

Poor-bashing is never the answer [CA-ON]^[1]

Counterpoint

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

This August marks another anniversary of the death of Kimberly Rogers. Three years ago, in the middle of a heat wave, Kimberly Rogers died in her apartment in Sudbury, Ont. She was eight months pregnant. Her death makes it so clear why policies based on prejudice and ignorance never serve any public good.

The circumstances of this death are hard to accept in a society as rich as ours. Kimberly Rogers died under house arrest, having been charged with defrauding the social assistance system. Her "crime" was failing to report a student loan she received while on welfare. At the time of her death, Rogers had less than \$500 a month to live on, pending the outcome of her appeal. If she had not appealed, her benefits would have been cut off entirely, leaving her with nothing. Her death became the subject of a Coroner's inquest.

The war on the poor waged by Ontario's now defeated Conservative government was finally and deservedly put on trial. On the defensive was a government that worked hard to build public support for a 22% cut to welfare, a lifetime ban for welfare fraud, workfare, drug testing and mandatory literacy tests for people receiving social assistance. This government did everything it could to humiliate and degrade citizens who were receiving social assistance.

In October, last year, Ontario voters said no to the policies of that government and voted it out of office.

To the credit of the Liberal government, Premier Dalton McGuinty acted on one of the coroner's jury recommendations in February of this year. He announced the lifetime welfare ban for those convicted of welfare fraud would end. However, that is the only one of the 14 recommendations that have been acted on.

It is time for action on all the jury's recommendations. It is time for both federal and provincial governments to think again about policies on income security and poverty.

A large food bank recently surveyed its users receiving welfare and asked them why they were on assistance instead of working. Some of the answers are worth noting. If you need a prescription drug and the only jobs you can find are at, or close to, minimum wage, with no benefits -- how can you quit welfare if this is the only way you can keep drug coverage? If you have small children to raise and there's no affordable, safe child care, how can you work without abandoning your children?

If governments are serious about giving people on assistance the "hand up," we need: a national prescription drug program to provide coverage for workers who do not have employer drug coverage; a national affordable child care program; social housing; improved access to disability benefits so people with disabilities can keep more earnings from work and not lose benefits they need; and provisions for attending school to upgrade job market skills while receiving unemployment or welfare benefits.

We should not penalize, and certainly not convict as criminals, people who want to improve their chances of working.

If we were serious about ending child poverty, no provincial government would claw back the national child benefit supplement from Canada's poorest families because they are receiving assistance. In short, unenlightened poor-bashing should give way to policies resulting in greater participation in the labour force, more cohesive families and stronger, healthier communities.

- reprinted from the National Post

Region: Canada^[2]

Ontario^[3]

Tags: poverty^[4]

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