

Ethno-Cultural Communities and Poverty ***Key Findings from a Survey***

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A report by



In partnership with



CALGARY CENTRE
FOR CULTURE, EQUITY
AND DIVERSITY



About Canada Without Poverty

Canada Without Poverty, formerly the National Anti-Poverty Organization, is a federally incorporated, non-partisan, not-for-profit and charitable organization founded in 1971. Our mission is to eradicate poverty in Canada, for the benefit of all. Our work is guided by a Board of Directors comprised of women and men who have all experienced poverty in their lives. We act from the belief that poverty is a violation of human rights and that poverty elimination is a human rights obligation. Our work includes raising awareness about poverty, participating in research to generate new knowledge about poverty, and striving to influence public policy to prevent and alleviate poverty.

About the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women (ANIW)

The Alberta Network of Immigrant Women is a provincially-based network of immigrant women's organizations. ANIW provides a forum for member organizations to discuss relevant issues and facilitate the development of solutions for issues that face immigrant women and their families. We also undertake research on issues that impact the settlement process of immigrant and visible minority women in Alberta. ANIW undertakes capacity building projects to ensure those most affected by the issues gain the capacity to address the issues as well.

About the Calgary Centre for Culture, Equity and Diversity (CCCED)

The Calgary Centre for Culture, Equity and Diversity is dedicated to enabling leaders, practitioners and citizens to be more effective in their diversity work. Our goal is to work towards a just society through the elimination of racial discrimination and stereotyping in a way which is collaborative and promotes both societal harmony and acceptance.

About Colour of Change – Colour of Poverty

The Colour of Poverty Campaign is an Ontario-wide, community-based effort to help raise public awareness about the serious problem of poverty within racialized communities of Ontario. The campaign is a joint effort of several organizations and groups including: African Canadian Legal Clinic, Canadian Arab Federation, Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, Hispanic Development Council, Karuna Community Services, Midaynta Community Services, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, and the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario.

Summary

Recent immigrants and people from racialized populations in Canada are more vulnerable to living in poverty than Canada's general population. To better understand this phenomenon and within the context of its co-leadership of *Dignity for All: the campaign for a poverty-free Canada* (<http://dignityforall.ca>), Canada Without Poverty partnered with the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women (ANIW), the Calgary Centre for Culture, Equity and Diversity (CCCED) and Toronto-based Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change (CoP – CoC) on a 25-question online survey examining perspectives of poverty within ethno-cultural communities.¹ The survey focused upon such communities in three provinces with significant ethno-cultural representation: Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario.

Definition of Poverty

The condition of a human being who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain economic self-sufficiency and participation in society

Per Quebec Bill 112 (2002), *An Act to combat poverty and exclusion*

Thirty-seven people, representing considerable ethno-cultural diversity in these provinces, completed the survey. Their collective response affirms that members of ethno-cultural communities are, indeed, highly vulnerable to poverty, but that there is also potential untapped desire and leadership from within these communities to engage in effective anti-poverty action. Among the key findings of the survey:

- 92% of respondents said poverty exists within the communities they represent;
- 65% believe poverty was increasing;
- Main areas of impact identified included lack of affordable housing, lack of access to employment opportunities, social exclusion and lack of dignity/respect socially;
- Recent immigrants (arriving within the last five years), refugees and ethno-cultural women are the most vulnerable to poverty;
- Over 90% responded that under-employment (skilled workers performing low paying jobs) was the main barrier, while over 80% pointed to systemic barriers such as racial discrimination and inadequate settlement services;
- To combat challenges of poverty, people from ethno-cultural communities are taking on multiple jobs, seeking assistance from family, the community, and government, and generally spending only on essential items;
- Three solutions to ethno-cultural poverty identified most frequently were improved access to necessities (affordable housing, child care, dental care etc.), funding for skills development, and more support for foreign trained professionals;
- Other solutions commonly suggested included analysis of census information to better understand ethno-cultural demographics, and the introduction/enforcement of provincial employment equity laws (hiring based on merit);
- 50% believe the federal government is the most responsible for eradicating poverty;
- 78% of respondents were interested in engaging in the *Dignity for All Campaign*.

¹ In this report, the phrase “ethno-cultural communities” is a shortened version of “ethno-racial-faith-cultural” communities which refers to the range of communities distinguishable by a combination of their ethnic, racial, faith-based and cultural make-up or orientations, as well as those communities that may self-identify as a visible minority.

Ethno-Cultural Communities and Poverty

Results from a Survey

Introduction

Immigration to Canada is growing: whereas there were 117,036 immigrants to Canada between July 1, 1971 and June 30, 1972, there were 203,357 over July 1, 1989 to June 30, 1990, and 270,512 over July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Moreover, there is increasing representation of immigrants from countries in the global South: whereas in 1971, 62% of immigrants came from Europe and only 12% did from Asia and the Middle East, by 2006 16% of them came from Europe while 58% came from the latter regions (Figure 1).

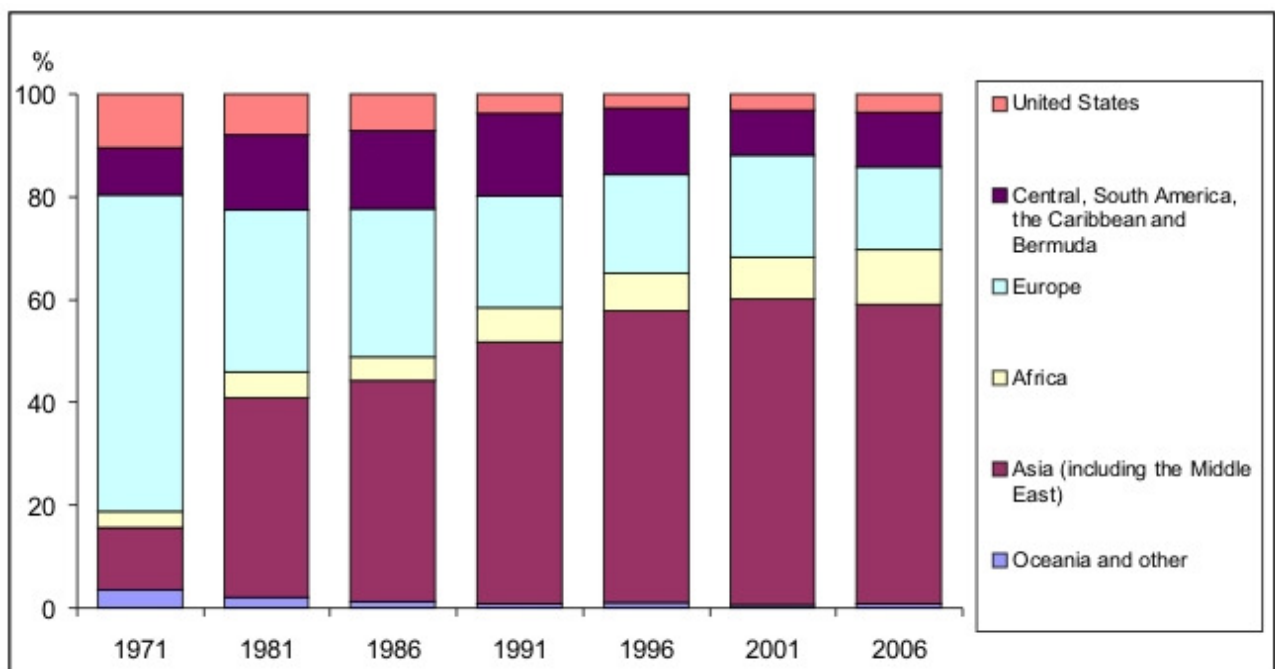


Figure 1: Changes in immigration to Canada

Source: <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-557/figures/c2-eng.cfm>

Unfortunately, language and cultural barriers upon arrival, inadequate skill levels, a lack of foreign credentials recognition, and potentially limited labour market opportunities mean that recent immigrants² are generally more vulnerable to poverty than the Canadian-born population, irrespective of their level of education. For example, individuals from West and East Asia are arriving with higher education but faring worse than their counterparts that arrived from Europe decades before (Fleury, 2007). Recent immigrants are having more difficulty finding employment and if they do, are earning less than older or non-immigrants (Collin and Jensen, 2009; Picot *et al.*, 2009).

In addition to such barriers to prosperity, faith- or race-based discrimination because of skin colour, accent and/or religion, has further impacts upon the employment opportunities and workplace experiences of

² Defined by Statistics Canada as “landed immigrants who arrived in Canada within five years prior to a given census”

racialized people (Wilson *et al.*, 2011). In general, individuals from visible minorities have a difficult time finding work. Once they are employed, they are also more likely to be paid less than their non-racialized, Canadian-born counterparts (Block and Galabuzi, 2011; Block, 2010). The negative effects of such problems include compromised health, lower wages leading to an increased likelihood of poverty, and a tendency for racialized individuals to be concentrated in less stable, precarious work (Wilson *et al.*, 2011; Block and Galabuzi, 2011). Indeed, racialized families (not necessarily recent immigrants) are considered to be three times more likely to experience poverty in comparison with non-racialized Canadians. For example, families of Arab, West Asian, and Korean descent have comparatively high poverty rates with an estimated 30% or more of these populations in poverty (Block and Galabuzi, 2011).

For Canada Without Poverty to meaningfully engage with ethno-cultural organizations which work directly with immigrants and racialized populations, it is important to determine whether conversations around poverty are taking place and, if so, the language that is being used and whether there is openness to broaden the dialogue. Accordingly, in partnership with the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women (ANIW), the Calgary Centre for Culture, Equity and Diversity (CCCED) and Toronto-based Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change (CoP – CoC), Canada Without Poverty began a project in 2011, entitled *Outreach to Ethno-Racial-Faith-Cultural Communities for Engagement in Anti-Poverty Action*. The purpose of this project is five-fold:

- 1) Build Canada Without Poverty's understanding of how people from various ethno-cultural communities perceive poverty in Canada, including viewing poverty as a human rights issue;
- 2) Raise awareness within ethno-cultural communities of poverty in Canada, the human rights context around poverty, the human rights "frame" within the *Dignity* campaign, potential solutions to poverty and the political and legislative context for action;
- 3) Identify key ethno-cultural NGOs that and their leaders who are concerned about poverty in Canada and that wish to increase their community's engagement in anti-poverty activism;
- 4) Increase ethno-cultural NGO endorsements and engagement in *Dignity for All*, including participating in policy-specific discussions;
- 5) Build new organizational relationships formed between Canada Without Poverty and various ethno-cultural NGOs, enabling greater collaboration in anti-poverty action beyond 2011.

The project is undertaken within the context of *Dignity for All: the campaign for a poverty-free Canada* to which Canada Without Poverty is a co-leader with Citizens for Public Justice and Make Poverty History, and which aspires to secure greater engagement and leadership of the federal government to help prevent, reduce and ultimately eliminate poverty in Canada (<http://dignityforall.ca>).

Survey Methodology

The first phase of the project constituted an on-line survey of ethno-cultural community representatives in Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. The survey was principally a means for advancing dialogue between Canada Without Poverty and ethno-cultural groups around poverty related issues.

Following an initial pilot survey to test questions and obtain peer review, a finalized 25-question survey titled *Perspectives on Poverty by Ethno-Cultural Groups* was opened to groups in these three provinces. Over 100 ethno-cultural groups were contacted, identified based on their direct connection to ethno-cultural communities through service delivery, and for overall organizational mandate. Thirty-seven participants from 35 ethno-cultural groups responded, six for the pilot survey and 31 for the final survey. Seventeen of the responses were from Alberta, 13 from B.C. and seven from Ontario. Respondents were generally organizations that offered a wide array of services ranging from settlement and family supports to language and educational training as well as volunteering.

Figure 2 indicates which ethno-cultural groups are served by organizations which responded to the survey, and how many of the organizations serve particular groups.

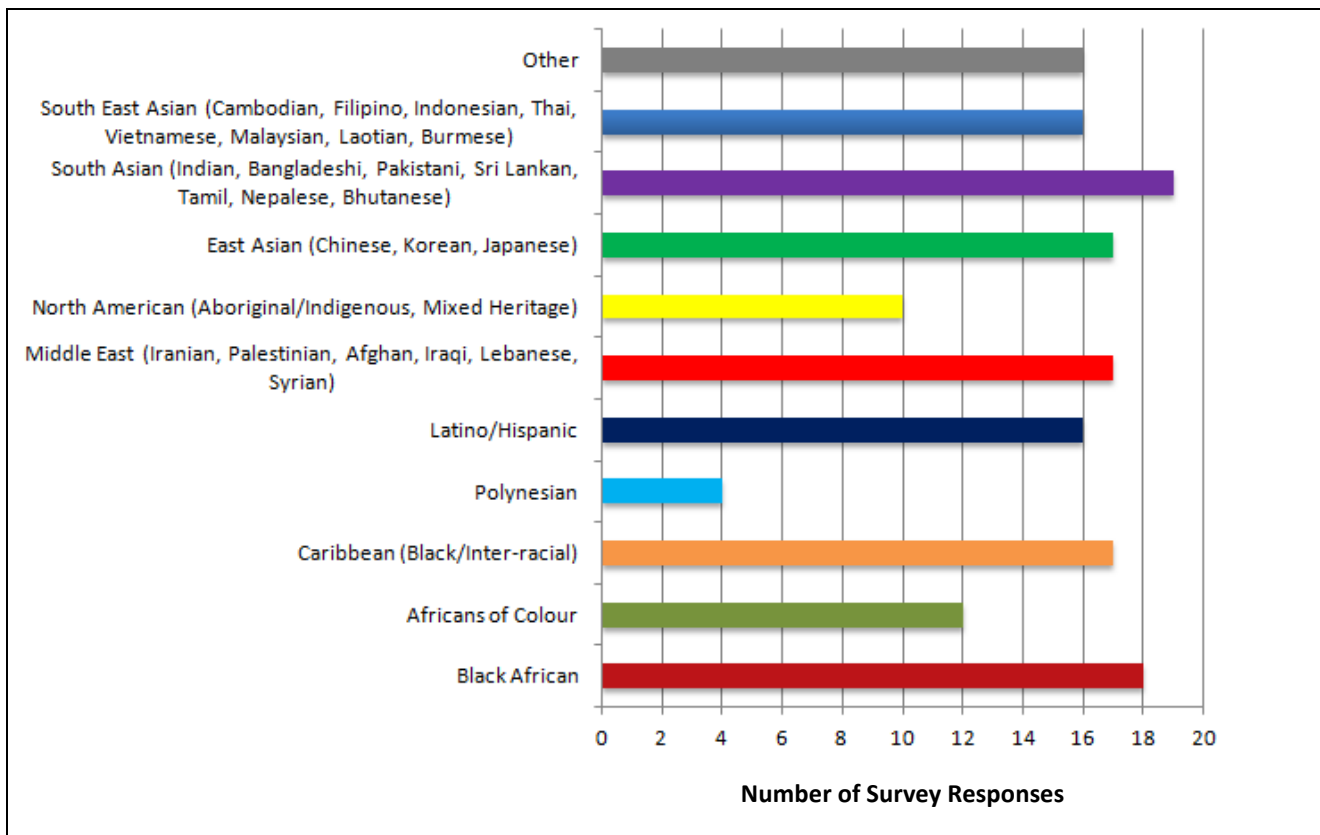


Figure 2: Number and type of ethno-cultural groups served by organizations that responded to the survey

Key Findings

Survey findings presented below are presented in four categories:

- The Question of Poverty
- Concerns and Barriers Facing Low-Income People
- Suggested Solutions
- Future Engagement in Anti-Poverty Action

The Question of Poverty

At the federal level there are no official metrics for measuring the incidence or depth of poverty. Several income metrics (e.g. Low Income Cut-Off, Low Income Measure, Market Basket Measure) exist which are often used by government and non-government interests alike as proxies for poverty lines and rates. Different interests use different metrics, resulting in confusion about how many people or what percentage of the population are living in poverty, and how deeply poor they may be. Moreover, available income data is typically non-specific with respect to particular vulnerable populations at the community level.

Perspectives on poverty held by individuals working at the ground level with ethno-cultural communities are important to consider and better understand patterns of vulnerability facing immigrants and racialized groups. Our survey therefore asked questions regarding the existence of poverty within these communities, whether or not poverty was increasing or decreasing, and whether conversations about poverty are taking place openly within ethno-cultural families or communities.

Ninety-two percent (92%) of survey respondents indicated that poverty exists within the ethno-cultural communities they represent. Ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents also agreed with the definition of poverty used for the survey, per Quebec Bill 112 (see box at right). Notable comments concerning this definition included the following:

- Poverty is structurally derived and an experience of social exclusion resulting from economic, political, social deprivation.
- Some people in poverty do have resources (education, experience), and therefore aren't entirely "lacking."
- The effect of poverty on social status should be considered.

Definition of Poverty

The condition of a human being who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain economic self-sufficiency and participation in society

Per Quebec Bill 112 (2002), *An Act to combat poverty and exclusion*

Sixty-five percent (65%) of survey respondents who answered this question believe that poverty is increasing within their communities, while 11% believe it is decreasing and 14% believe that it is neither increasing or decreasing. The three groups most vulnerable to poverty identified were immigrants arriving within the last five years (30 responses) and refugees and women (25 responses each) {Figure 3}.

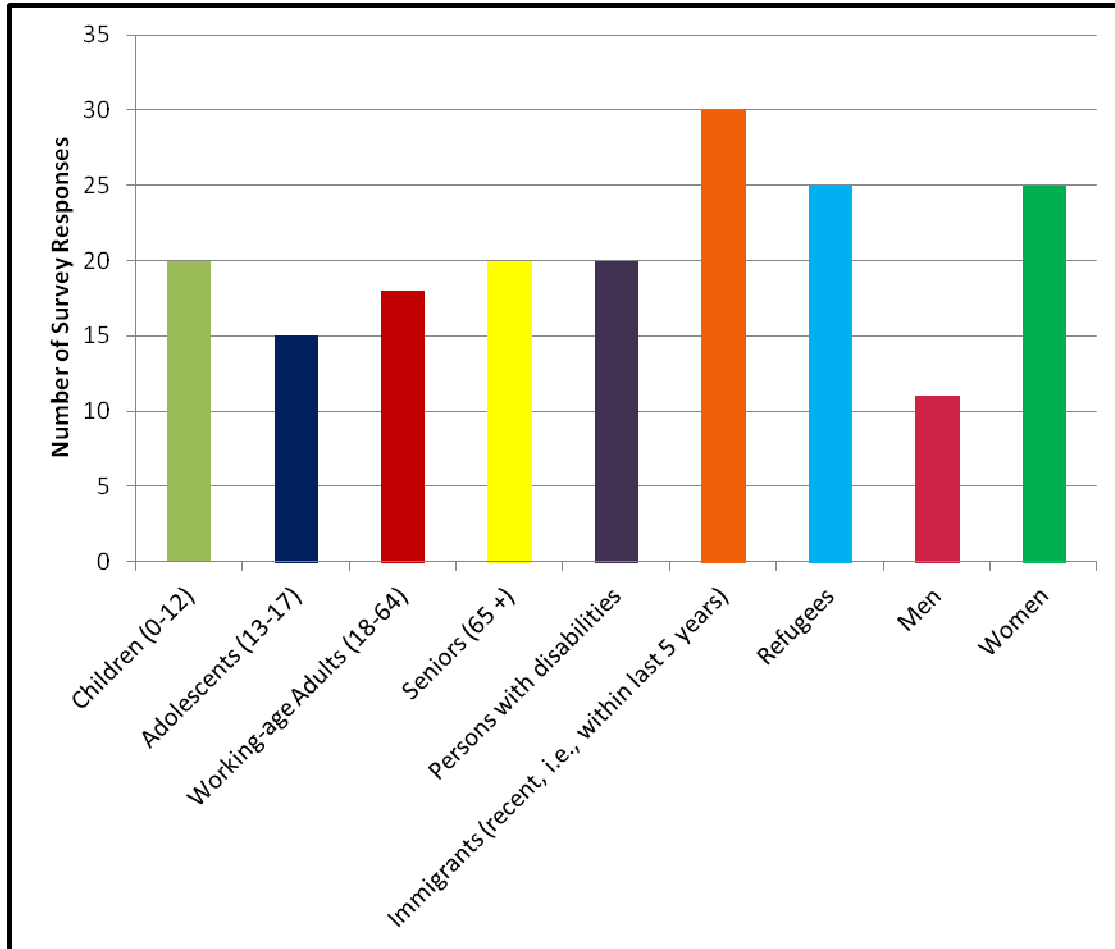


Figure 3: Populations most vulnerable to poverty

More respondents indicated that poverty is being discussed in households but not as often within communities: however the difference was marginal. **While 59% responded that conversations on poverty occur in the home, only 48% indicated that a larger discussion was taking place within the greater community.**

Concerns and Barriers Facing Low-Income People

The survey illustrated a number of areas where poverty is having a direct affect on individuals and families. Main areas of impact include: a lack of access to affordable housing and employment opportunities, feelings of social exclusion, and a lack of dignity/respect socially. These concerns were followed by a number of responses indicating the negative impact of poverty on mental/emotional health, experiences of economic exploitation, difficulty accessing child care, and a lack of opportunity for further education.

Additional responses on the impacts of poverty were gathered through a space for further comments. A look at “Other Responses” reveals a few key areas to also consider:

- Lack of access to justice to defend against gender based violence
- Acknowledgment that the effects of poverty reach all areas of an individual’s life

- Lack of a network to overcome fear of social injustice

Reflecting on these areas of impact, the following question asked respondents about barriers that restrict individuals from moving beyond poverty. **Under-employment (skilled workers performing low paying jobs) was seen as the main impediment facing individuals with 92% of respondents selecting this issue, while 81% pointed to systemic barriers such as racial discrimination and inadequate settlement services as major obstacles (Figure 4).** This finding is consistent with research that suggests that more immigrants are arriving educated but unable to translate their training into higher paying jobs; that wages for these newcomers are much less than for those of the Canadian-born population; and that “colour-coded” or racialized disadvantage in labour market outcomes and employment prospects are worsening regardless of an individual’s place of birth – whether it be in Canada or abroad. This research also points to the fact that 86% of immigrants in recent years belong to a visible minority group (Fleury, 2007), which has been noted as a group much more likely to experience low-income (Collin and Jensen, 2009).

Side note: Various government and other reports have stated that poverty in Canada has a reoccurring theme of low wages. The National Council of Welfare has reported that a majority of people living in poverty are “working poor” (National Council of Welfare, 2007; National Council of Welfare, 2001). These are individuals with employment of more than 27 weeks per year, many closer to full time (National Council of Welfare, 2007; Chen, 2005). The Living Wage for Families campaign in British Columbia is targeted at what a family of four needs to earn to be above a stated poverty line for this household type and provide essentials like food, clothing, housing, child care, transportation, and certain healthcare expenses. Calculations are relative to geographic location, and highlight the need to move beyond a minimum wage to meet what is considered a “bare bones budget” (Richards *et al.*, 2008).

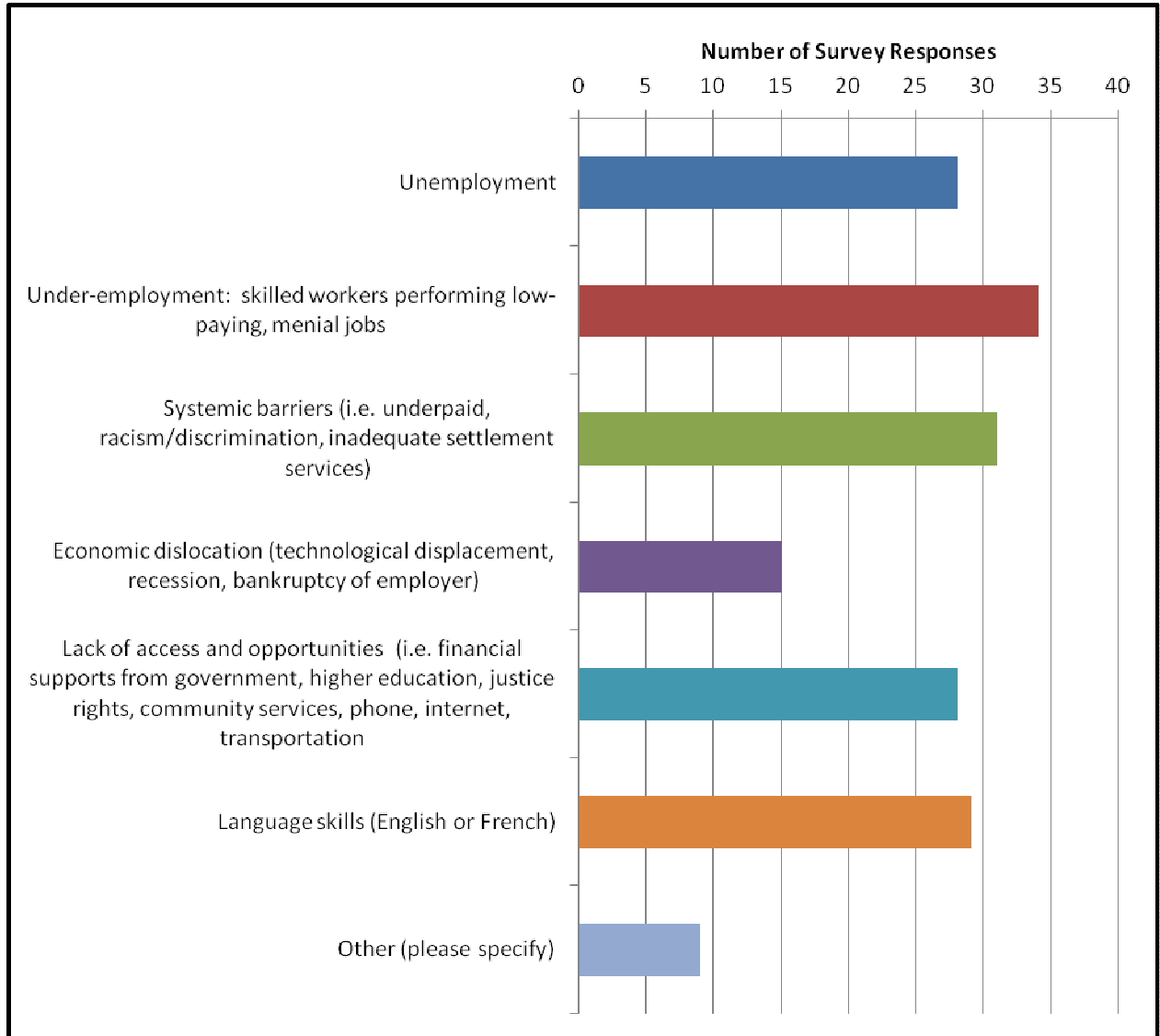


Figure 4: Barriers preventing people in ethno-cultural communities from moving out of poverty

According to the survey, ethno-cultural communities take unique steps to combat the challenges of poverty that include taking on multiple jobs, seeking assistance from family, the community, and government, and saving money by only spending on essential items. As with many low-income families forced to work multiple jobs in order to better their economic position, inevitable sacrifices are made in regards to family and personal time, as well as physical and mental well-being. Respondents also added other strategies that individuals use to survive on low income:

- Shared housing
- Sending family members back to country of origin to work
- Going to court unrepresented
- Staying in abusive relationships
- Isolation from others, or practicing substance abuse

In total, 82% found that poverty is not being effectively addressed within the ethno-cultural communities they represent. While this is high, it suggests that some respondents believe there are solutions in place for people to overcome poverty.

Suggested Solutions

The top three solutions to eradicating poverty selected by survey respondents were:

- 1. Improved access to necessities (e.g., affordable housing, child care, dental care)**
- 2. Funding for skills development and higher education**
- 3. Support for foreign trained professionals (e.g., bridging programs)**

Following these selected priority solutions, three additional solutions were given equal weight: analysis of demographic information on ethno-cultural communities from the census³; introduction and/or enforcement of federal and provincial employment equity laws (hiring based on merit); and enforcement of laws on pay equity, discrimination and economic exploitation of workers (Figure 5).

To the question of who is responsible for addressing poverty, 50% of respondents said the federal government is primarily responsible, followed by (in order) provincial government, municipal government, individuals, business, non-profit groups and labour unions.

Future Engagement in Anti-Poverty Action

An intended outcome of this project is for ethno-cultural groups to become engaged in *Dignity for All: the campaign for a poverty-free Canada*. This campaign puts a human rights lens on poverty and is striving to achieve three goals: a federal plan to eliminate poverty; a federal Act to mandate that the federal government have a plan and be accountable for results; and social security for all Canadians. With involvement from more ethno-cultural groups, the campaign can be strengthened nationally and its effectiveness increased.

Ninety-five percent (95%) of respondents agreed and 5% of respondents disagreed with the statement that poverty is a human rights issue, pursuant to Canada's commitment to economic and social rights under international law.

A total of 39% of participants had heard of *Dignity for All*, and 91% agreed with the goals of the campaign. Eighty-nine percent (89%) requested more info on the campaign, signalling a willingness to continue the dialogue around poverty issues and possibly create future shared initiatives or partnerships. Twenty-nine groups are interested in engaging directly with the campaign, for example through meeting with Members of Parliament, organizing events, and through organizational endorsements (Figure 6).

³ While analysis of census-derived information on ethno-cultural populations does not constitute a solution to ethno-cultural poverty per se, it could provide deeper insight into particular demographic information that greatly informs anti-poverty work and programming.

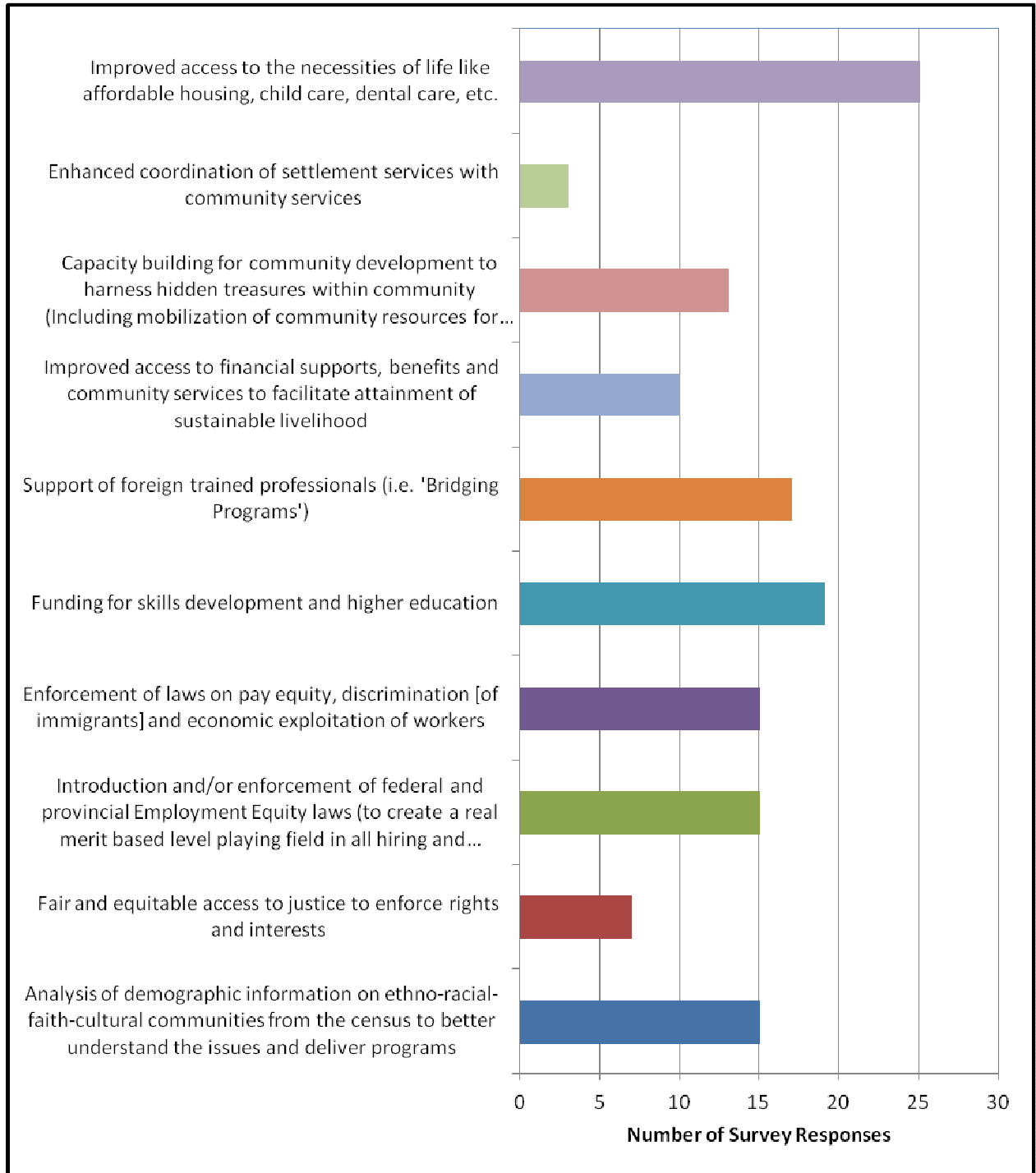


Figure 5: Solutions to eradicate poverty within ethno-cultural communities

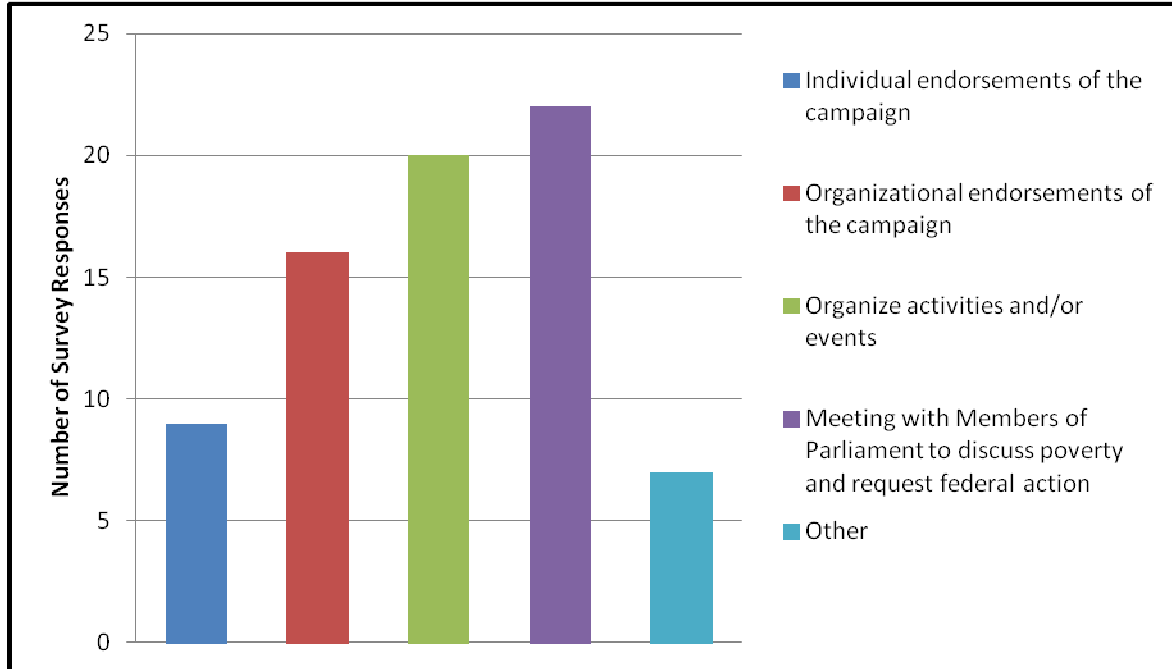


Figure 6: Ethno-cultural group preferences for directly engaging in the *Dignity for All Campaign*

Conclusion

Findings from this brief survey show that poverty is a significant problem within diverse ethno-cultural communities and racialized groups, and a majority of respondents agree that it is increasing. It does not appear that any community or demographic group in particular is immune, but the survey suggests that recent immigrants to Canada (those who have arrived within the last five years), refugees and women are generally the most vulnerable.

A few notable findings include:

- Underemployment was selected as the single most significant barrier to moving beyond poverty.
- Unemployment was another key barrier identified from the survey, a finding consistent with research which suggests that people of colour face greater discrimination to employment and advancement, and that more immigrants are arriving with education but having difficulty finding well paying jobs.
- Lack of access to affordable housing, child care and employment opportunities are seen as a serious hindrance to moving beyond poverty.
- Individuals with low income experience social exclusion, economic exploitation as well as mental and physical health issues.

Possible solutions chosen by the majority of respondents were:

- Improved access to necessities (e.g., affordable housing, child care, dental care)
- Funding skills development
- Support for foreign professional credentials
- Hiring based on merit
- The enforcement of laws on pay equity, discrimination and economic exploitation of workers

When asked who was responsible, 50% selected the federal government as the most responsible, and 29 participants indicated an interest in future federal advocacy action through engagement with the *Dignity for All Campaign*.

This survey affirms current research on ethno-cultural communities and illustrates some of the complex issues individuals and families with low-income face. It marks the beginning of a broader and deepening dialogue between Canada Without Poverty and various ethno-cultural communities and organizations committed to the welfare of these communities.

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Appendix A: Organizations That Responded to the Survey

Alberta

Asociaciones Latinas en Calgary Alberta (SALCA)
Calgary Chinese Community Service Association
Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre
Calgary/Mexican Canadian Culture Society (CALMECA)
Central Alberta African Centre
F.O.C.U.S on Seniors
Ghanaian Canadian Association of Calgary
Haitian Integration Centre of Calgary
Healthy Families Outreach Program
India Canada Association
Ismaili Community
Mennonite Central Committee Alberta
National Black Coalition of Canada Society, Calgary Chapter
NeighbourLink
Saamis Immigration Services Association (SISA)
Sunrise Community Link
Women Together Ending Poverty (WTEP)

British Columbia

Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA)
Ghanaian-Canadian Association of BC
Immigrant Services Society of BC
Iranian Information Centre Society (IICS)
Kenyan Community in BC Society
Latincouver Cultural & Business Society
Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC)
Options Community Services Society (2 responses)
Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS)
S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
Vancouver & Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society (2 responses)

Ontario

Canadian Association of Muslims with Disabilities (CAM-D)
Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter
Jamaican Canadian Association
KCWA Family and Social Services
Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC)
Metro Toronto Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)