



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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The Deep Roots of the Meth Crisis

Winnipeg's meth crisis continues to skyrocket.

I think a case can be made that in large part, the meth problem is a reflection of a much deeper societal malaise.

We are still in the midst of what is now a 40 year revolution, driven in large part by dramatic technological change and accompanied also by deep and disruptive socio-economic transformation. Many are reeling from its effects. Among the most dramatic of these is the shift away from manufacturing, with its full-time, well-paid, unionized jobs with benefits and security, to the new, precarious labour market with poorly-paid, often part-time jobs that have no benefits and no security or union protection.

As a result, many people's economic circumstances have deteriorated, and in too many cases this has been accompanied by a loss of the dignity and sense of purpose and meaning that come with holding a job that contributes to society and can support a family.

For many of us, our sense of the future has changed. We are increasingly fearful about the future, and about the future of our children and grandchildren. These are existential fears.

The revolution that we are living through has also been accompanied by, and to a considerable extent driven by, a shift in

values toward extreme individualism and hyper-competitiveness. These values and the astonishingly rapid pace of change have pushed aside and left behind very large numbers of people.

Yet even while ever-growing numbers are left by the wayside, the gap between the rich and the rest of us has grown so wide as to be obscene, thus adding to the sense of exclusion, and in many cases the resentment, of those left behind.

Today's hyper-competitiveness, and the social fragmentation and isolation that it leaves in its wake, has contributed to the erosion of our collective sense of the common good. Gone are the commitment to sharing and solidarity that previously found expression in the creation of such overwhelmingly positive benefits as medicare, and the Canada Pension Plan, and Canada's equalization program.

Growing numbers of young people are socially isolated, and are experiencing what scholar Henry Giroux provocatively calls "social homelessness." There is increasingly widespread despair, and in at least some cases even a sense of hopelessness among those who are being left out of the benefits of the new economy, and those who feel that the future holds little for them.

there is an alternative.

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For some, these feelings are not new. Many who are poor, and in Manitoba especially those who are Indigenous and poor, have long felt that they have been left out of the benefits of the modern economy. The long-term and ongoing impact of colonialism, and what Justice Murray Sinclair called “cultural genocide,” has produced despair for many Indigenous people.

But the issue is not at all confined to those who are Indigenous. Far too many young people—the children and grandchildren of those of us who feel we’ve been lucky enough to have done all right in our lives—see little hope for a meaningful future, faced as they are with the prospect of poorly-paid part-time jobs alongside the soaring costs of housing and of post-secondary education, and the increasingly obscene levels of income inequality.

We are paying a price for all of this. It was Milton Friedman, intellectual architect of today’s ultra-competitive and ultra-individualistic economy, who insisted that there is “no free lunch.” There is always a price to be paid. And we are paying a price for the kind of economy and society that has been systematically fashioned over these past 40 years. We can count that price in a multitude of ways.

For example, across North America we are seeing rising rates of violence, anger, xenophobia and hatred. Rapacious greed is celebrated. The incidence of suicide and mental health problems is soaring. And many of us are truly and genuinely shocked by the extent to which voters are attracted to authoritarian demagogues.

American writer Chris Hedges argues, referring particularly to the USA, that these are the morbid symptoms of a society in decay. It might well be argued that here in Manitoba, these symptoms include the attraction of meth.

Why meth? A spokesperson for the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba said at a recent public information session that meth produces a more intense and longer lasting high than other drugs, and is very inexpensive. For those who feel left out,

who see their lives going nowhere, who experience a social homelessness, whose lives are overwhelmed by despair and hopelessness, why not escape?

And even while the meth problem that Chief of Police Danny Smyth has called a “crisis” explodes, governments across North America and much of Western Europe are cutting taxes for the wealthiest, while imposing austerity on the rest of us, with particularly harsh effects on those who are the socially homeless, and increasingly the literally homeless.

The meth crisis is one part of the price that we are paying for the kind of society we have created—or that has been created for us by those who are its increasingly wealthy and powerful beneficiaries.

The real solution is more dramatic than adding more treatment centres, although our austerity-driven governments, to their eternal shame, won’t even do that.

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References available upon request.