emerging needs and empower communities to guide resource allocation. Would this new system structure increase our ability to better address and support emerging and evolving citizen priorities?

These are just a few examples of possibilities. The specific interventions do matter – but what matters most is the commitment to a shared “north star” of collective thriving. Progress will come as more citizens and leaders make that vision their priority.

What it Takes

To realize this vision, we need:

1. Shared recognition of the systemic nature of the challenge. If we want a society that truly works for everyone, we must first acknowledge that the barriers we face are embedded in the very systems we have built, and that these systems will not transform without intentional, collective effort.
2. Collective acceptance of the need for change and the implications of such change. If we are serious about eradicating food insecurity, then we will need to provide direct support to those

currently struggling and address the upstream root issues that are enabling the current level of insecurity. If we recognize that a system that naturally enables all Canadians to thrive shares power and resources, then we will have to create mechanisms to share power and resources.

3. Investments in systems change. The challenges we are facing are systemic and interconnected. Solutions require investment in illuminating root causes, building shared understanding, shifting incentives, developing pilots, fostering collaboration, and enabling policy innovation. This work cannot be resourced by reallocating already-stretched dollars from foodbanks or shelters – we need new, dedicated investment to fuel transformation alongside support.

Moving Forward

So how do we move from vision to commitment?

As with any shift, change starts with attention and focus. We must name the vision, highlight when it is missing, and lift up examples where systems are enabling thriving. The reality is that today's outcomes are the product of billions of rational choices made by a disparate group of individuals, organizations, businesses and governments. There is no silver bullet intervention, policy or program that will change our outcomes. We need to collectively envision and build a system that incentivizes those rational choices to serve people and share prosperity.

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About the Author

Monica Da Ponte is the Principal at Shift & Build where she leverages a systems lens to help build a socially just, sustainable future. Her work ranges from strategic planning and program design to research, facilitation and implementation support. She is also the founder of financial resiliency program Strive.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

The Canadian Poverty Institute
Ambrose University
150 Ambrose Circle SW
Calgary, Alberta,
T3H 0L5

www.povertyinstitute.ca

povertyinstitute@ambrose.edu

