

**FAR WORSE THAN FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS:  
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC  
LANDSCAPE IN CANADA, AND THE URGENCY FOR  
PUBLIC POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS**

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# Thinking about cracks ...

- “Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks.”

*Erving Goffman*

- “If we aren’t intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the cracks.”

*Kimberlé W. Crenshaw*

- “What I seek is a permanent opening of possibilities.”

*Michel Foucault*



# Working assumptions

1. In the coming decade and more, Canada will have an older population and thus proportionately a more *disabled population*. Whether Canada becomes a more or less *disabling society* is central to political action and policy advocacy
2. Challenges and struggles of people with disabilities involve more than “falling through the cracks” of current social policies
3. *We need a fuller metaphorical vocabulary* to think and talk about, and take action on the barriers, inequalities and consequences of systemic hardships Canadians with disabilities endure in everyday life



# Diversities of disability

- In bodily impairments, health conditions, and functional limitations
- In age of onset, degree of severity, degree of permanence
- In interplay with social markers of age, ethnicity, gender, locality, socio-economic status (education, income), household living arrangements
- Intersect with ageism, racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination
- In social awareness and understanding
- In public policy and practice responses



# My theme: the uses and limits of a metaphor

- The image of “falling through the cracks” promotes a view of the pandemic’s consequences for people with disabilities and potential societal lessons that
  - Captures only part of the lived experiences
  - Depicts only certain characteristics of the social policy landscape
  - Risks ignoring the need for transformational changes in institutional roles and practices and in social programs
- We need to go beyond “falling through the cracks” and consider such images as “dropping into deeper fissures” and “disappearing into the abyss”



# Institutions impacting economic support for people with disabilities

- Labour markets & workplaces
- Savings/credit markets
- Families, friends & neighbours
- Government supports
- [Others can be noted]



# Lessons of COVID for people with disabilities: health & social care

- **Tragic paradox of long-term care:**
  - People with disabilities often socially identified as sick, elderly and frail, those living in institutions
  - Yet this population in congregate care settings suffered extreme vulnerabilities and wretched outcomes both before and especially during the pandemic
  - **Institutional failures:**
    - Lack of trained staff and management
    - Poor physical design of facility buildings
    - Weak regulatory oversight
    - Absence of family voices



# Lessons of COVID for people with disabilities: income security (a)

- **Patchwork social safety net**
  - Financial support to many workers with disabilities through CERB
  - Aid to post-secondary students with permanent disabilities
  - Special support to seniors
  - Eventual one-time \$600 payment to those eligible for the Disability Tax Credit
  - Disabled persons on social assistance who qualified for CERB saw the benefit clawed back in almost all provinces
  - Hundreds of thousands of disabled Canadians felt to be an afterthought or forgotten by governments





# Lessons of COVID for people with disabilities: income security (b)

- **Institutional failures:**

- Labour market employment barriers for many people with disabilities
- Absence of integrated administrative data across federal/provincial services and benefits
- Lack of co-operative federalism in program interactions
- Persistence of a welfare model in social assistance
- Information gaps about tax measures (e.g. Disability Tax Credit, Registered Disability savings Plan)



# The coming decade: challenges and possibilities

- Multiple politics, publics, and agendas:
  - Redistribution of resources
  - Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples
  - Diversity and equity
  - Accessibility and inclusion
- Institutional mixes of roles and activities
- A social development dynamic of *progressive incrementalism* in cultural beliefs, public policy, and service practice reforms



# A fuller metaphorical vocabulary

- Labour markets
  - *Falling through the cracks*: relatively small pockets of unemployment and underemployment
  - *Dropping into deeper fissures*: long-term unemployment, precarious and segregated jobs, systemic discrimination of an individual or group of persons
  - *Disappearing into the abyss*: outside the labour force, deemed incapable and therefore unemployable



# A fuller metaphorical vocabulary

- Savings/credit markets
  - *Falling through the cracks*: for some people with disabilities with significant workforce attachment, unaware of tax credits or savings plans
  - *Dropping into deeper fissures*: people with little savings, limited assets, constant struggle to get by, worry about money all the time
  - *Disappearing into the abyss*: people is profound multifaceted asset poverty, with no savings, bank accounts, no property, no cushion, financially fragile individuals or households



# A fuller metaphorical vocabulary

- Families

- *Falling through the cracks*: people on wait lists or deemed ineligible for key services
- *Dropping into deeper fissures*: unmet needs for essential personal supports and home care year after year, stresses on informal caregivers, threats of abandonment, divorces
- *Disappearing into the abyss*: collapse of natural supports, social isolation, occurrence of murder/suicides



# A fuller metaphorical vocabulary

- Government supports
  - *Falling through the cracks*: some applicants denied benefits or unduly delayed in getting supports
  - *Dropping into deeper fissures*: systematically and comparatively high rejection rates of applications to benefits
  - *Disappearing into the abyss*: street entrenched, homeless people with complex multiple needs, extreme material hardships



# Conclusion

- “Falling through the cracks” is a conventional spatial metaphor that offers an understanding of some experiences of people and highlights certain features of social policy programs and systems
- It is not a metaphor that we all live by or that applies equally to everyone in our communities
- For people with disabilities, we have need of other metaphors to highlight the troubling constraints and degrading realities for many in society
- In the coming decade social policy reform requires new metaphors, new narratives to better see experiences, to stir political imaginations, and to guide new decision making across all institutions



# Resources

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