CASE STUDY | COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN HASTINGS PRINCE EDWARD COUNTIES

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Meaningful community engagement is a cornerstone of poverty reduction work that acts as the foundation for creating lasting social change, especially in the face of complex issues. The rural and smaller community experience of poverty is different, in many ways, from the larger, urban centre experience. So much so, that this past spring, a Rural Poverty Summit was held in Muskoka, Ontario, profiling the narratives of people with living experience of poverty and their allies. It focused on solution-oriented dialogue to more effectively organize and collaborate for much-needed policy change.

INTRODUCTION TO HASTINGS COUNTY & PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY

Hastings County and Prince Edward County (HPE) are located in southeastern Ontario, spanning the 401 corridors to the southernmost part of Algonquin Provincial Park. Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, located east of Belleville, is the main First Nation reserve of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation. The region spans 14 municipalities and represents six primary regions: North Hastings, Central Hastings, Belleville, Quinte West, Prince Edward County, and Southeast Hastings. Each of these regions has diverse populations, assets and challenges, and is separated by vast geography. HPE has approximately 160,000 people spread across 7,6000 KM^2.

About the Organization

The Poverty Roundtable of Hastings Prince Edward (PRT) was formed in 2013 to address the root causes of poverty and to broaden the community's capacity to drive solutions to poverty by working together. The PRT is a multi-sector backbone organization focused on community education, community empowerment, information exchange, creating collaborations, and policy advocacy. The PRT is not incorporated and works with core partners to implement projects. Core partners include The Community Development Council of Quinte, United Way Hastings Prince Edward and the Community Advocacy and Legal Centre.
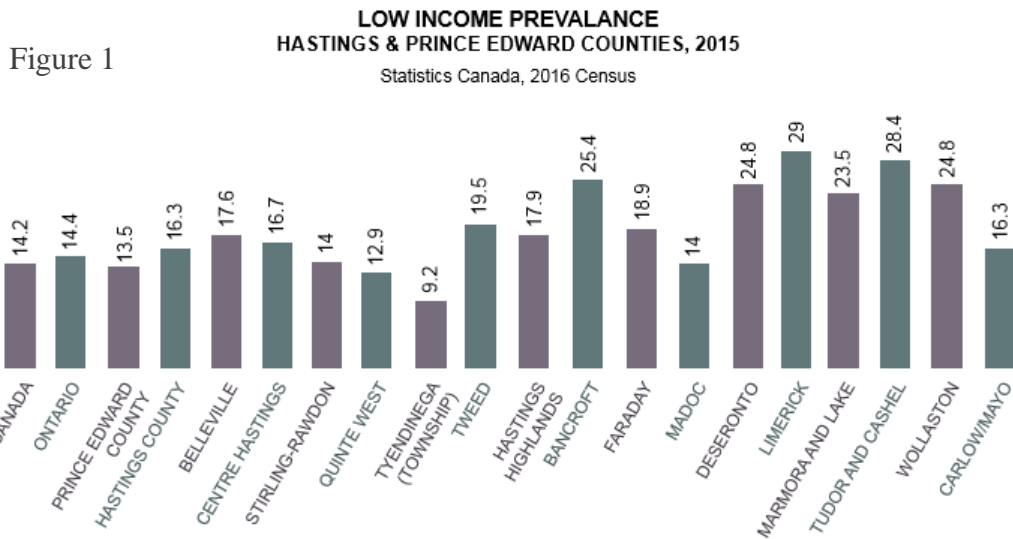
POVERTY IN HASTINGS PRINCE EDWARD

While the region has many economic assets, since 2005, the percentage of people living in low-income has increased across Hastings and Prince Edward Counties. Below is a profile of low-income prevalence by municipality, which is as low as 9.2% in Tyendinega Township, and as high as 29% in Limerick (Leaning In, 2017).

In Hastings County 1 in 4 children under the age of four are living in poverty (based on the Low-Income Measure), and 1 in 5 in Prince Edward County (Statistics Canada, 2016 Census). Belleville is the 6th highest municipality in Canada for rates of urban child poverty, at 20.5% (Statistics Canada, 2016 Census). The collapse of Sears Canada in recent years was a significant hit to the local economy, with the closure of a large Sears Canada warehouse in Belleville that resulted in the loss of 650 jobs and a reduction of industry-related job opportunities.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation state that the largest rent increases in Ontario are led by Belleville, at 5.9%, followed by Oshawa (5.2%), Hamilton (5.1%), Barrie (4.6%) and Toronto (4.2%). In Hastings County, 35.5% of single-parent families are living in poverty, with 26% of single-parent families in Prince Edward County living in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2016 Census).

> **Poverty is reaching crisis proportions in rural Ontario. Rural economies increasingly rely on tourists and seasonal vacationers … as local industries and family farms go out of business. Many people leave rural areas to find work, while those who stay have limited employment options. Too often the reality is hidden poverty, food insecurity, transportation problems, homelessness and under- or unserved mental health and addictions challenges.**
>
> Rural Poverty Statement, 2017

Figure 1

LOW INCOME PREVALANCE
HASTINGS & PRINCE EDWARD COUNTIES, 2015
Statistics Canada, 2016 Census

	Value
CANADA	14.2
ONTARIO	14.4
PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY	13.5
HASTINGS COUNTY	16.3
BELLEVILLE	17.6
CENTRE HASTINGS	16.7
STIRLING-RAWDON	14
QUINTE WEST	12.9
TYENDINEGA (TOWNSHIP)	9.2
TWEED	19.5
HASTINGS HIGHLANDS	17.9
BANCROFT	25.4
FARADAY	18.9
MADOC	14
DESERONTO	24.8
LIMERICK	29
MARMORA AND LAKE	23.5
TUDOR AND CASHEL	28.4
WOLLASTON	24.8
CARLOW/MAYO	16.3

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POVERTY ROUNDTABLE OF HASTINGS PRINCE EDWARD (PRT)

With the PRT's support, the community identified the following priority areas: 1. Income & Employment, 2. Housing, 3. Transportation, 4. Health Equity, 5. Families & Caregivers, 6. Food Security, 7. Belonging & Inclusion, 8. Rural Poverty, and 9. Financial Empowerment.

With a focus on people with lived/living experience of poverty shaping programs and services that matter to them, consultations and deputations have ensured people with lived/living experience of poverty have provided regional input into:

- Provincial minimum wage consultations
- National Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Defining Housing as a human right
- Income Security: Road Map to Change consultations

CREATING COMMUNITY: FACILITATING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

A grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation enabled the "Creating Community: Informing Our Poverty Reduction Strategy" project to start in 2016. A partnership with the Community Development Council of Quinte (CDC Quinte) – one of the founders of the roundtable which acts as the lead agency – continues to play a pivotal role in the success of the "Creating Community" project.

The aim of "Creating Community" is to bring together diverse community partners to create a new framework for collaboration that will drive local action. The Community Conversations referenced in this Case Study were a part of this work and reflect the contribution of more than 3,000 residents, and over 400 people with living/lived experience of poverty providing narratives of their experience and specific recommendations to address poverty.
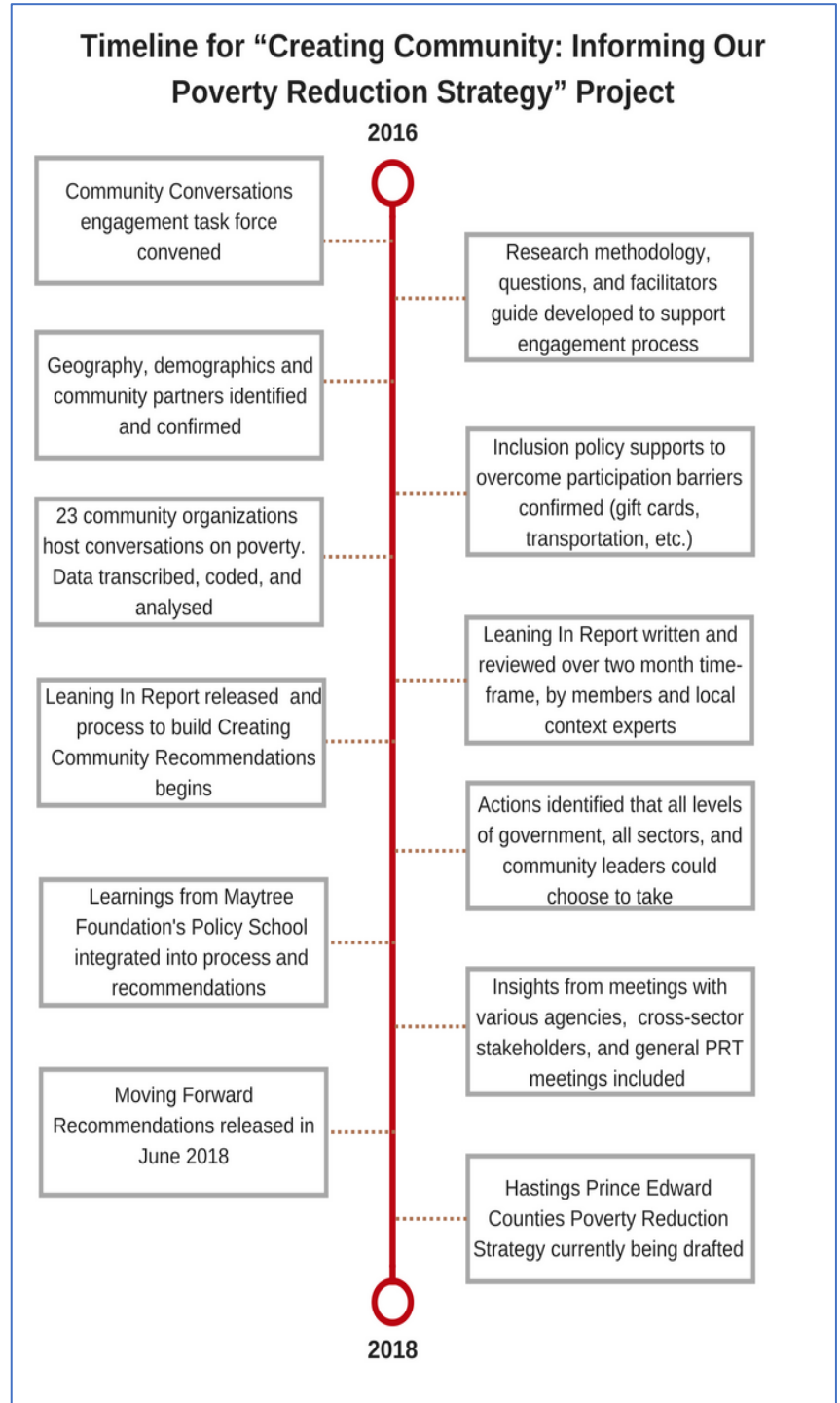
The goal of the Creating Community Project, which runs until 2019, is three-fold:

- To deepen the community's understanding of the complex nature and impact of poverty
- To engage people from a broad range of perspectives to plan and take action together on poverty reduction
- To change the way local citizens think about and respond to poverty as a community

A key activity in the Creating Community project was hosting community conversations on poverty. Explicit in this undertaking was the priority to create a platform for the voice of lived experience.

The conversation methodology was shaped by Paul Born's book *Community Conversations*, which was then adapted to uncover real experience rather than general community perspective. The Community Conversations team also cite a World Bank research effort, [Consultations with the Poor](), a large scale comparative research effort using participatory methods to focus on the voices of the poor, and specifically the report [Voices of the Poor](), by Deepa Narayan, as influential bodies of work that informed this process.

The Community Conversations team included the United Way of Hastings Prince Edward, supporters of the PRT since its inception: "For the first time we have data and stories…from the citizens in our community living in poverty. This narrative empowers us to explore the question 'What is the cost of doing nothing'?" (Brandi Hodge, United Way Hastings Prince Edward). Other leads on the Community Conversations team included The Community Development Council of Quinte, North Hastings Community Trust, Salvation Army, Abigail's Learning Centre, and the Quinte West Youth Centre.

Timeline for "Creating Community: Informing Our Poverty Reduction Strategy" Project

2016

- Community Conversations engagement task force convened
- Research methodology, questions, and facilitators guide developed to support engagement process
- Geography, demographics and community partners identified and confirmed
- Inclusion policy supports to overcome participation barriers confirmed (gift cards, transportation, etc.)
- 23 community organizations host conversations on poverty. Data transcribed, coded, and analysed
- Leaning In Report written and reviewed over two month time-frame, by members and local context experts
- Leaning In Report released and process to build Creating Community Recommendations begins
- Actions identified that all levels of government, all sectors, and community leaders could choose to take
- Learnings from Maytree Foundation's Policy School integrated into process and recommendations
- Insights from meetings with various agencies, cross-sector stakeholders, and general PRT meetings included
- Moving Forward Recommendations released in June 2018
- Hastings Prince Edward Counties Poverty Reduction Strategy currently being drafted

2018

PRT, as the backbone support organization of this community effort, needed the commitment and partnership of community groups, governments, and community leaders with strong relationships to ensure that this engagement effort was as inclusive as possible.

Covering a large area meant adopting a different kind of methodology that came more out of qualitative research design; e.g. ethno-methodologies, one-on-one interviews, and small group conversations. Building on the ideas and process articulated in their ["2017 Creating]()

Community: A Tool for Engagement", the Community Conversations team used a Facilitator's Guide that the PRT developed in 2016 to support the engagement process.

Allowing for emergence during the engagement and research process enabled a deeper engagement, and a responsiveness to evolve processes as needed. For example, the initial goal was to reach 200 people with lived/living experience of poverty. As word about this project spread through the community, more folks wanted to be included in this process, which meant an extended research phase, and the need to host more conversations.

The Community Conversations team's intended impact, in analyzing the more than 500 pages of data, was five-fold:

1. To shift to a culture of solidarity. People need to see themselves in each other's stories.
2. To surface community-identified causes of poverty (vs. agency or government driven).
3. To shift the narrative from charity to rights and dignity. Candid dialogue was needed about what programs and services worked, and what didn't – where were the gaps and opportunities to evolve programming and service delivery?
4. To look at poverty from a deeply humanizing place as well as from a place of real potential for action.
5. To emerge from the process having shifted from 'poverty is a given' to 'poverty can be eliminated'.

EMPOWERING VOICES OF TRUTH

A series of conversations was held in each community that engaged people in a dialogue about the pervasiveness of poverty, the day to day challenges of those living in poverty, what mitigates the effects of poverty and what amplifies hardship (Leaning In, 2018).

People shared personal accounts detailing the effects of poverty on themselves and their family and the context behind their current experience of poverty. It was important to many who participated that their voices were included so that they could contribute to positive change, and reduce the stigma associated with poverty.

> ### What We Asked:
>
> 1. What is poverty? Is there poverty in your community? What are its causes?
> 2. What are the impacts of poverty?
> 3. How do we get by?
> 4. What message needs to be heard in your community?
> 5. What is your vision for your community?
> 6. How do we solve poverty?

Each conversation was recorded and the data was assessed to build the Leaning In Report. Highlights of some of the common themes discovered through analysis of the data include:

1. **Poverty, as defined by people living it, is strongly associated with trauma, with struggle and with crisis. "The grinding exhaustion of poverty cannot be captured with data alone" (Bell-Rowbotham, 2018).**

Examples of trauma reported include experiencing loss of a family member; physical, sexual and emotional abuse; and witnessing a violent event. In the north, people reported [living] without power, with some households' dependent largely on hunting and fishing for food and that people were also aging in the bush without supports.

2. **People have a deep need to contribute and to be included in community, contrary to many negative stereotypes of people living in poverty.**

People depend on each other more than they depend on social and community services. (Leaning In, 2018). "The concentration of services in urban areas means rural areas are fending for themselves. People and communities feel left out and forgotten. Economic development is focusing on outsiders and not on the benefits to local residents" (Elizabeth Bedore, 2018). This is especially true in the rural North of Hastings County where connecting with the dis-connected was voiced in most all conversations.

> **We're educated, we're experienced…We hear a lot of people talk…about people in our position or lower income positions and I just wish they'd be more understanding and realize that anybody could be here. We're literally all one paycheck away from being homeless. And that's the reality and I think, people don't realize that unless they've gone through it**
>
> Participant in Community Conversations, Hastings Prince Edward, 2017

WHAT THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS TEAM HEARD

The team gained significantly deeper awareness about the experience of poverty in HPE as a result of the Community Conversations. Beverley Bell-Rowbotham, a Data Analysis Coordinator in Hastings and a passionate anti-poverty champion, reflected on an insight that surfaced in many of the interviews completed for this case study: living in poverty leads to a drastically different worldview, as well as normalizing the experience of poverty (2018)

Insights gained from Community Conversations included:

- The importance of removing barriers to participation by providing honorariums, meals, transportation and child care.
- The need to build flexibility into design of the community engagement process; some conversations were closed for particular groups and some were open.
- The Community Conversations team heard, primarily, from people who were already connected to supports and, likely did not hear from people who were not already connected.

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- A strong rights-based agenda came out of the conversations with a focus on social and economic rights as laid out in the UN universal declaration of human rights. While rights talk usually focuses on rules, it was evident in conversation the path to fulfilling rights also includes building relationships.
- Connecting with the working poor was difficult. The data brought attention to this gap when analysis took place and revealed that it would be ideal to go back to do further research to connect particularly with the 'working poor'.
- Starting the process with people living in poverty, rather than engaging in multi-sector conversations from the beginning resulted in authentic conversations with participants speaking freely about what works and what does not.

Elizabeth Bedore, initially a Community Conversations participant, went on to volunteer for the project, aggregating research for and contributing to the writing of [Leaning In](#) and [Moving Forward](#). "I was inspired to be involved. This [project] was bigger than the food bank, bigger than the employment agency. People generally wanted to look at poverty elimination and not just alleviation." As a local citizen who is experiencing poverty, it was important to Elizabeth that this effort was not an expression of charity, rather an experience grounded in social justice.

> **What struck me was that people living in poverty, when asked "Is there poverty in your community?" there was a common response of severely overestimating the amount of poverty at 60% and sometimes 70% of people in HPE living in poverty. This was a polar opposite view when compared to responses from people who were not living in poverty, who most often considerably underestimated the amount of poverty in the community.**
>
> Beverley Bell-Rowbotham, 2018

The Voices of Hope Speaker's Bureau was formed after the Community Conversations process concluded, based on feedback from the consultations. Invitations went out to conversation participants. A small number of participants responded, joined the Speaker's Bureau training and are now active members of this PRT Advisory Council.

ADVICE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Community Conversations team offers this advice to other communities:

- Shared knowledge and resources increases the capacity to carry out this kind of region-wide endeavor. Identify core community partners for the overall project, from conception to conclusion.
- Ensure you are well resourced to support the design of the process before starting, and follow up once it has concluded, so that you can maintain and grow the engagement that comes from this process.

- Focus first on connecting with people who are experiencing poverty and engage those who have first-hand experience of poverty throughout the entire process.
- Engage lived experience of poverty from the beginning, to support and inform design of research methodology, analysis, report writing and report review.
- Pay attention to power in the room in community conversations and neutralize power imbalances with good process design and strong facilitators.
- Embrace emergence and a willingness to surrender a degree of control in the name of deep and authentic community engagement.
- Resources/publications/best practices/toolkits from Tamarack, and narrative and strategic plans developed by other Cities Reducing Poverty members have been helpful, e.g.:
  - Top 100 Exercise
  - Paul Born's Community Conversations book
  - Webinars of some online tools would be helpful in designing this kind of community based research and learning from others is always helpful.

NEXT STEPS: WALKING THE TALK

Priorities for the PRT over the coming months include securing funding, clarifying partnership roles, continuing to build cross-sector engagement to implement the recommendations, forming working groups around priority areas and expanding the lived experience advisory council.

The PRT is currently developing a Policy Strategy that will complement the Moving Forward report. The PRT's aim was to create recommendations, grounded in community voice, that articulate a path forward for community allies, Municipal, Provincial, and Federal governments. Producing recommendations over a traditional strategy was an intentional decision to encourage broad community ownership of these evidence-based actions. The message one gets from reading this document is that there is something we can all do, now, from whatever point of power we hold.

READ MORE
- Poverty Roundtable HPE
- Leaning In Community Report
- Moving Forward: Recommendations for Community Action

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