

On the road to reduce poverty
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The experts and activists have spoken. Now the Senate committee examining urban poverty wants to hear from the people.

This summer, Senator Art Eggleton and his five colleagues (three Liberals, two Conservatives) head out to ask Canadians what they want to see in a national poverty reduction plan, how it should be designed and who should pay for it.

They'll visit eastern Canada in August, Toronto and Montreal in September and the four western provinces in October.

The committee will provide witnesses with a 90-page report that distils the testimony it has heard over the past 18 months and sets out a list of options – 103 in fact – ranging from the complete replacement of the current income support with a guaranteed annual income to a few low-cost adjustments.

Even those who don't plan to attend the hearings will find *Poverty, Housing and Homelessness* (available at www.parl.gc.ca/39/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/com-e/soci-e/rep-e/rep17jun08-e.htm) an excellent primer. It contains up-to-date statistics, solid analysis and proposals from the country's top social scientists.

The committee is not endorsing any course of action yet, although some of its members have strong preferences. It will listen to the public, weigh the pros and cons of each alternative and (barring an election), issue a final report by year-end.

When the six senators embarked on this initiative, they intended to update the groundbreaking 1971 report of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty, headed by the late David Croll.

It painted an eye-opening picture of the "ugly subculture" of poverty in Canada and set out an ambitious agenda for social reform.

To Croll's dismay, the committee's principal recommendation – a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians – was never implemented, but the Liberal government of the day did triple family allowance payments.

Eggleton and his colleagues saw no need to start afresh. But after seven meetings, they realized that the social and political landscape had changed so much in the past 37 years that they'd have to do a more thorough inquiry.

They have now heard from 92 witnesses, held a number of round tables on specific issues and pored over reams of research.

They have identified seven key issues:

- Canada's income support systems are broken.
- A job is no longer enough to lift a person out of poverty.
- Too many Canadians can't afford decent housing.
- The federal government is too compartmentalized to fight poverty in a comprehensive way.
- Provincial and territorial governments are likewise chopped into departments and agencies that deal with pieces of poverty.
- Cities are an afterthought in the development of social policy.
- The poor usually have no input into programs that affect them.

It is an unflinching diagnosis. Whether their remedies are as bold remains to be seen. But they've offered Canadians plenty of choices. Some are highly focused: create a dedicated income support program for Canadians with disabilities. Others are extremely broad: promote security of the person, shelter, food and adequate income as basic rights. There are suggestions on housing, child care, employment insurance, pharmacare and bolstering the voluntary sector.

The senators are aware that several of the provinces have their own poverty reduction strategies (or soon will). They don't want to pre-empt or impede these efforts, but they believe Canadians need to tackle this challenge collectively.

They recognize that Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his colleagues have little appetite for social policy initiatives. But they believe Canadians would support a fair, workable poverty reduction plan. That would put pressure on Ottawa to respond.

At minimum, the six senators – a pre-eminent heart surgeon, two former cabinet ministers (Conservative and Liberal), a former lieutenant-governor, a former prime ministerial adviser and a socially engaged teacher – will provide a forum for a thoughtful, nationwide debate on poverty.

If a consensus develops, they will be able to present the government with a credible, cogent prescription for change.

(More information is available from the Senate subcommittee on cities: 1-800-267-7362 or SOC-AFF-SOC@sen.parl.gc.ca)