



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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## The Tragedy of Phoenix Sinclair

**M**edia coverage of the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry has been quite thorough and often insightful. However, the bulk of the media coverage is missing the defining feature of the story. When that defining feature is mentioned, it is buried deep in the story, and the painfully obvious conclusions are not drawn.

What the public inquiry has already made strikingly clear is that whatever mistakes Child and Family Services (CFS) staff may have made, and whatever systemic problems may exist at various CFS Authorities and Agencies, tragedies such as that of little Phoenix Sinclair will continue to happen as long as the increasingly complex and racialized poverty that is their root cause is allowed to persist. Social worker after social worker has attested to the dreadful, poverty-related conditions that make their work so exceptionally difficult, and too often so heart-breaking. On September 8, 2012, for example, the Winnipeg Free Press wrote that a former social worker told the inquiry: “We were being asked to deliver child welfare service in probably the most daunting community in this country,” Winnipeg’s North End. Two social workers described “how child welfare workers struggled to keep up with a rising tide of need—especially in parts of North Winnipeg, where gangs spread out their “octopus-like grasp” and families reeled from generations of abuse, addictions and crushing poverty.”

This is the real story. As this increasingly complex and racialized poverty—this “crushing poverty”—deepens over time, more and more children are taken into care

by CFS. The number has grown to over 9500 in Manitoba. What kind of society is it that allows this poverty to persist, decade after decade, when it produces such dreadful outcomes?

Nor are the outcomes confined to the large and ever-growing numbers of children taken into the care of CFS. The Manitoba Centre for Health Policy at the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Medicine has consistently produced empirical data that show that this complex poverty produces poor health outcomes, relentlessly driving up our health care costs, and poor educational outcomes, thus depriving all of us of the skills of many thousands of people raised in poverty, and depriving us also of the income tax revenue they would otherwise produce. These are among the high and relentlessly rising costs of poverty. To these costs we could add the increasingly violent street gang activity that plagues our inner city, and is engaged in by young people mired in poverty and unable to see other ways of making a living.

It is this particularly malevolent poverty, steeped in Manitoba’s colonial history, that is the root cause of the tragedy of little Phoenix Sinclair, and the reason that 9500-plus children have been removed from their families and now in the care of CFS. It is also the root cause of the poor health and educational outcomes and the violent street gang activities that plague the very low-income neighbourhoods of Winnipeg’s inner city.

there is an alternative.

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Yet rather than deal with the root cause, we spin our wheels endlessly in responding to the symptoms. We hire more social workers to take ever more children into care; we build more prisons to incarcerate ever more young people who have grown up in poverty.

In spite of its complexity, we know how to solve this problem. The remedy will require time and great effort. It will also require the investment of considerable amounts of public money in, for example, significantly increased adult education and early childhood education opportunities for those mired in poverty; the creation of thousands of additional units of good quality, low-income rental housing that poor people need as the foundation for improving their circumstances; and the creation of good quality jobs that fit the realities of those who are poor. We know how to do all of these things, and in fact are now doing them, albeit on a scale far too small to solve the problems. We could dramatically reduce poverty if we were to invest in these kinds of initiatives consistently and heavily over the next two generations.

Yet the political leadership needed to do what needs to be done is not there. The courage to say to Manitobans that we must pay now in order to prevent the never-ending growth of poverty-related costs is absent. Instead of investing, our governments are cutting. Instead of calling for such investments, our media call for lower taxes, even while they decry the tragedy of Phoenix Sinclair.

As long as this is the case, there will be more and more Phoenix Sinclairs. There will be more children taken from their families and placed in care, more young people leaving school without graduating, more youth and young adults locked up in youth detention centres and prisons, more people suffering from the poor health that growing up poor so often produces. And as these personal tragedies grow, so will

the financial costs to all of us.

Connect the dots: it is the persistent, complex, racialized poverty that produces tragedies like that of Phoenix Sinclair; therefore it is the persistent, complex, racialized poverty that we have to tackle, in an aggressive and intelligent and consistent fashion, if we are to prevent still more Phoenix Sinclairs. Invest now, or pay later. When will Manitobans demand that our governments do this?

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