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

MICHAEL J. PRINCE
LANSDOWNE PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL POLICY
MPRINCE@UVIC.CA

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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


