A Guide
to Incorporating
a Poverty Lens
in Research and
Engagement

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Community-University Partnership
for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families

Introduction

What is the purpose of this document?

This document was written for researchers, graduate students, and others who engage diverse populations, including those experiencing poverty, in their work.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a toolkit or resource for how to incorporate a poverty lens in research and engagement. This document describes why it is important to consider incorporating a poverty lens in research and engagement activities, even in projects not directly related to poverty, and provides practical examples of how this can be done.

NOTE: While the recommendations made in this toolkit are all important and useful ways to incorporate a poverty lens into research and engagement work, it is important to recognize that 1) this is not an exhaustive list of how a poverty lens can be incorporated into research and engagement, and 2) what works for some people and some projects, won't always work for others - this brief is intended to be a flexible tool; recognizing that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to this work, and therefore it does not have to be used as such.

Why incorporate a poverty lens in research and engagement?

"It's also called participatory democracy, right. Where it is one of the kinds of the fundamental principles of equity that people who are impacted by issues should be part of the solution seeking process." (Participant; Wallace, 2019)

Poverty is a pervasive problem in Canada, with at least 1 in 8 Canadians experiencing the detrimental impacts of poverty in their daily lives (1). More specifically, in Edmonton, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people are currently living in poverty, 40,000 of which are children (2).

While it is well known that there are significant human rights arguments associated with addressing poverty, community engagement and research work undertaken by governments often lack a poverty lens. The World Health Organization defines community engagement as a "process by which people are enabled to become actively and genuinely involved in defining the issues of concern to them, in making decisions about factors that affect their lives, in formulating and implementing policies, in planning, developing, and delivering services, and in taking action to active change" (p. 1) (3).

People-Centered Approach

EndPovertyEdmonton has committed to taking a people-centered approach:
"where every family and person living with poverty is seen to have distinctive needs and is best served by systems that put people first" and a trauma-informed focus that, *"acknowledges that many living with poverty have experienced trauma"*(4).

With a commitment to **authenticity** (rooted in equity and inclusion), **sustainability** (policy resilient), and **distributed leadership** (a community owned plan)3, it is important that the City of Edmonton, as a major partner and funder of EndPovertyEdmonton, lead by example in employing these

principles in their work. Further, principles underlying community engagement often include:
- fairness,
- justice,
- empowerment,
- participation,
- self-determination,
- collaboration,
- integrity,
- mutual respect,
- communication, and
- inclusivity and diversity

All of these principles support the ethical or moral motivations for engaging with communities(5-12).

Benefits to Incorporating a Poverty Lens

Alongside a compelling human rights argument, research suggests that incorporating a poverty lens into research and engagement work can bring about many positive outcomes (13-14, 7-8, 10). It can:
- generate greater public support,
- help to develop a more informed and knowledgeable public,
- help to create more efficient uses of financial resources,
- reduce the risk of social conflict,
- create a sense of involvement in and ownership of projects for community,
- lead to better project and policy outcomes, and
- acknowledge the experience community (and those experiencing poverty) has in working to address an issue, such as poverty.

What does it mean to incorporate a poverty lens in research and engagement?

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION →

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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There are several ways to consider incorporating a poverty lens into research and engagement. These can come in the form of:

- grounding the work in core organizational principles and values,
- offering participation support,
- ensuring equitable access and general accessibility,
- considering ethics, and
- taking a systems thinking approach to the work.

Below, are just a few **examples** of what it can mean to incorporate a poverty lens into research and engagement work (of any topic):

- Identify population groups impacted by poverty and how they can be reached/engaged
- Suggest ways to engage people experiencing poverty in co-creating solutions to challenges affecting their communities.
- Provide insights into people's experiences with poverty and how they can inform and influence policies, programs, projects, and/or services.
- Identify, describe, and evaluate how people experiencing poverty are impacted by organizational decisions about policies, programs, projects, and/or services.

How to take a poverty lens in research and engagement work?

As outlined above, there are many ways to incorporate a poverty lens into your work. Depending on the context and scope of a project, this can look very different. We recommend considering the following when working to incorporate a poverty lens into your work:

1. Principles & Values
2. Ethics
3. Systems Level Change
4. Access & Accessibility
5. Participant Recognition

Principles and Values
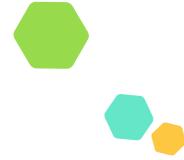
Principles and values underlying an organization pave the way for organizational behaviour. Principles and values that acknowledge and articulate an understanding of poverty provide a foundation for incorporating a poverty lens into research and engagement work. These often include **relationship-building**, **building trust and respect**, **collaboration**, **transparency** and **reciprocity**, **equity, human-rights, empathy, and trauma-informed practice**. Each of these can facilitate the successful integration of a poverty lens into research and engagement work and are highly researched (7, 16-17).

1. Relationship-building (building trust and respect) are crucial to research and engagement activities as they highlight community support. Said best in the CoE Public Engagement Framework: *"Good public engagement [and research] depends on making connections and building relationships with people"* (p. 10) (15). A lack of trust and respect or lack of relationship can serve as a significant barrier to research participation and engagement. They are the foundations of collaborative work, and without taking the time to develop trust and build relationships, collaborative work is not possible.

2. Collaboration is important as it streamlines efforts; it minimizes duplication of work among initiatives. Collaboration also suggests a meaningful partnership between initiatives and community; this allows a diversity of perspectives to contribute to the work, and is critical to addressing social justice issues, such as poverty.

3. Reciprocity often goes hand-in-hand with collaboration in that meaningful and successful collaborations require mutually beneficial, or reciprocal, relationships. Employing a principle of reciprocity means ensuring that any relationship an organization means to pursue is equal - benefiting everyone involved, rather than being extractive and exploitive.

4. Transparency is the act of being clear and open about project goals, timelines, expectations, successes, and struggles and is key in not only developing trust but also in maintaining trust.

5. Building knowledge of the community which is being engaged is critical to successful engagement. Understanding the community helps to ensure an *empathetic and equity-driven approach* to decision-making.

6. Valuing human rights as an organization is all about recognizing that citizens have a right to be involved in decisions that impact their lives. In this case, recognizing and working to ensure that Edmontonians experiencing poverty have a right to be involved in decisions that impact their lives is the biggest step in incorporating a poverty lens into research and engagement work.

Ethics

There are several ethical considerations to take into account when conducting research with a poverty lens; these include understanding the purpose of your research, the use of your results, and obtaining informed consent (16).

1. Considering your purpose or the answer to "why are we doing this research?" is critical to practicing ethical research, particularly when incorporating a poverty lens into said research. Alongside this is the question of *how you plan to use and share the results* of the research. Both of these questions are important to think about when conducting research - collecting data with no intention of using it to inform decision-making is unethical and can result in participant (re)traumatization and distrust, making it unlikely for a person to re-engage in conversation or research in the future. Alternatively, conducting research to better inform policy and using data to shape presentations and planning are great ways to incorporate research into practice ethically, and with consideration of those experiencing poverty. Additionally, *following up with participants after the fact* is equally important.

2. Informed consent can take on a new meaning in research that uses a poverty lens. Edmontonians experiencing poverty are more likely to have language and reading level barriers that may prevent them from truly providing informed consent. Ensuring consent forms are at a grade 8< reading level, and that those participants who use English as a second language have the ability to consent in their first language (as much as possible) is important. For projects where the same people are being engaged often over a longer period of time, it is also important to consider the idea of "point in time" consent - this means participants should give consent every time they are engaged in research activities, rather than just at the beginning of a project. This principle follows the concept of "meeting people where they are at"; life is constantly changing, especially for those struggling with poverty, and therefore assumptions shouldn't be made about participation in research 1+ months down the line.

Systems-level Change
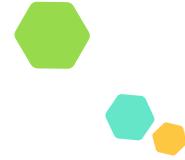
Taking it a step further, organizations might consider trying to incorporate a poverty lens into research and engagement at an systems level (and possibly a sector level), rather than on a project-by-project basis (16). This looks like:

1. Strong leadership that has bought-in to and invested/committed to ensuring the experiences of those living in poverty are considered at the forefront of all organizational activities (including research and engagement). In many cases, this will require leadership training around what it means to incorporate a poverty lens to the work, and how it can be done effectively. With strong leadership, using a poverty lens in research and engagement work, and in all aspects of organizational practice, has the potential to become the norm for individual organizations, and sector-wide.

2. Creativity at the policy or systems level is needed to ensure a culture of research and engagement that puts poverty at the forefront. Systems are inherently designed to exclude people (specifically individuals experiencing poverty) and to devalue the experience of those with lived experience of poverty (i.e. low-income Edmontonians rarely get paid for their participation in research and engagement activities while the researchers/data collectors/project coordinators are paid salary). Current practices for research and engagement work are often very Western, and therefore not culturally appropriate for many. Similarly, participants in research and engagement activities are often asked to participate within the organization's working hours. These are all practices that devalue and discourage participation from those experiencing poverty. It is important to think outside the box, get creative with research and engagement activities, and truly consider the barriers to participation for low-income Edmontonians.

Access & Accessibility
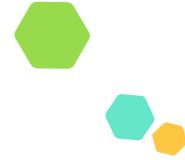
Incorporating a poverty lens into research and engagement work means "meeting people where they are at". It is very important then, to consider how people might participate in research and engagement activities; this means understanding how accessible things are.

1. Language is often a barrier for people, specifically those experiencing poverty, to participate in research and engagement activities. A significant portion of Edmontonians experiencing poverty are newcomers; english often being peoples' second language.19 Therefore, in order to ensure low-income Edmontonians have the opportunity to participate, it is important to consider language barriers and work to address such barriers through translators and/or community leaders.

2. Reading ability, while often forgotten, can be a significant barrier to participation. Many Edmontonians experiencing poverty have difficulty reading19; documents, surveys, and any knowledge mobilization activities should be written in a grade 8 (or lower) reading level to ensure broader access. Similarly, documents shouldn't read as overly academic or "business-like"; plain language is very important.

3. Considering location of activities is an important task; both in terms of accessibility and broader access. Research and engagement activities should be conducted in public spaces close to transit, public parking, and walking routes. They should also be spaces that do not represent power, privilege, and colonialism. For example, university buildings and city buildings or not suggested locations to host activities; instead, consider community parks, community recreation centres, libraries, and partner organization offices. *Mobility-accessible* is another critical piece to ensuring a poverty lens in research and engagement; many people experiencing poverty have physical disabilities or mobility challenges (19) and require consideration when choosing locations (i.e. no stairs or ensuring a working elevator/ramp is available, button-powered doors, large entryways, etc.).

4. Embedding trauma-informed practice into research and engagement is important when we consider that many Edmontonians experiencing poverty are refugees and/or Indigenous folks (19). Both of these groups have often experienced significant trauma (historical and systemic) and it is therefore important to ensure that participating in research and engagement activities does not retraumatize anyone. Trauma-informed practice means integrating and understanding of past and current experiences of trauma (violence, discrimination, etc.) into all aspects of programming (and policies/systems). It is intended to avoid re-traumatization and support individual safety, choice, and control in an attempt to promote healing. Partnering with organizations who use a trauma-informed approach to their work would be valuable.

Participant Recognition

It is important to recognize not only that people experiencing poverty will most likely require support to participate in research and engagement activities, but that they deserve to be compensated for dedicating their time and expertise (16). This support looks like:

1. Honoraria is an absolute necessity in taking a poverty lens to research and engagement work; people deserve to be compensated for their time commitment and any expertise they lend to a project. Standard practice is a living wage (currently $16.51)20 and distributed on an hourly basis (i.e. one hour = $16.51, two hours = $33.02, etc.). This should also be distributed in cash and categorized as an honoraria so to ensure participants are not taxed and/or lose any supports they are accessing as a result of additional funds coming in. In a university setting, this often means taking money from a project's petty cash fund, and providing it to participants, in an envelope, in person. Institutional guidelines require us to have participants receiving cash sign a "release" form, stating that they have received a certain amount of money. The researcher or university employee providing the cash will also sign the form as a witness. This form is then collected as a receipt for accounting purposes and is used to track expenses.

2. Travel should also be compensated; this typically comes in the form of bus tickets. That being said, a more respectful manner to support any travel expenses is to provide the equivalent of bus tickets in cash, to allow participants to make their own choices in how they spend their money - it also ensures that those who drive are compensated. In Edmonton, two bus tickets is $7.21 In a university setting, this often means taking money from a project's petty cash fund, and providing it to participants, in an envelope, in person. Institutional guidelines require us to have participants receiving cash sign a "release" form, stating that they have received a certain amount of money. The researcher or university employee providing the cash will also sign the form as a witness. This form is then collected as a receipt for accounting purposes.

3. On-site childcare should be provided at any research and engagement activities/events to ensure anyone has the opportunity to participate. A licensed childcare provider can be contracted to provide care in a separate room from any research activities occurring.

4. Capacity building is something that is often forgotten when we consider how participants can be supported to participate in research and engagement activities, but is a very critical aspect of incorporating a poverty lens to research.16 It is important that participants have the opportunity to learn how to participate in research (i.e. understand research, learn about knowledge mobilization and policy, etc.). Standard practice for incorporating a poverty lens into research and engagement activities is to embed the principle of reciprocity throughout a research process - participants are supporting your research process with their expertise and therefore should also be engaged in a learning process, such as learning about public speaking, policy writing, knowledge mobilization, or collaborative communication. These all provide opportunities for participants to gain from the process (i.e. be actively engaged in decision-making, learn new skills, make new connections, etc.) rather than contributing to a project with no benefit.
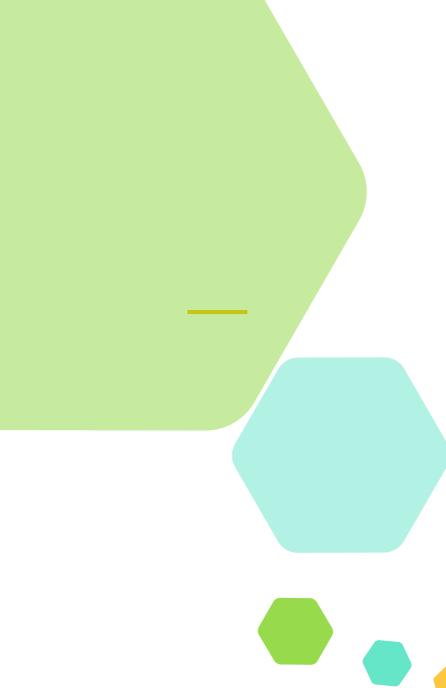
Questions to consider before research and engagement (1/2)

While it is considered best practice to build projects on the foundation of the principles and values highlighted above, there are other ways to think about and understand how to use a poverty lens in your work. One way to do this is by walking through where you might incorporate a poverty lens in these four steps:

Planning & Design Process

Consider **access and accessibility** when planning and designing research and engagement activities
- Are locations accessible and comfortable for anyone to attend?
- Are you taking a trauma-informed approach to the work?

Consider **recognizing participation in activities** when planning and designing (and implementing) research and engagement activities
- Who might need support to participate and in what way (i.e. transportation, childcare)?
- Are we valuing people's participation, experiences, and expertise by providing an honorarium?
- Are we building in opportunities for public learning/education and/or opportunities for capacity building?

Consider **ethics** when implementing research and engagement activities
- What is the purpose of this activity and the use of any information gathered?
- What does informed consent look like?

Communications

In communicating with partners, stakeholders, citizens, public, and media, consider **access and accessibility**
- Are communications at an appropriate reading level for anyone to consume?
- Are communications available in several different languages?
- Are communications available for those with literacy/reading limitations?

Reporting

Consider **ethics** when reporting on research and engagement activities
- What is the purpose of this report? How have we used the information collected for this report?
- Is all the information listed in this report collected with informed consent (i.e. the understanding that it might be shared publicly)?

In reporting to partners, stakeholders, citizens, publics, and media, consider **access and accessibility**
- Are all reports written with an appropriate reading level for anyone to consume?
- Are all reports available in several different languages?
- Are presentations hosted in locations accessible and comfortable for anyone to attend?
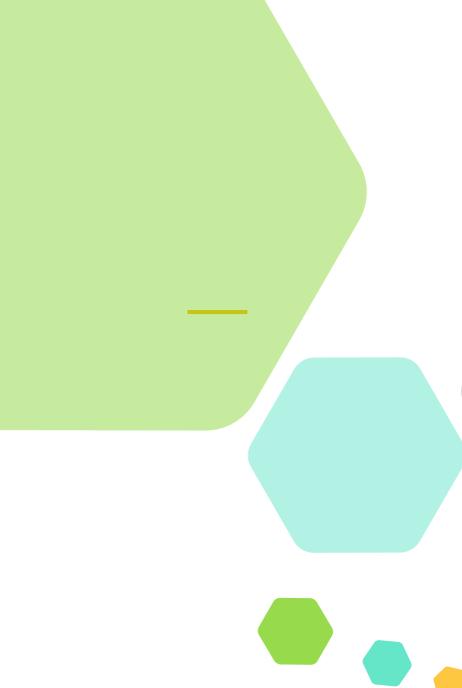
Questions to consider before research and engagement (2/2)

Evaluation

In conducting any evaluations, consider **access and accessibility**
- Are all locations used to conduct evaluative interviews or surveys accessible and comfortable for anyone to attend?
- Are any surveys or interviews conducted for evaluative purposes offered in the preferred languages of participants? Are they at the appropriate reading level? Do they take a trauma-informed approach?

In conducting any evaluations, consider **recognizing participation in activities**
- Are evaluation participants recognized and supported for their time and knowledge in the form of travel and childcare support and honorariums?

In conducting any evaluations, consider **ethics**
- What is the purpose of this evaluation? How have we used the information collected for this evaluation?
- Is all the information listed in this evaluation reports collected with informed consent?

Consider also whether this work and any associated activities helped **incorporate a poverty lens into research and engagement on a larger scale**
- Did this work help to build strong leadership who is committed to ensuring poverty is at the forefront of all projects and decision-making moving forward?

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