

Times are tough: how is Canada doing?

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We're living in a time of uncertainty. Dominant political institutions are stumbling, long revered pollsters now have difficulty predicting election outcomes and despite sagging voter turnout, those still casting their ballot seem open to considering alternative options. Everywhere pundits are scrambling to understand why. We ask the question: Could it be governments at all levels and political parties are not truly responding to the needs and values of everyday Canadians?

With the release of our second annual composite index, the Canadian Index of Well-being (CIW) has found the 2008 recession hit Canadians harder than Gross Domestic Product (GDP) numbers revealed and the decline in

our well-being continues despite subsequent economic recovery. Between 2008 and 2010 Canadians experienced a 24 per cent drop in

overall well-being. Further, from 1994 to 2010, Canada's GDP grew by a large 28.9 per cent, while improvements in Canadian wellbeing over the same 17-year period saw only a small 5.7 per cent increase. Yet still, the health of our country is largely gauged by GDP measurements alone, presuming economic growth equals a better quality of life for our citizens.

CIW draws from a deep well of data using 64 separate indicators within eight inter-connected domains central to the lives of Canadians: *Community*

Vitality; Democratic Engagement; Education; Environment; Healthy Populations; Leisure and Culture; Living Standards; and Time Use. When partnered with GDP, CIW provides more comprehensive data to help decision makers better assess the impact of policies and programs.

This year, our findings uncover some troubling truths about the connection between our economy and our well-being. When Canada's economy was thriving, Canadians saw only modest improvements in our overall quality of life, but when the economy faltered, our well-being took a disproportionate step backward.

Deterioration in the environment, job quality and economic security, soaring long-term unemployment and persistent income inequality speak to the growing unease felt coast to coast. Our country's wealth creation has not been fairly distributed and, as a result, everyday Canadian families are falling behind. It is important to bear this all in mind as governments contemplate approval of the oil sands pipeline, changes to pension policy, new international trade deals or whether to allow foreign corporate takeovers. We believe the benchmark in any decision must be: Will it improve the actual wellbeing of Canadians?

In these difficult times, CIW has also uncovered a few beacons of hope that offer further insight into the needs and values of everyday Canadians. Despite the recession, Canadians continue to

report an increased sense of belonging to our communities. More than 80 per cent of us volunteer to help others. Violent crime is at its lowest level since 1994, having dropped every year since 2001. Property crime, also at its lowest level, is down 48 per cent since 1994. And the percentage of Canadians who feel safe walking after dark is at its highest level. Given current financial limitations, are the needs of Canadians really being met by spending increases to build more prisons?

CIW has also found that families and individuals are stepping up when it comes to the environment. Canada is still creating one of the biggest ecological footprints in the world, but only six per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions came from Canadian households in 2010 and despite an increased population, total household emissions are in decline. In contrast, more than 60 per cent of the contribution comes from transportation, fossil fuel industries, and electricity production and it continues to grow. Considering respiratory diseases related to air pollutants account for a significant number of all hospital visits, adding to our overburdened health-care system, and the fact that climate change is expected to have a serious detrimental impact on the global economy, action must be taken. Canadians have proven we are willing to do our part but we need our governments and industry to do the same.

History shows Canadians share a legacy of coming together during hard times and building a stronger foundation for a vibrant future. As we continue to struggle from the 2008 recession we believe this same legacy holds the key to our recovery and growth. Measuring Canada's health through the well-being of our citizens is paramount to any government or political party determined to lead our country through these difficult times. *Read our complete findings at: www.ciw.ca*

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the Future of Health Care in Canada; and senior fellow, political studies, University of Saskatchewan.

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