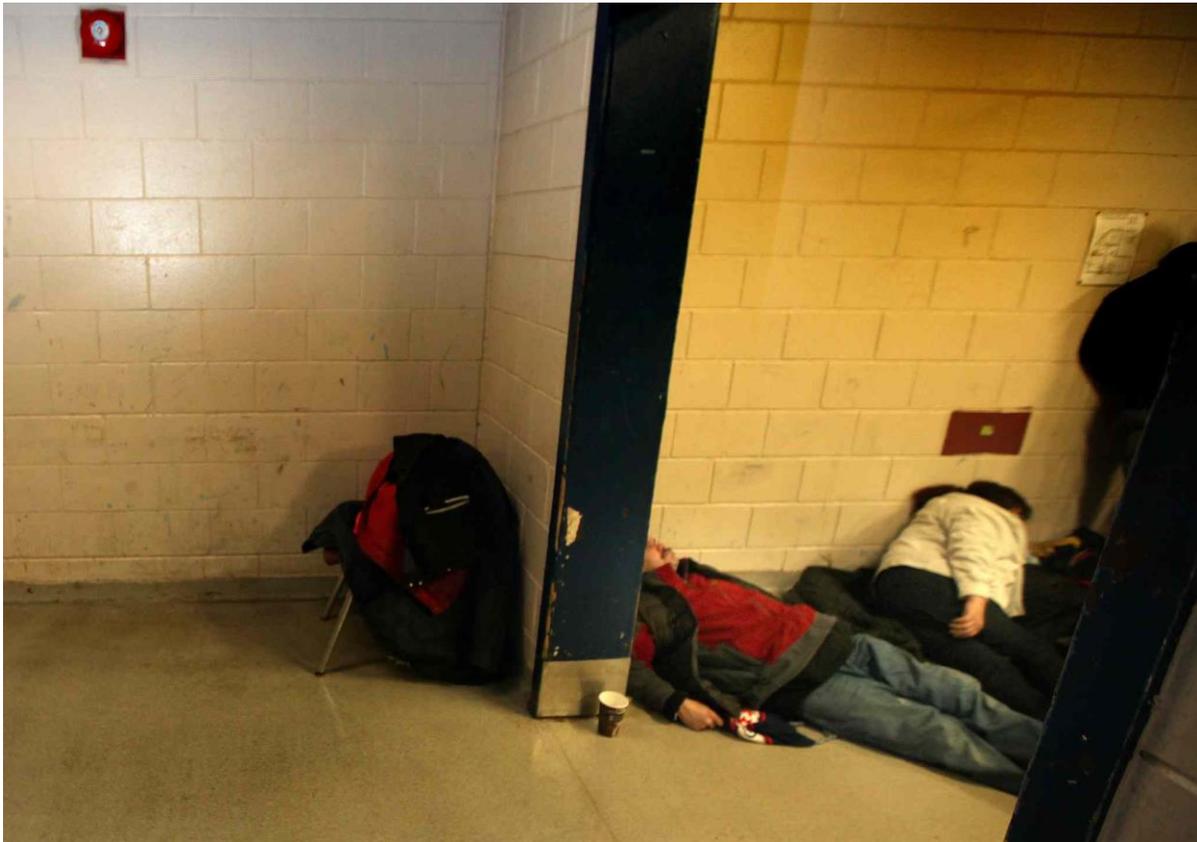


Winnipeg Free Press

Editorials

National security shouldn't outweigh poverty

October 13, 2015



PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES

Clients wait in the Main Street Project for mats to be laid out on the floor to sleep on a cold January night in 2014.

There is no good definition of poverty. But the effects are profound.

Living under a bridge, in a parkade or emergency shelter are the most extreme and obvious examples of poverty. Being poor, however, takes many forms and can include a working family whose income simply isn't enough to ensure a dignified life.

We know a lot of things about poverty, even if there is no national or international method for defining or measuring it.

We know it makes people sick, lowers life expectancy, reduces educational outcomes, causes crime and family breakdown. It's both a cause and effect of mental illness and other diseases.

We know it's a scourge that affects millions of Canadians, although precisely how many is a source of endless debate among academics, statisticians and social service agencies.

And as we learned once again during this election, it's not an issue that gets a lot of attention. The mainstream parties have politely acknowledged the issue, without saying much of anything. Politicians are good at that.

Last February, for example, every party in Parliament supported a motion to end child poverty. When it came time to develop electoral platforms, however, the issue was largely forgotten.

And when the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg invited candidates to a forum on social issues, it was obvious the mainstream parties had not spent much time thinking about the problem.

The challenge of eliminating poverty, of course, often seems overwhelmingly complex, if not impossible.

Winnipeg's Siloam Mission, for example, is dealing with a 50 per cent increase in the number of people using its services. The organization says it can't explain the increase, although part of the answer might be related to an increase in rental rates in the city.

An increase in the costs of shelter affects the working poor the hardest, driving some of them to food banks and even to soup kitchens for free meals. Many of these people are hanging on by the skin of their teeth.

There are many programs today to deal with homelessness and poverty — the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council last year vowed to end homelessness in the city within 10 years — but many critical components are still missing.

It's often observed, for example, there are more settlement programs for refugees than there are for Canada's native peoples when they leave their home communities and travel to Winnipeg in search of jobs and homes with running water.

Without proper ID or a place to live, it is nearly impossible for them to find jobs or register for social programs. Some of them may find help from friends, but others fall through the cracks and end up lining up at places such as Siloam Mission.

Others return to their home reserves where the quality of life is usually substandard and well below the threshold that should be available in a G7 country such as Canada.

In this way, poverty continues to grow and expand, generating huge costs for taxpayers.

The next federal government does not have to promise to solve the problem itself, but it must pledge to work with cities, provinces and the private sector on comprehensive solutions.

It can start by investing in social housing, which Ottawa abandoned in 1993, leaving the provinces to deal with the need.

Right now, the middle class and national security seem like bigger priorities for politicians than poverty.

That's just not good enough for a country such as Canada.

Editorials are the consensus view of the Winnipeg Free Press' editorial board composed of Catherine Mitchell, David O'Brien, Shannon Sampert, and Paul Samyn.