

Income Disparity and the Impact on Immigrants and Newcomers

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The following is a transcript of an Alberta College of Social Workers podcast recorded January 23, 2008. [Click here](#) to hear the audio version.

INTERVIEWER: What does income disparity mean to immigrants and newcomers? How does it impact them?

JOHN: What we see with immigrants as one of the biggest challenges they face is the discrimination in the market against them. Newcomers often don't have the same social networks as people who are established in the community so they can't achieve the kinds of jobs that they are qualified for.

We're seeing a lot of discrimination in the market across the province with regards to people who are highly qualified and have university degrees, college diplomas and trade certificates. They end-up working in janitorial services, fast-food services or as cab drivers. Cab drivers are often highly educated people but they are not being picked up by the market in terms of getting into the jobs that they're qualified for.

The other challenge that this creates for them is they come to this country with expectations and they aren't able to achieve those expectations. The impact on them is that they feel devalued, particularly the immigrant who is looking for that kind of work. They don't feel that they can provide for their families the way they would like to and they feel depressed. They feel angry even at the promises that were made of coming to this land of plenty and then not achieving their dreams.

A challenge too is their income levels. Most immigrant families are much larger than the standard Canadian family so they require a greater amount of income yet they actually achieve lower incomes overall. I think they also face much higher levels of underemployment and unemployment and this creates stress and strain in the family. Other challenges include access to housing, access to quality food, good transportation, and quality education for their kids.

INTERVIEWER: You were mentioning to me the other day that temporary foreign workers face similar times of challenges.

JOHN: Well, temporary foreign workers are even a greater challenge in that they have been introduced to the economic system without a whole lot of thought on the impact on the temporary foreign worker but also the overall labour market. Temporary foreign workers don't necessarily have the same access to services and supports that say landed immigrants or permanent residents have.

They are not eligible for many of the social support services, income security services, and other supports that other people have. They also don't have access to the health services and the education services that other landed immigrants and permanent residents and citizens have. So they face a greater challenge, they take a great risk. They are considered temporary. If something goes wrong in the business they have been hired into or laid off - they have very little recourse and often are sent back to their home countries with little or nothing to show for it.

The other challenge is that they are vulnerable to recruiters and agents in their own countries and perhaps even in Canada who exploit them. They charge them large fees and sums of money in order to find them jobs here, which is illegal according to Canadian law. But it's hard to catch the folks, especially if these folks are recruiters that are operating in their home country. We don't really have any legal jurisdiction to go after them.

We certainly have legal jurisdiction in Canada. We can go after them here but that also creates tension between the established immigrant community and the temporary foreign worker community. We've met with people in the community and we've heard a real strong sense of resentment that immigrants who have lived here for many years - who have been overlooked in the labour market - are now angry at those temporary foreign workers who are coming in and getting paid for jobs that they themselves have not been able to achieve. That's created resentment and challenges there.

INTERVIEWER: So how does all of this affect Albertans at large?

JOHN: For one, it certainly doesn't promote a positive image of Alberta internationally. We know for a fact that immigrants talk to their family and friends who live overseas or in other cities in Canada. If immigrants aren't able to achieve the kinds of outcomes that they are hoping for and aren't respected and recognized for the qualifications and the job skills that they bring into the community then they send a message back to their own countries that this is not a country or a province or a city that recognizes and respects their qualifications. People are going to be less likely to choose Alberta and Edmonton and its cities as a place to immigrate to.

That's a real challenge too because we know that Alberta has a vastly expanding economy right now. It's going to require the support of immigrant labour in the future. In fact Citizenship and Immigration Canada tell us that by 2011, 100% of the labour market expansion in Canada is going to be dependent on immigration. So the way we treat immigrants who come into our country right now is going to have an impact on our future economic viability.

INTERVIEWER: How does income disparity and its challenges for immigrants and newcomers affect social workers and their ability to help others?

JOHN: One of the biggest challenges that I'm hearing about, especially in the immigrant settlement agencies where many social workers are working front line, is the ability to help immigrants access the kinds of supports and services that they really need.

I have already mentioned that immigrants often come here with families that are much larger than the standard Canadian family. Our housing isn't developed in order to accommodate these

folks. Social workers end up rushing around trying to find accommodations that are going to be suitable.

The challenge that faces immigrant families who are taking on two or three jobs is that they don't have the same amount of time to spend with their kids. We're seeing some real tensions around and worries about the welfare of children and the youth in the community. It's certainly not that the immigrants themselves aren't concerned about their own children and youth, it's just they don't have the time to invest in them. We see volunteers in those communities trying to provide additional programs and supports.

Social workers themselves are working in agencies that are dependent on grant funding. They are rushing around, often trying to cobble together projects where they can get grant funding. They do the proposals and all the work that goes into that in order to provide the kind of supports that they need to perhaps help a family immigrate to the community.

What happens for social workers is that they end up having to react and help the family to react to a lot of issues. If we were set up strategically in terms of the supports ahead of time, we wouldn't be reacting. We would be more able to respond effectively to their needs.

There's been very little thoughtful planning I would say on a provincial level around the kinds of challenges that are facing these individuals and families in our community. There was very little planning ahead for needs in situations where either employment situations break down or there's a problem in the economy and that employment situation is no longer viable. I understand that there is a group of workers who have been hired to take on cases of temporary farm workers who are having difficulties. They are receiving up to ten phone calls a day; ten referrals a day of very complex issues.

Another challenge is the complexity of the challenges facing these families and the difficulty that any one social worker has in trying to help that family address all these complex issues. We're talking income security, child care, youth support, education, probably language challenges in terms of integration. Their own challenges trying to integrate into the work force if they're able to find a job. These are multiple, complex issues and they require a lot of investment of time and energy. What we're hearing especially in the immigrant settlement agencies is that they are overwhelmed with the numbers of folks that are facing these kinds of challenges.

The other area where there are pressures and challenges for social workers in the community is when these families experience breakdowns. Then other social workers have to come in and try to help. Now some of those social workers may not be well-versed in intercultural practice. They may not understand the language that the family is using or the challenges in terms of their ability to communicate with that family around some of the challenges that they are seeing.

Some of these challenges we know. You can see it. You can hear it. What I'm describing is that a family may be in fact have neglected their child but it may be because they are economically forced to have to leave the child unattended. They have to work in order to make enough money to pay for a very high-priced apartment. You can see the challenges there.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see the situation getting better or worse in the future?

JOHN: I would say without some thoughtful, sustained intervention and planning by both provincial and federal governments around the needs of immigrants that the situation will not improve. It will get worse. Particularly if something isn't done to respond effectively to some of the tensions and challenges that are faced with the introduction of temporary foreign workers to our economy.

I think there is some evidence at the provincial level that they have been thinking about some of these challenges. For instance, they had a policy framework identified and developed a few years ago and one of the planks was welcoming communities. It was to try to help support municipalities, community agencies and other community stakeholders in helping with the integration of immigrants into the social and economic fabric of the community.

If the province moves forward on that kind of a plank I think we could see some programs and policies that could move towards addressing and supporting these families. So I'm hopeful that there is an incentive to do that at the government levels right now. But I'm more wait and see right now. I'm watching to see if they will actually follow through on these kinds of things.

INTERVIEWER: Are there other social policies that you think should be incorporated to stop what really is a growing trend? It's not a trend that is slowing down in any way - it seems to be growing in terms of income disparity.

JOHN: Yes. Absolutely. I think the recognition of immigrants and their qualifications and what they bring to our city and our province need to be celebrated and recognized. If we would make a more concerted effort to assure that these folks are recognized for what they have brought to the province they would achieve higher paying jobs. They would be able to earn more money and not have to work as long hours in order to earn an income that would be able to help sustain their families.

I think our housing policies in the province are abysmal. We've relied far too long on the free market economy; believing that that's the only way that housing can be delivered effectively. I believe that we need social investment in housing. We need public investment in it, and we need more of it.

We also need more options for families that are not the same as the standard Alberta family. We need options that help accommodate the uniqueness of different immigrant families. We should see some policy developments in those areas as well.

Income security is a no-brainer in terms of the income security policy of the province. The rates are just way, way too low. They are way below poverty line. They need to be increased so when families do fall into the situation where they rely on supports for independence that there is enough money to take good care of that family.