

Stigma

Sociological Definition of Stigma: The root social causes and attitudes that lead to continuing demoralization and prejudice that prevent people from progressing in their ideal life cycle (such as goals, dreams and aspirations). – Mark Sussman, People’s Blueprint Panel member

Of all the topics discussed at the conference, the topic of stigma was the one that most people at the table with lived experience not only offered their experience, but many practical and specific ways to address it. It is a subject of great significance to those receiving social assistance, and one that only those who’ve actually experienced the issue first hand could adequately describe its impact and how to recommend changes that would make a difference on a day to day level.

People who attended the conference who had experienced stigma talked about how stigma affects them generally, and also gave very specific examples of how the stigma manifested itself in everyday life. It was mentioned that this stigma came from external sources, as well as being internalized.

Those who experience poverty feel stigmatized when they don’t fit the stereotypical criteria of someone who lives below the poverty line. Having nice things, or dressing nicely, brings about judgment, and their need for help is questioned.

Many feel judged by those who haven’t experienced poverty, and as a result feel ashamed and worthless to the extent that it cripples to their confidence and sense of self. Their confidence is affected to the extent that they feel discouraged from even applying for a job.

Stigma that people experience day to day as a result of poverty comes in different forms: you can’t fix your teeth, you can’t fix broken appliances or furniture in your home, you can’t participate in family functions, you can’t afford food from a grocery store. Children are teased if their parents can’t provide nice clothes for them or pay for school excursions or sports. People feel like a burden to friends, family, or potential partners. For those dealing with addiction, there is the stigma of dealing with substance abuse on top of the resultant poverty and need for financial assistance.

Conference attendees discussed how stigma was specifically related to social assistance. Stigma in this regard could manifest itself in a visit to the welfare office, which gave one the impression of going to jail. This was due to glass partitions, no privacy, and chaos and mayhem that exist, particularly on the day cheques are ready. The form letters people receive also adds to the stigma, as it usually means something is wrong or payment is being withheld.

People also mentioned how rules around receiving social assistance that contradict societal values create stigma. These rules include being penalized for getting assistance from friends or family, not allowing refugee claimants to work, and people losing a portion of their income when they enter a relationship and live with somebody.

Housing, particularly public housing, was closely connected with experiencing stigma as well. Being placed into housing that moves people away from friends, family, work and community was seen as stigmatizing. People often don't like where they are, and kids don't want friends to know where they live because they are ashamed. Newcomers are often forced into certain neighbourhoods and schools, and as a result can't move forward as easily.

Recommended Changes

1. What are the practical things that could be done to reduce stigma when people come to their welfare office for assistance?
 - Change the physical space of the welfare office to make it more welcoming
 - Have staff in offices demonstrate as much kindness and empathy when possible
 - Make welfare offices open to everyone, a universal system integrated with other services

2. Some say social assistance is by nature stigmatizing. What would a non-stigmatized system look like?
 - Decreased bureaucracy
 - Less use of form letters
 - Seen as a bridge, not as a last resort. A system that recognizes people for making headway
 - Having cheques being delivered bi-weekly as opposed to once per month, similar to employment cheques, and being delivered in envelopes that make it less obvious people are receiving social assistance
 - A system that challenges the stigma of welfare as a whole: educates the public on the realities of poverty and the reasons people need social assistance, and challenges language that stigmatize people receiving it
 - Focuses on income security, enabling people to save money and reduce clawbacks, and receive help from friends or family
 - A system that facilitates caseworkers to have a healthy trusting and stable relationship with their clients, and who can counsel, and who can be held accountable
 - A system that enables better access to transportation
 - More individualized, does not discriminate, and encourages people to advocate for themselves
 - Eases the transition from income support to financial independence
 - Develops and incorporates the recommendations of client advisory groups

3. People often turn to family and friends to help them through difficult times. How can the system be designed to support people to do that rather than hinder it?
 - Different municipalities have different rules concerning outside help, which seems to be the root of much of the confusion in this area. Educating those on social assistance the rules of outside support, including putting them in layman's terms so they are easy to understand.

- Changing the rules to encourage outside support. A gift should not be humiliating or stigmatizing because many of us receive outside financial help, whether we are on social assistance or not.

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4. How can policy mitigate unequal gender relationships?

- Many women can't get out of abusive relationships because they cannot afford to live on their own/leave their partner. Make policies that allows for women in this situation to leave their partner and be financially secure.