

WINNING THE WAR ON POVERTY

CANADA IS DOING IT; THE USA IS NOT

April 5, 2019

eResearch Comment: *The following article was published by [The New York Times](#) on Thursday, April 4, 2019 under its OPINION column. It is authored by David Brooks, Opinion columnist. His bio is provided at the end of the article.*

Jesus said the poor will always be among us, but there are a lot of people in Canada testing that proposition.

According to recently-released data, between 2015 and 2017, Canada reduced its official poverty rate by at least 20%. Roughly 825,000 Canadians were lifted out of poverty in those years, giving the country today its lowest poverty rate in history. How did it do it?

The overall Canadian economy has been decent but not robust enough to explain these striking outcomes. Instead, one major factor is that Canadians have organized their communities differently. They adopted a specific methodology to fight poverty.

Before I describe this methodology, let us pause to think about what it is often like in American poor areas. Everything is fragmented. There are usually a bevy of public and private programs doing their own thing. In a town, there may be four food pantries, which don't really know one another well. The people working in these programs have their heads down, because it is exhausting enough just to do their own work.

A common model is one-donor-funding-one-program. Different programs compete for funds. They justify their existence using randomized controlled experiments, in which researchers try to pinpoint *one* input that led to *one* positive output. The foundation heads, city officials, and social entrepreneurs go to a bunch of conferences, but these conferences don't have much to do with one another.

In other words, the Americans who talk about community don't have a community of their own. Every day, they give away the power they could have if they did mutually reinforcing work together to change whole systems.

In Canada it is not like that. About 15 years ago, a disparate group of Canadians realized that a problem as complex as poverty can be addressed only through a multi-sector comprehensive approach. They realized that poverty was not going to be reduced by some innovation — some cool, new program nobody thought of before. It was going to be addressed through better systems that were mutually supporting and able to enact change on a population level.

So, they began building city-wide and community-wide structures. They started 15 years ago with just 6 cities, but now they have 72 regional networks covering 344 towns.

They begin by gathering, say, 100 people from a single community. A quarter of the people lived or has lived with poverty; the rest were from business, non-profits, and government. They spend a year learning about poverty in the area, talking with the community. They launch a different kind of conversation.

First, they don't want better poor; they want fewer poor. That is to say, their focus is not on how we give poor people food so they don't starve. It is how we move people out of poverty.

Second, they up their ambitions. How do we *eradicate* poverty altogether?

Third, they broaden their vision. What does a vibrant community look like in which everybody's basic needs are met.

After a year, they come up with a town plan. Each town's poverty is different. Each town's assets are different. So each town's plan is different.

The town plans feature a lot of collaborative activity. A food pantry might turn itself into a job-training center by allowing the people who are fed to do the actual work. The pantry might connect with local businesses that change their hiring practices so that high school degrees are not required. Businesses might pledge to raise their minimum wage.

The plans involve a lot of policy changes on the town and provincial levels, such as improved day-care, redesigned transit systems, better work-force development systems.

By the time Canada's national government swung into action, the whole country had a base of knowledge and experience. The people in the field had a wealth of connections and a sense of what needed to be done. The two biggest changes were efforts in city after city to raise the minimum wage and the expansion of a national child benefit, which can net a family up to nearly \$6,500 a year per child. Canada essentially has guaranteed income for the young and the old.

The process of learning and planning and adapting never ends. The Tamarack Institute, which pioneered a lot of this work, serves as a learning community hub for all the different regional networks. (BW: The Tamarack Institute is headquartered in Waterloo, Ontario and has offices all across Canada; <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>)

Paul Born, the head of the Institute, emphasizes that the crucial thing these community-wide collective impact structures do is change attitudes. In the beginning, it is as if everybody is swimming in polluted water. People are sluggish, fearful, isolated, looking out only for themselves. But when people start working together across sectors around a common agenda, it is like cleaning the water. Communities realize they can do more for the poor. The poor realize they can do more for themselves. New power has been created, a new sense of agency.

Born thinks you can really do social change with a methodology, without creating community-wide collective impact structures.

But, in many American communities, we are mostly scattershot. That is the problem with our distrust and polarization. We often don't build structures across difference. Transformational change rarely gets done.

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David Brooks became an Op-Ed columnist for The New York Times in September 2003. His column appears every Tuesday and Friday. He is currently a commentator on “PBS NewsHour,” NPR’s “All Things Considered” and NBC’s “Meet the Press.”

He is the author of “Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There” and “On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense.” In March 2011 he came out with his third book, “The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement,” which was a No. 1 New York Times best seller. He is the author of “The Road to Character” and the forthcoming book, “The Second Mountain.” [@nytdavidbrooks](#)

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