Anti-poverty organisations in Canada are looking for legal ways to force the federal government to live up to its responsibility to help the poorest of its citizens, as guaranteed by Canada's Charter of Rights. Bruce Porter, spokesman for the non-governmental Charter Initiative, stated that while the country had committed itself to eradicating poverty at the 1995 Copenhagen Social Summit, it was busy dismantling its own social safety net, including assistance to the poor, health care and education.

The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.

The combination of cuts to the federal unemployment insurance programme and transfer payment cuts has led to a situation where "food banks have shouldered more and more of the burden of poverty, unemployment, family breakdowns and illness," said CAFB executive director Julia Bass.

A high rate of unemployment since 1990—currently hovering around nine per cent—has been blamed on economic restructuring, free trade arrangements with the United States and Mexico and a controversial anti-inflation policy by the Bank of Canada.
Also, there has been a growth in Canada, as in other industrial countries, of short-term low-paying jobs while permanent well-paying positions become fewer. **But in a conservative political climate, the poor themselves are blamed for their predicament**, said Porter.

**“Poverty has become a skills problem for the poor”,** he said. **“They are telling the poor how to manage their money, how to be better parents”.** The National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO) says in a report that provincial and federal authorities increasingly divide the poor into the categories of «deserving (working poor, children and the severely disabled)» and «undeserving (adults deemed employable, including parents of young children)». Social assistance benefits are maintained for the former while they are denied to, or penalties are imposed on the second group. In addition, says Porter, funds for advocacy groups such as his own have been eliminated by the conservative provincial government in Ontario, a trend repeated elsewhere in Canada.

Porter observes that the federal and provincial politicians are opting to protect Canada’s publicly run health-care system rather than grapple with the more dire fate facing country’s low-income families, lack of adequate housing. Some families are forced to double up in their present living accommodations in the large Canadian urban centres like Toronto where affordable housing is scarce and homelessness is an obvious problem.

Until the mid-1990s, Canadians in need of financial assistance because of job loss had access to unemployment insurance and social assistance to tide them over until they found employment. **“The social safety net provided some relief from the drop in income”,** according to Ken Wyman, a NAPO researcher. But cuts in both unemployment insurance and social assistance have made Canadians more vulnerable to economic downturns, particularly young eople, single mothers, people with disabilities and aboriginals, he added.

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