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Research Paper

'You're just invisible and you don't matter at all': The structural violence of the COVID-19 Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

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In March of 2020, the Canadian government introduced the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), a taxable income transfer of $2000 CAD a month received by millions of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that CERB is an example of structural violence because the eligibility requirements excluded many Canadians living in poverty. CERB provided a window into the structure of power in Canada, differentiating those 'deserving' of government support (i.e., temporarily unemployed workers) from those who were not. We undertook this qualitative research to document the experiences and perspectives of individuals living in poverty who were ineligible for CERB. An analysis of 28 interviews shows that participants felt their suffering was invisible to policymakers, particularly in relation to unmet basic needs, including food and shelter; stigma and lack of dignity; and the ongoing stress of economic precarity. Participants were unanimous that CERB should become permanent and made available to all in poverty. Although millions of Canadians experienced a temporary form of basic income during a time of crisis, it is unclear how to mobilize that experience to pressure government to provide everyone with a permanent income floor sufficient to meet basic needs.

Introduction

In March of 2020, with the implementation of public health measures to control the spread of COVID-19, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reassured Canadians that 'we are all in this together.' With millions of Canadians unable to work because of stay-at-home orders, the federal government introduced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) (Koebel et al. 2021), a taxable income transfer of $2000 CAD a month, to assist Canadians at a time of unprecedented unemployment and financial precarity. By September 2020, almost 9 million Canadians had applied to the program (Employment and Social Development Canada 2020).

By providing an income floor under eligible Canadians, CERB was considered by some to be a type of basic income[1] (Koebel et al. 2021, Olive 2021), albeit a temporary and conditional one (Young & Mulvale 2009), and one of many pandemic cash transfer experiments globally that may eventually help shift income security policy towards basic income (De Wispelaere et al. 2024). Canadians were eligible for CERB if they had lost employment because of COVID-19, earned at least $5000 CAD in the previous year, and had not quit their jobs voluntarily. Following a long tradition of conditionality in the provision of income assistance, CERB drew a strong line between those 'deserving' of support and those not (Pettinicchio & Maroto 2021), demonstrating that while we were all in the same *storm,* we were in different boats — and some were left behind altogether.

CERB's deliberate exclusion of the poorest Canadians exacerbated inequalities during a time of crisis (Pettinicchio & Maroto 2021). The temporary benefits provided by CERB were intended to maintain social stability and keep the workforce afloat (Aquanno & Bryant 2021), not to address the well-documented adverse health effects of poverty. As Pin et al. (2022) observe, CERB 'centered a particular subject as deserving of income assistance: individuals experiencing labor-market interruptions, and those experiencing temporary income insecurity' (p. 11). Those structurally vulnerable to labour market exclusion, including single mothers, racialized people, Indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities, were less likely to be able to collect CERB because of its conditionalities, thus exacerbating poverty and health inequities (Pettinicchio et al. 2021, Pin et al. 2022).

We undertook this qualitative research to document the experiences and perspectives of individuals living in poverty who were ineligible for CERB. CERB could have been an opportunity to 'pull up' those living in poverty and to help them meet everyday expenses and the extra expenses associated with the pandemic (Petit & Tedds 2020). Furthermore, this program could have had profound impacts on the health of those living in poverty, by enhancing the ability of the poorest Canadians to access safe housing, nutritious foods, and essential medications, at minimum. Instead, it perpetuated and reinforced health inequities, injustice, and indignity by keeping marginalized citizens in poverty. We argue that CERB is a specific example of *structural violence* — a policy that perpetrated preventable harm, and reflects larger social, political, and economic power relations.

Structural Violence as a Conceptual Framework

The concept of structural violence was developed by sociologist Johan Galtung (1969) and popularized by medical anthropologist and physician, Paul Farmer (1996, 2004) As Scheper-Hughes (2004) explains:

> Structural violence is violence that is permissible, even encouraged. It refers to the invisible social machinery of inequality that reproduces social relations of exclusion and marginalization via ideologies, stigmas and dangerous discourses ... attendant to race, class, sex and other invidious distinctions. Structural violence 'naturalizes' poverty, sickness, hunger and premature death, erasing their social and political origins so that they are taken for granted and no one is held accountable except, perhaps, the poor themselves (p. 13).

[1] In many Western countries, there are calls for 'UBI,' a universal basic income that is provided to everyone. UBI experiments in the USA tend to provide amounts of money that are much less than the cost of living. In Canada, the national movement for basic income is calling for a basic income that is adequate to meet basic needs and unconditionally available to all those who fall below an income cutoff, much as Medicare is available to everyone who needs it. (See, for example, https://basicincomecoalition.ca/en/what-is-basic-income/basic-income-we-want-for-canada/) Some in Canada are now referring to this kind of basic income as a 'guaranteed livable basic income' or 'GLBI.' We use the terms interchangeably to refer to the conceptualization of basic income championed by Canadian advocates.

Some have critiqued the term as conceptually vague, difficult to operationalize, neglectful of the specificity of injustices, and disconnected from policy implications (De Maio & Ansell 2018, Herrick & Bell 2022, Winter 2012). Others have defended its use. Kirmayer (2004) declares that 'structural violence is a powerful metaphor that leads us to look for the brutality in taken-for-granted arrangements' (p. 31), and Winter (2012) argues that it is useful to help make unjust social conditions visible. De Maio and Ansell (2018) appreciate that the term explicitly links poor health with social, political, and economic structures. Some scholars consider the term 'structural violence' to be more 'politically potent' (Herrick & Bell 2022), than 'social determinants of health,' which has been criticized for passivity (De Maio & Ansell 2018) and apoliticism (Raphael et al. 2022). Given the significant evidence of the detrimental impacts of poverty on health, Raphael and colleagues (2022) have urged the use of more explicit and strongly emotional terms, including 'structural violence,' to mobilize the public to demand government action.

Research participants' accounts of their experiences of poverty and being left out of CERB were consistent with structural violence. We were left feeling angry on behalf of participants, incredulous at government inaction, and determined to make participants' stories more visible. Like the prematurely cancelled Ontario Basic Income Pilot (Smith-Carrier & Power 2025), CERB provides a specific, clear window into the operations of power, and the structural arrangements that perpetuate violence and harm upon people living in poverty. Unlike other uses of structural violence that ignore policy implications (Herrick & Bell 2022), our analysis also suggests a specific policy remedy — to permanently and unconditionally extend the income support that CERB provided to all those who live in poverty (Koebel et al. 2021).

Methods

In the Fall of 2020, we advertised on Facebook and Twitter for volunteer research participants who were living on a low income and not eligible for federal pandemic income supports (e.g., CERB). The recruitment call specified that participants would be asked about their experiences living on a low income and their perspectives on how to improve income security for Canadians. Additional participants were recruited in person from a street health clinic in Northern Ontario. Participants recruited using social media were interviewed by the second author via Zoom, while those recruited at the street health clinic were interviewed in person by the third author. Participants gave verbal consent for recorded interviews, with one exception. One participant did not consent to recording; detailed notes were taken instead.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours, with most lasting about 1 hour. Participants were asked about their backgrounds, main source of income, personal and community supports, the impacts of COVID-19 on their lives, their thoughts about whether CERB should have been turned into a permanent basic income, who should be eligible to access a basic income, what other public programs are needed to support people living on low-incomes, and if they had a message to send to their premier or the prime minister. All interviews except one were audio recorded with permission. Participants received a $40 CAD honorarium for participation, paid by e-transfer or cash.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and a modified QUAGOL (Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven) analytical approach was used to promote rigour and trustworthiness (Dierckx de Casterlé et al. 2012). QUAGOL is a comprehensive and systematic approach to data analysis involving an iterative process of moving between the different phases of analysis. The first and second authors read and re-read the interview transcripts, developed a brief abstract of each participant's interview, and drew up an inductive coding scheme grounded in the data. The first author systematically coded the interviews, using ATLAS.ti to manage the data and a constant comparative process within and across interviews, and developed a second order of codes to group the primary level codes. To ensure quality, we followed Tracy's (2010) criteria. All names are pseudonyms and potentially identifying information has been

removed. The research received approval from the General Research Ethics Board of Queen's University (Ontario, Canada).

Results

Participant Characteristics

Of the 28 participants, 19 identified as women, 8 as men, and 1 as non-binary. Eight individuals identified as Indigenous, and two others were racialized. Twenty participants were from Ontario, 2 resided in Quebec, 2 in British Columbia, 2 in Newfoundland & Labrador, and one in Saskatchewan. Two participants were married and lived with their spouses, but the others were single. Twelve participants were unhoused or underhoused at the time of the interview.

Twenty-three participants with disabilities were on provincial social assistance programs. In 2020, the total monthly welfare payments for an unattached person with a (certified) disability ranged from a low of $868 CAD in New Brunswick to a high of $1554 in British Columbia (Laidley & Tabbara 2021). In almost every province, these amounts of income left recipients in deep poverty, living on less than 75% of the poverty line (Laidley & Tabbara 2021); monthly welfare incomes were significantly less than the $2000 CAD/month that CERB provided. However, despite their deep poverty, those eligible for disability income assistance were materially better off than those on "regular" social assistance (e.g., Ontario Works), which provides even lower rates of income. The disproportionate number of participants with disabilities may reflect a greater ability to participate in the research (e.g., slightly higher incomes enable better access to technology) or may be an artifact of recruiting through social networking tools. We welcomed the opportunity to diversify the sample with recruits from a street health clinic. Most participants from the clinic were unhoused and enduring addictions and mental health complications. The remaining five participants were working part-time at low-wage jobs.

Experiences of Poverty

During the interviews, participants highlighted their experiences of living in poverty, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We identified five main themes in their accounts: 1) inability to afford basic needs; 2) constant stress and uncertainty; 3) lack of dignity; 4) stigma; and 5) feeling forgotten and abandoned.

Inability to Afford Basic Needs

Given the depth of their poverty, it was not surprising that participants were unable to afford basic necessities. This is not a novel or startling finding. However, one of the primary features of structural violence is how it normalizes and makes invisible its effects (Winter 2012), including the impacts of poverty. Therefore, it is (still) important to emphasize participants' inability to afford basic necessities. Participants' stories of hardship are poignant and sobering.

Participants stated that critical expenses, including groceries and rent, were simply unaffordable because of their limited incomes. As Julianne explained:

> I make a grocery list, every week, of the food I want to get, and the food I'm actually going to get. It's a bit like, I don't know, almost just having this fantasy life of like, you know, eating fresh veg every single day or you know, buying yogurt when it's not on sale. You know? Things that, to other people, might seem silly.

Rebecca, who is 61 and works two part-time jobs, experienced tremendous anxiety about how to save enough to pay rent: 'So now I have my rent paid for this month and I don't know what I'm going to do come December.'

Participants often had to rely on goods and services of lower quality, sometimes jeopardizing their health. For example, Baily said that they could only afford to live in an apartment that presented health risks:

> There's recurring mold that got fixed last year and now it has to be fixed again. And leaking stuff and yeah, it's frustrating. The landlady was really frustrated with me when I first moved here because I wanted her to address the issues with the apartment. And she basically decided that I was the problem. *(bitter laughter)*

Similarly, although she was appreciative of the services her local food bank provides, Monica was frustrated that the quantity and nutritional value of the available food was inadequate:

> You get one meat product and one milk product, and that's it — oh no, you can get a half carton of eggs, and that is supposed to be for the whole month, and the rest is just carbs and fat. You get one or two canned vegetables for the entire month. As much as they are putting food in your belly, it is not healthy food. It is better than starving and I am grateful that they have been there for me, but it's not healthy food.

Living on a low income not only restricted participants from accessing basic necessities, but also limited the quality of goods they could afford.

Many participants explained that they were constantly juggling priorities because their financial resources were so scarce. They thought frequently and carefully about their spending. Naomi stated, 'When you're this low in poverty, every dollar counts.' Monica elaborated that she frequently considers how each purchase impacts her ability to afford other needs:

> All the allergy reaction things [medications] that we are trying … they are not covered either, so I have spent 50 dollars on a medication that does not work. I hand it back to the pharmacist who disposes of it properly and throws it in the garbage, but that money came out of my food budget, or my hydro [electricity] budget.

Without sufficient funds for basic necessities, participants' budgets did not leave room for error. As such, poverty was a dominant, limiting factor in participants' lives, which is oppressive and dehumanizing. By failing to include people living in poverty, and thus leaving them unable to meet their most basic of needs for survival, CERB acted as a clear example of enforced structural violence.

Stress, Uncertainty, and Despair

Participants' inability to afford basic goods and services induced a constant state of stress and uncertainty about their circumstances. Ella explained the mental and emotional toll:

> It gets to the point where you are living under so much stress from a lack of income that you're not even aware that you are stressed out, you are just constantly in a state of stress … being under so much stress and constant worry about being able to pay your bills. How are you going to get any more money? How are you going to be able to pay for increases in your rent or your heat and light? or your groceries are going up … it becomes your life, all consuming.

Rebecca had a similar testament about the unrelenting nature of living on such little income. She said, 'I don't have time to do anything except think: how am I going to survive?' The 'all-consuming' nature of

how to make ends meet while living in poverty has been well-documented (Mani et al. 2013, Raphael 2020). This intense chronic stress has profound negative effects on physical and mental health (Raphael 2020, Thoits 2010). Moreover, Mani et al. (2013) found that the stress of living in deprivation produces a disabling cognitive load that can result in a reversible drop in cognitive function of up to about 13 IQ points. It is much more challenging to make sound decisions in conditions of such stress (Mani et al. 2013). As such, living in poverty could be considered a *cause* of disability. Therefore, social assistance programs are not just 'legislated poverty' (Pin et al. 2022, Swanson 2001), but also a way of legislating disability. CERB perpetuated, and legislated, these experiences of poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic, and exemplified structural violence as it excluded some Canadians and kept them in deep poverty.

Several participants shared that the stress and uncertainty of their situations had become almost too much to bear, leading to a sense of hopelessness and despair. Alice explained:

> If I can't get the help that I need, and I can't get the pain relief that I need, and I can't get the food that I need, then my life needs to come to an end, because my life, even though I would say, it is worth living, it's not livable.

Alice's comments about her life being worth living, but not livable is a damning indictment of the condition of state-funded resources and social determinants of health in Canada. It is the (il)logical endpoint of the withdrawal of the state from responsibility for the well-being of marginalized citizens, and the increasingly harsh nature of neoliberal income assistance programs (Chouinard & Crooks 2005). Disturbingly, there is some evidence that it is easier for some people with disabilities in Canada to access Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) than the services, health care, and income they need to live with dignity (Lemmens 2022, Wiebe & Mullin 2023). Philosophers Wiebe and Mullin (2023) defend the right of people with disabilities to choose MAiD because their decision can be 'interpreted as an accurate assessment of their situation' that their suffering is 'insurmountable and unlikely to change' (p. 4). However, they also recognize such a decision as a 'grim' choice that 'reflects a severely unjust social landscape' (p. 3). Lemmens (2022) argues that it is 'deeply troubling' that MAID 'is now offered for *suffering directly related to or even caused by* poverty and social injustice combined with interrelated disability' [italics in original]. Such a development is a new, unwelcome twist on the harms caused by structural violence.

Stigma

There is a significant body of literature discussing the stigma associated with living in poverty (Lister 2021, Swanson 2001); those living on social assistance have an additional layer of stigma to deal with (Calnitsky 2016, Raphael 2020). Participants' stories echoed what scholars have found, particularly with respect to the stigmatization of disability-specific social assistance programs. Hannah said, 'you hear people talking, "Oh, they're leeches and welfare scum."' Naomi stated, 'I don't like telling people I'm on ODSP because then they just assume that I'm lazy … people look down on me all the time.'

Participants spoke of how they attempted to counter stigma. For example, Monica explained:

> I have had a lot of people say to me: 'well you know you're not working you are not doing anything, why should you get to go socialize and do fun things?' Well, because I am still a human being.

Further disturbing evidence of the public stigmatization of people who live in poverty can be found in a recent online poll of Canadian adults, which found that 27% support assisted dying on grounds of poverty and 28% on grounds of homelessness (Canseco 2023). If an accurate representation of population views, the findings of this poll are deeply distressing, although not entirely surprising after

decades of 'poor-bashing' (Swanson 2001). For example, government reforms to Ontario social assistance programs in the mid-1990s replaced 'the ideal of the poor having an entitlement to assistance based on need and by virtue of their citizenship' with 'a construction of poor people as a public burden who should themselves be held responsible, and personally blamed, for their circumstances' (Mosher & Hermer 2010, p. 27). Smith-Carrier and On (2022) found that when cancelling the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (OBIP) in 2018, the newly elected government mobilized numerous myths about people who live in poverty that classify them as 'other.' Their analysis shows that the premier and government ministers accused poor people of being lazy, unmotivated, and needing incentives to work; responsible for their own poverty; and being unproductive members of society (Smith-Carrier & On 2022). With reforms that have made social assistance programs more punitive, and political leaders reproducing cruel and degrading falsehoods about people living in poverty, it is not surprising that some members of the public would deem the lives of those living in poverty unworthy of living. By excluding these participants from CERB, the federal government reaffirmed these stigmatizing stereotypes that people living in poverty are unworthy, further promoting the notion of structural violence through intentional neglect.

Lack of Dignity

Participants discussed ways in which poverty can be dehumanizing. Sean, who was previously incarcerated, stated, 'Sometimes, I'd almost prefer being in jail, than just be on the street, walking around in the cold'. Hannah, whose parents provided some financial support, explained, 'It's hard to feel good about yourself when, like I said, you have to ask for help. I'm usually pretty independent, so being put in this position just makes you feel really kind of low and pathetic'. Rebecca said, 'I work at a church and the people are so so good to me but they give me Christmas gifts … (crying) I'm embarrassed because they're going to do kind things for me and I can't, I can't give to my family let alone other people'. These sentiments highlight the lack of dignity many participants felt, as their financial restrictions prevent them from living autonomously and engaging in activities that provide a sense of purpose and connection.

Monica, who was on the OBIP and then reapplied for the ODSP, expressed feelings of shame when going to access social assistance and having to walk past others renewing drivers' licenses or health cards:

> You are walking by all those people every month, walking through to get up to the office to go hand in your paperwork and go 'please can I have some money?', like ahhhhh … (pause) … and then they tell you every month what you're worth.

Monica's experience of being on the OBIP is consistent with Calnitsky's (2016) analysis of the 1970s basic income experiment, MINCOME, that showed MINCOME participants were much less likely to feel embarrassment or discomfort about their receipt of government support as a basic income versus welfare.

Feeling Invisible, Forgotten, and Abandoned

For many participants, their inability to access CERB was perceived as a deliberate act of abandonment and neglect by the federal government, which generated anger, bitterness, and despair. Ella wondered why governments and people receiving CERB couldn't recognize the financial struggles of those living on woefully inadequate disability benefits:

> So, if they can create a program that help people with CERB and that group of people, they should be able to help people who are low income to also bring them up out of poverty and stimulate the economy … Aren't they aware of all the people who are living on not even half of that, or trying to live on half of that?.

Julianne was furious that CERB's eligibility requirements reproduced common stereotypes about people with disabilities:

> But then CERB happened, and CERB was a 'Oh no, there's people who are in a situation beyond their control, who can't work. Whatever are we going to do to help those people? We better give them two thousand a month with no strings attached, right?' (laugh) Like, fuck off. You know? … Every time I hear the news about CERB, I want to throw something. It brings me such deep anger, that for abled people, they can be trusted with two thousand dollars, with no background checks, cause it's beyond their control. But for disabled people, we're obviously evil and did this to ourselves. Because we're just so, so permanently lazy that we need to scrounge. It's like, no, we're also people. … I'm tired of seeing pretty talk about how we're all in this together and how all the able people are in this together with CERB, and the disabled people still don't matter, despite the federal responsibility for human rights, to maintain a basic standard of living.

Julianne had a strong sense of the structural violence that consigned her, other people with disabilities, and those living in poverty to exclusion from the mainstream, and the ways that CERB reinforced the dominant individualistic and self-responsibilizing discourse about poverty. For many participants, CERB was yet another reminder of how neglected they felt by government and politicians. Their feelings of being invisible and abandoned were not new, because many had been living in deep poverty for years. However, seeing other citizens receive government income supports so easily and at much higher rates, amid government rhetoric of solidarity, heightened those feelings and added a new layer of bitterness. The structural violence of CERB left participants feeling unimportant and invisible. Hannah expressed this eloquently,

> Because it does just, you know, after years, it just grinds you down and makes you feel more and more useless. And that nobody cares. You're just invisible and you don't matter at all. So, (sigh) I think a lot of us are just, we're just tired.

Ella pleaded to be recognized, saying, 'Don't forget about us, please. We still matter. We are still people … [even though] we can't work.' The loneliness and sense of invisibility during the pandemic exacerbated mental illness and left some participants to think about ending their life. Alice filled in her application for MAiD. Another participant, Eric, contemplated suicide:

> I wrote a note, and I recorded it… and that was my first time. I was going to hit the tracks and just end my life. Cause no one talked to me; I was all by myself.

Much as poverty itself is commonly seen to be a matter of individual choices, structural violence hides the roots of the decision to end one's life.

Perspectives on the Impact of Access to CERB

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to speculate how receiving CERB, or a regular income of an amount similar to that of about $2000 CAD a month, approximately at the poverty line for a single person, would impact their lives. Ella exclaimed that it would be 'almost like winning the lottery. I can't even fathom how good it would be.' Similar to the findings of others (e.g., Pin et al. 2022), participants were unanimous that an income transfer of this amount could quite literally change their lives, and should be delivered to everyone who needs it on an ongoing basis. Participants highlighted that having access to an amount of money similar to CERB would provide a sense of security and freedom, resulting in improved quality of life and health.

Security

An income transfer such as CERB is often referred to as a 'safety net' or 'income floor' providing security and stability (Forget 2020, Swift & Power 2021). Participants agreed that an income transfer of approximately the same amount as CERB would create a sense of financial security, enabling them to save for the future. Hannah shared:

> I'd like to, eventually, at some point, be able to save enough money to hopefully be able to get our own house. But, that seems like a pipe dream sometimes. So, you know, just, being able to have something for emergencies, like, if the cat got really sick and had to go to the vet or something, you know, I'd have that sense of security.

Aaden dreamed of a future that was unattainable without more income, stating 'I want to build the future someday and I want to go to college - that's why I need some money.' These sentiments were similar to those commonly expressed by OBIP participants, who were able to further their education or start a small business (Ferdosi & McDowell 2020, Halpenny 2023, McDowell & Ferdosi 2020).

Similar to academic supporters of GLBI (e.g., Lawhon & McCreary 2023, Weeks 2020), some participants expressed that a form of basic income could facilitate a different relationship to work, whereby paid employment could promote their contributions to society, supporting others, and gaining a sense of purpose, rather than just a means of getting by. As Angie stated,

> [People] wouldn't feel scared of going to work and that kind of looming anxiety that most people have when they leave their house for their job and they don't have the money. Everyone is kinda of scared of losing their jobs literally every single day, and if we had that safety net, it wouldn't make us as scared.

Similarly, Glenda highlighted how the amount of money from CERB would allow her to focus on the value and meaningfulness of the work she was doing in her community, without it being tied to her hourly wage:

> I could continue to work … and not worry that this needs to help me get through the week with this little bit of money that I am making, and just go out there and feel really good about the contribution I'm making.

Lucas explained that financial support like that of CERB would give him access to the stability and resources to enable him to do more in the world:

> You can't go out and do more, because you have no means to. If you had the means to, you know, … have a warm, clean place to stay, and some money, you know, they can go out and do things. They can go out and look for jobs.

Research on participants in the OBIP showed exactly what Lucas expected having more money would do. In a non-random sample of OBIP participants, of the 54% of respondents who were employed before and during the Pilot, over a third were able to land a higher paying job or one with better working conditions with the financial security of the basic income (Ferdosi & McDowell 2020). All respondents to this survey, whether employed or unemployed, reported a variety of health, social, and financial benefits (Ferdosi & McDowell 2020, McDowell & Ferdosi 2020), similar to Smith-Carrier & Power's (2025) qualitative research with OBIP participants.

Freedom

The financial security of CERB represented freedom to participants, and the opportunity to be liberated from the scarcity of the deep poverty with which they were living. When considering the impact that CERB could have had, participants felt that purchasing basic necessities would not be so restricted. Hannah shared,

> You know, just sitting there thinking about what you could do with that money … like, 'Look at all the money I have to spend on groceries, still. Like, wow.' You know? It blew my mind … But just thinking about that, you know, that would be heavenly. (laugh)

Ella exclaimed that, if she had access to CERB, 'Gosh, I would be able to buy actual meats and eggs and like dairy products, fresh fruit and vegetables and actually be able to make meals.' These statements exhibit the relief and health-promoting purchases that CERB could have enabled.

Participants speculated that $2000 CAD per month could enable them to seek out opportunities they were unable to realize when trapped in a cycle of poverty. Kerry, who had struggled with addiction and had been previously incarcerated, stated:

> Like, it seems kind of like a dream … It'd keep me from needing to break the law or so, do anything illegal for profit, and you know, keep me from - I'd be able to do, or set my mind to things that are more productive in life, I guess. Like, I, yeah, it would keep me from all the things that kind of make me a slave to needing money, I guess.

As a freelance artist and writer, Sana showed that consistent financial support like CERB would allow her to pursue her passions without worrying financially:

> For the life of creative people in this country, … any support that comes from the government for the livelihood of such people is huge, and it's the difference between someone completing their masterpiece, or an important work of art or literature or music, and not being able to complete it.

Fiona mused that it would make changing the trajectory of one's life much more feasible, stating,

> It would make it possible for people to go to school, without getting as deeply in debt. It would make it possible for them to better their living circumstances, and see what could be possible for themselves. And that's incentive to work then, if you can actually see it's getting you somewhere.

Angie's testament demonstrated a similar point, specifically regarding employment,

> It would motivate them to do more things, it would motivate them to do more of a job that they enjoy, … instead of going in getting like two or three jobs and putting themselves into a medical situation that they shouldn't have had to push themselves into.

Similar to what participants in the OBIP experienced (see, for example, Ferdosi & McDowell 2020, Halpenny 2023, McDowell & Ferdosi 2020, Smith-Carrier & Power 2025, Swift & Power 2021), Fiona, Angie, and others proposed that income support similar to CERB could provide the freedom to choose, in a dignified way, what one's future might hold.

Improved Quality of Life

Comments about stress reduction were ubiquitous when participants discussed the perceived benefits of a CERB-like support system. Hannah stated,

> I wouldn't be so stressed financially all the time. I wouldn't dread, you know, the middle of the month, and trying to eke through towards the end, or you know, having to scramble.

When Monica was a participant of the OBIP, she was able to start a small business that she was passionate about. With her newfound income and sense of self, she explained,

> For $10 I could go into [nearby city] and listen to some live music and just get out of the house, get out to see friends, and for four hours I didn't have to worry about being sick or where my money was coming from, or who is going to see me and ask me what I am doing now. The stigma was gone, my dignity was back because I could say I was a business owner.

Glenda discussed that her stress would be reduced, and she could have the time and energy to engage with others in a more intentional way. She shared, 'It maintains dignity when people show compassion for each other and builds up resilience of the entire community and everyone feels like they've got the stability and they are not going to fall through the cracks'. Lisa summarized succinctly, 'If I was given the opportunity, then yeah, I wouldn't waste it.'

Improved Health

Many participants asserted that consistent income support would have direct impacts on their health. Monica shared how the money provided under the OBIP allowed her to engage in health-promoting activities:

> I was very overweight and very unhealthy because you cannot afford any kind of membership to anything when you are just on ODSP … as soon as I got the money from BI, I immediately went and got a membership to the Y [YMCA] … I started to feel better … and everything got healthier.

Other participants speculated about the health impacts of a more adequate income. Ella described how she would be able to afford uninsured healthcare services:

> I would be able to pay for my dental care that I so desperately need right now … I would not have to worry about paying for my non-prescription medications … I would be able to go to the chiropractor. I would be able to go to massage therapy.

Other researchers (Ferdosi & McDowell 2020, Halpenny 2023, McDowell & Ferdosi 2020, Smith-Carrier & Power 2025, Swift & Power 2021) have documented similar improvements in the physical and mental health and health-promoting practices of those who participated in the OBIP. Though not statistically powerful, as the originally planned evaluation would have been, the consistency of findings from different OBIP research is striking, and the congruence with other basic income and cash transfer programs is high (see, for example, Forget 2020, Gibson et al. 2020, McGuire et al. 2022).

Discussion

CERB was a lifeline for millions of Canadians. It allowed people to re-enter the job market on their own terms, helped them pursue skills building, improve their job position and earnings, or make a career shift (Scott & Hennessy 2023). However, the structure of CERB made it abundantly clear whose lives are visible and valued by the Canadian government: those with attachment to the labour market. Those without a labour market attachment were forgotten, a striking example of the operation of structural violence.

As Aquanno & Bryant (2021) observed, the CERB extended a historical pattern in the Canadian welfare state of instrumentalizing economic insecurity and reinforcing labour discipline to serve the interests of capital, thus reproducing systemic inequalities. The deliberate omission of the poorest, most marginalized citizens of Canada from income supports during a global pandemic is a clear example of structural violence that 'naturalizes' the poverty that results from being on social assistance or having precarious workforce attachment. By supporting only temporarily unemployed workers, rather than all those with low incomes, CERB is an example of the change in the 'class/command dynamic' under neoliberalism, such that the state is more subservient to capital than in the past (Scambler & Scambler 2015). Our analysis of participant experiences connects to a political economy theoretical framework that points to the origins of this structural violence — the needs of capital — and the Canadian government as an agent of capital that limited income support solely to temporarily unemployed workers. To prioritize economic savings over the livelihoods and health of those living in poverty is a stark demonstration of the abuse of government power, and clearly exemplifies the structural violence tied to CERB.

Writing in the context of another public emergency, Hurricane Katrina, when poor, mostly Black US citizens were left to fend for themselves, Giroux (2007) notes that the US federal government sent a message to those who were poor — 'society neither wants, cares about, nor needs you' (p. 308). Similarly, CERB revealed whose lives were valued, and whose lives had 'been rendered redundant and disposable in the age of neoliberal global capitalism' (Giroux 2007, p. 308). CERB revealed a 'logic of disposability that removes [the poor] from government social provisions' (Giroux 2007, p. 309), demonstrating that

> the category 'waste' includes no longer simply material goods but also human beings, particularly those rendered redundant in the new global economy, that is, those who are no longer capable of making a living, who are unable to consume goods, and who depend upon others for the most basic need (Giroux, p. 308).

The implementation of CERB opened up a path to begin thinking about more radical possibilities for a permanent and guaranteed liveable basic income (GLBI) program that would pull people out of poverty, providing the security and freedom to imagine new and different futures. A GLBI, unconditionally available to all Canadians who live below the poverty line is not a 'silver bullet' for addressing health inequities, but could go a long way in doing so, in combination with other social supports and services. CERB provided valuable lessons for how to construct an income floor so that no one is left behind in a wealthy and prosperous country like Canada (De Wispelaere et al. 2024, Koebel et al. 2021, Segal et al. 2021). There is evidence of strong public backing for a basic income of some form in Canada (Angus Reid Institute 2020), support in the governing federal Liberal party (Tasker 2021) and in some provincial and municipal governments (Campbell 2020, Gorman 2023). It is a key recommendation of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigeous Women and Girls 2019), endorsed by a major national feminist organization (LEAF: Women's Legal Education and Action Fund 2021) and over thirty major arts organizations (Coalition Canada Basic Income/Revenu de Base 2020). However, there is considerable opposition from both the political right and left (see Lawhon & McCreary (2023) and Weeks (2020) for an overview of opposition from the left). While GLBI remains a strong opportunity to begin to address the structural violence of poverty, and its associated health inequities, it will take a concerted political struggle to implement one that works to support the interests of recipients, promotes human flourishing, and more just social structures.

Study Limitations

The use of social media for recruitment and zoom technology for interviews enabled us to recruit participants from all regions of the country, except the Northern territories. However, the province of

Ontario was overrepresented, partly because the in-person interviews were all conducted in the same health clinic in Ontario. Notably, our sample did not include parents with children living with them, perhaps because they were overwhelmed with childcare responsibilities during COVID-19; single people were over-represented.

Conclusion

CERB provided relief and stability for millions of Canadians during a time of immense precarity, and presented the government as a 'force for good,' a reversal of the standard neoliberal ethos that state action is problematic and 'you are on your own.' However, for the participants in this research, and the numerous other people living in poverty who were ineligible for CERB, it acted as another reminder that they remain a lower priority than those attached to the labour market. Their intentional abandonment via CERB's enrollment criteria exemplifies how governments in Canada perpetuate structural violence, and how people in poverty bear the brutal consequences.

The implementation of CERB provided valuable lessons about the potential to implement a permanent and unconditional guaranteed liveable basic income, such as the feasibility of using the income tax system to deliver it. The question remains how to mobilize and harness the opportunity that CERB presented to compel governments to provide an income floor under *all* Canadians, as part of a renewed and reinvigorated social security system, to reduce structural violence and decrease poverty-related health inequities.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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