

Poverty key factor in crime rates, health trouble, conference hears [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Money may not buy happiness, they say, but the lack of money is a pretty strong predictor of misery, delegates to a Charlottetown conference heard Monday.

Dennis Raphael, associate professor at York University's School of Health Policy and Management, told delegates to the Atlantic Summer Institute on Healthy and Safe Communities, that a growing body of research is showing that there is a common obstacle in the fights for health promotion, crime prevention and social development.

"Poverty is a major cause of all these problems, poverty and exclusion," Raphael said in an interview.

"It's not a question of how thick your wallet is, but whether you can participate in the activities that are expected as a member of an affluent society."

He said people who live lives of exclusion, particularly children raised on society's margins, are the people at greatest risk of becoming criminals, of becoming victims of crime, of developing health problems later in life.

The speaker said studies that look at developed countries have found that the gap between rich and poor is the strongest predictor of crime rates, regardless of the country's overall wealth.

He said poverty is similarly a huge factor in the prevalence of low birth weights, addictions, cancers and chronic diseases. He said social policy is one of the surest mechanisms for both safer streets and healthier lives.

He said families led by single mothers tend to be among Canada's poorest, but that isn't the case in Sweden, for example.

"They recognize that here is a person who is at risk so they put money into supporting her, into child care, into training opportunities," he said. "The result is that in Sweden female-led families are not poor families and because the women are supported they are generally back out, able to get well-paid work and able to support themselves.

"When I see health promotions now they're all about individual choices, get your exercise, eat vegetables, don't smoke. That's where we were 20 years ago in health policy. Are you really going to tell somebody eating from a food bank to eat more vegetables?"

A panel discussion that followed Raphael's speech shared his views.

Jeannita Bernard, director of health promotion and rehabilitation for Veterans Affairs Canada, said it is difficult to get the health system and planners to come around to the multidisciplinary approach in which a family's income is seen as making as much of a contribution to their health as the family diet does.

"We all know the importance of income and social stability in our development programs, on our children," she said.

"We need to learn how to embrace health promotion as a part of our health agenda."

Raphael said crime prevention is like illness prevention. It can't replace response to emergency situations, but it may do more to help communities in the long run.

- reprinted from the Charlottetown Guardian

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