ARTICLE | Community Belonging: A way to end poverty in Canada

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In the vast and culturally rich landscape of Canada, two hidden gems in our fight against poverty are the power of community and our sense of belonging. Poverty isn't just about financial security; it is deeply intertwined within our social fabric. By understanding the social aspects of poverty and the transformative impact of feeling like you belong, we can pave the way towards a better future for everyone who lives in Canada.

Poverty stems from experiences of exclusion and isolation in addition to a lack of financial resources, especially for equity deserving members of society. When individuals feel disconnected and undervalued, it can lead to a cycle of poverty that can be further perpetuated by race, ethnicity, gender, and other social determinants.

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>
> *Heather Keam*

On the other hand, when people feel seen, heard, and valued, they are more likely to contribute to the community's well-being, fostering a positive ripple effect. Communities are essentially the heartbeat of our society, offering a sense of identity and purpose. When communities work together to create a sense of belonging, people find support and experience resilience, breaking free from the poverty cycle.

The concept of belonging is getting more attention as a solution to the rise in loneliness and disconnection across Canada and goes well beyond its dictionary definition of an affinity for a place or situation. Brené Brown, an author and speaker, defines belonging as the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Author Kim Samuel defines belonging as wholeness; the experience of being at home with ourselves and the social, environmental, organizational and cultural context of our lives. As we look to belonging as the solution to poverty, loneliness, and disconnection, Samuel says, we need to think about it from the lens of people, place, power and purpose.

Focusing on the Sense of Community Belonging

Belonging to a community is to be an active co-owner of the community and to foster a deep sense of emotional and communal ownership. Community is the container within which our longing to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves is fulfilled.[5] We need to

think about the container... the structures that include all the places where people come together to create community and get things done. A sense of community belonging describes the degree to which individuals are (or judge themselves to be) connected to their community and their place within it.[4] Research indicates that a strong sense of community belonging can positively influence health outcomes. A greater sense of community may translate to a higher likelihood of people engaging in participatory processes to solve their problems. Further, community belonging and engagement contribute to improved quality of life which results in a greater sense of identity and confidence, opposing anonymity and loneliness.[4] When we think about the sense of community belonging with regards to health, there are three factors: Micro, Meso and Macro.[4]

Micro Belonging
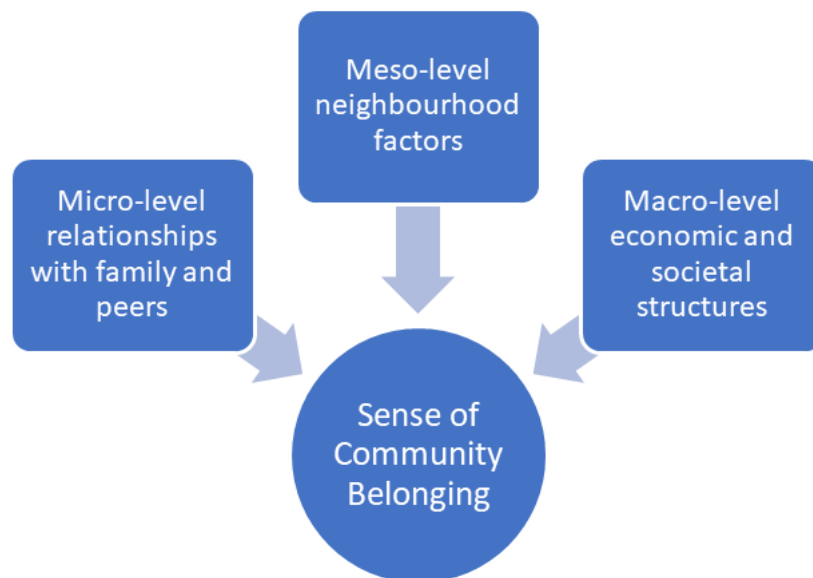
Humans are social beings. Making connections with one another and maintaining relationships with family and peers is vital. The ability to connect and socialize with one another can have a positive impact on our overall health. Human connection can fuel one's sense of belonging, build confidence, and improve overall wellbeing.[7]

Meso Belonging

The meso-social context encompasses both social relations and neighbourhood characteristics. We now know the importance of knowing your neighbours and forming connections within your neighbourhood.[10] The design and infrastructure of a neighbourhood, such as homes with front porches, bumping places, (Places where we naturally bump into each other such as communal spaces and gathering places) also contribute greatly to belonging. In addition, connecting neighbourhoods to *other* neighbourhoods build cross-culture relationships.

Macro Belonging

Macro belonging encompasses the development of inclusive economies and societal systems that contribute to a sense of belonging. We must shift power and move away from top-down approaches to empower neighbourhoods in program and policy design. When designing policy and programs, consideration for cultural and social norms, economic factors, level of education and social policies is vital to create and maintain a sense of community belonging with lasting impact.

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To address the sense of loneliness and disconnection across Canada it is crucial to weave social connection with an integrated approach. We must look to change the physical and social environments of community belonging—as opposed to focusing solely on the individual aspects of belonging. The Tamarack Institute works with change-makers from across Canada to support municipalities and organizations to focus on designing, building systems and policy that support communities to centre people and belonging in their planning.

Social Capital and Belonging

Social capital is about the value of social networks, bonding similar people and building bridges between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity. It refers to the connections, relationships, and networks that exist between individuals, organizations, and groups within a society. It often describes the social support, shared values and trust that exists within a community or group, and the collective benefits that individuals, organizations, and communities can gain from tapping into their collective resources. Ultimately, nurturing strong connections and trust between individuals, organizations, and communities can create a more vibrant, resilient, and healthy society.

Communities that suffer from greater levels of poverty often have lower levels of social power. Social capital and connection can be one mechanism for creating social power within a community that empowers them to advocate for solutions that work for them.

Historically, efforts to alleviate poverty focus mainly on economic and ecological solutions. However,

> In marginalized places, people's gifts are invisible. What if we bothered to take a deeper look? What if we took the time to visit, connect, identify and celebrate those gifts and share the rich lived experience of those we pretend not to see!
>
> *- DeAmon Harges, Roving Listener*
> *Learning Tree[9]*

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over the past 10 years Tamarack's Communities Ending Poverty members in St John. NB, Calgary, AB, and Edmonton, AB. have been paving the way by centering belonging in their poverty eradication strategies. We need to support more cities and towns to shift towards incorporating a stronger focus on the human and social aspects of community development and innovation to eliminate poverty.

Economic Impact of Belonging

A strong sense of belonging correlates with economic growth and prosperity.[3] In a community where individuals feel connected and valued, there is a greater willingness to invest time and resources for the common good. This collaboration leads to the development of local businesses, job opportunities, and improved overall economic conditions.[3] Moreover, as individuals feel safe and supported, they are better equipped to pursue education and professional development, ultimately breaking free from the grips of poverty.

In a community where individuals feel supported, they can focus on personal growth and development. Education and skills training have become more accessible, helping people build better futures for themselves and their families. This growth uplifts the entire community, creating a positive cycle of progress.

In a research paper called Sense of Community Belonging and Health in Canada: A Regional Analysis the authors found that socio-economic status and a sense of community belonging was highest among seniors, couples with children, homeowners, and those living in single-detached homes. In contrast, the sense of belonging was lower among youth, individuals living in high-rise apartments, and single parents or those without strong social connections.[2] Zita Cobb has emphasized the need to invest in our communities as this is a powerful way to create a sense of meaning. We must focus on building strong community-centered economies to build belonging and true connections.[3]

The Role of Belonging in Ending Poverty

It is essential to acknowledge the disparities that exist between geographical regions of Canada. Some regions suffer from neglect and lack adequate resources, perpetuating cycles of poverty. This disparity is particularly common in rural and remote communities.

When communities feel detached from decision-making and disempowered in finding solutions, there is a decrease in tolerance and lack of trust in democracy. To address this, it is important to promote local governance, empower community members in decision-making, and tailor poverty reduction strategies to meet the unique needs of different regions.

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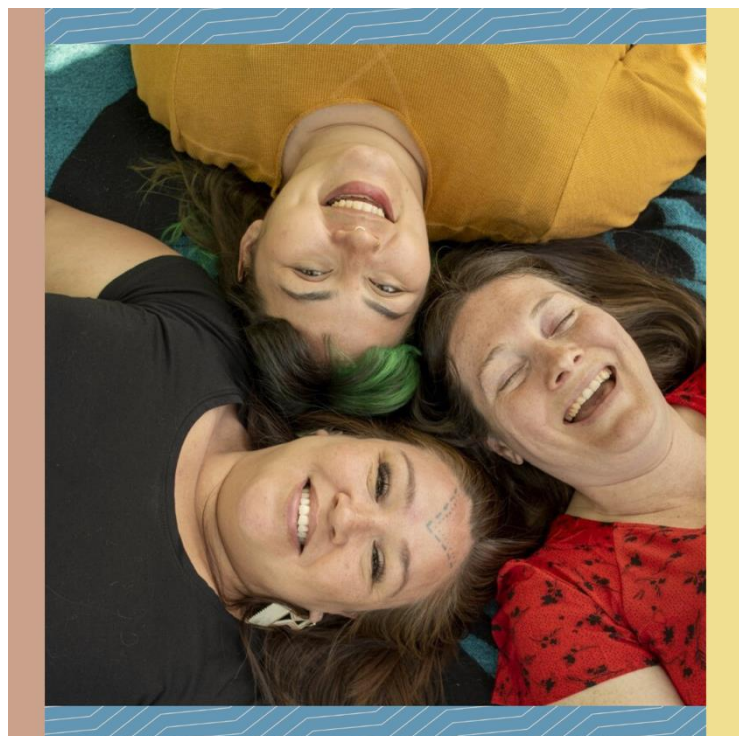
john a. powell from the Othering and Belonging Institute wrote an article that outlines that belonging is the most important good we distribute in society and informs all other decisions. *powell* states that we must support the creation of structures of inclusion that recognize and accommodate difference, rather than seek to erase it.[8] Promoting inclusion and fostering a sense of belonging on a national level can yield numerous benefits. A nation that thrives on unity and diversity is more resilient in the face of challenges. When individuals from diverse backgrounds are actively included in the country's social, economic, and political fabric, they become active contributors to its growth and prosperity. As we collectively work towards ending poverty, we build a resilient nation that can address various societal issues.

Ways to achieve belonging and eliminate poverty include:

- Shifting awareness and will: raising awareness about the importance of inclusivity, cultural diversity, and the sense of community belonging. This includes dispelling stereotypes and fostering empathy to bridge divides.

- Building community spaces: shifting local policies and building supportive environments that are safe and accessible, encouraging people to come together, to foster a sense of community belonging.

- Authentic community engagement: encouraging community-driven initiatives that involve residents in decision-making processes, allowing them to take ownership of their future.

- Strengthening local support networks: strengthening support networks for equity deserving communities, ensuring access to resources and opportunities.

- Local economic development: promoting social capital, entrepreneurship and local business development to stimulate economic growth within communities.

- Empowering individuals: providing opportunities for skill-building and personal development. This empowers people to uplift themselves and create a sense of meaning and purpose so that they are more involved in the decisions within their communities.

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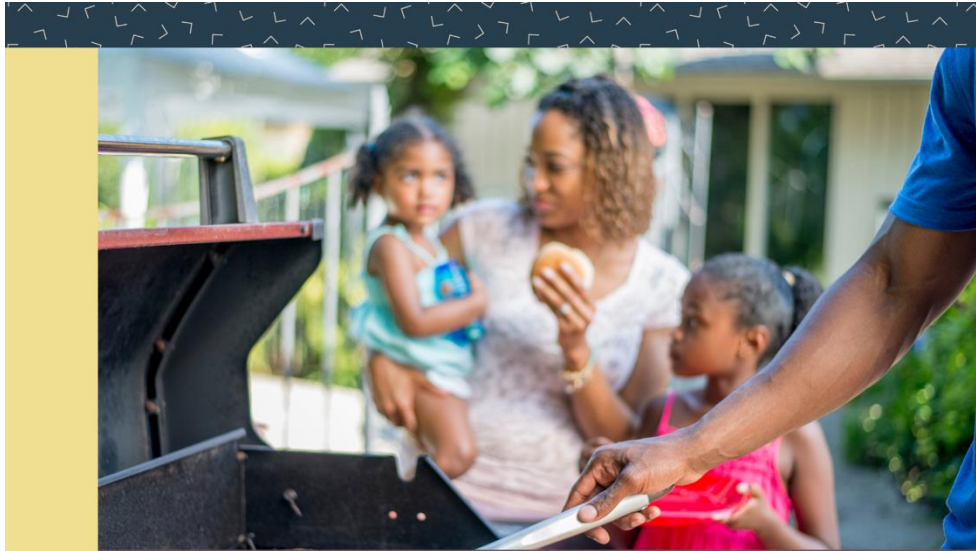
Conclusion

A sense of community belonging has the power to transform lives and end poverty in Canada. By nurturing strong communities that support and uplift their members, we create a nation that thrives together.

Belonging to a community means having someone to lean on. It means knowing that if you stumble, there will be a helping hand to lift you up. In strong communities, neighbours look out for one another, lending support in difficult times. This support lessens the burden of poverty, making it easier for individuals to get back on their feet. When people feel like they belong, they gain confidence and a sense of self-worth. This empowerment drives them to take charge of their lives, seek better opportunities, and strive for success.

A sense of community belonging isn't limited to one community—it can extend across the nation. By strengthening community belonging and promoting connection and inclusivity, we foster cooperation and resources sharing at a national level. Communities that stand together are better equipped to tackle the loneliness and disconnection epidemic, ensuring that no person is left behind.

This is why we are calling for a national strategy to build a sense of community belonging across Canada. A plan that brings a sense of community belonging into the discussion of national economics and quality of life for all people.

It is up to each one of us, with a community-oriented mindset, to come together with others and build a Canada where everyone feels like they belong, unlocking the potential for a brighter future for all. Let us stand united in our pursuit of a poverty-free Canada, where the warmth of belonging shines on every Canadian.

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