

THE HOLIDAYS AND SOCIAL POLICY ISSUES

The holiday season is when we think of family and count our blessings. It is also a time when some social trends take significant turns.

Most social trends show little in the way of monthly variation. Rates of poverty and measures of inequality, for example, are quite stable month to month. However, some issues of concern to social policy advocates, researchers, and governments take a noticeable turn during the holiday season. Favourable breaks in these trends remind us that the choices we make, when coordinated and acted upon simultaneously, can have noticeable effects on the lives of individuals and families in need.

In a previous issue of *Social Policy Trends*, we have shown how the number of people using [food banks](#) changes during the December holiday season. A possible explanation is the effort of families to redirect limited income to gifts, necessitating extra use of food banks to balance an already strained budget. We have also shown a disturbing increase in incidents of [domestic violence](#) during the holiday season, something that is again often associated in part with strained budgets and the stresses they bring.

The holiday season often bodes ill for individuals and families with limited resources and heightened expectations.

Our efforts to better understand homelessness have also led us to uncover seasonal patterns in the use of homeless shelters in Calgary. Our statistical analyses show that the holiday season regularly sees fewer people staying in Calgary's homeless shelters. The number of youths entering the shelter system for the very first time also falls in December. Our speculation is that generosity of spirit, not otherwise available the rest of the year, finds spaces for people to sleep during the holiday season.

Another significant change during the holiday season is the amount of charitable giving. About one-third of annual giving occurs in December and charities typically raise between a quarter and a half of their funds during this time. [Research](#) suggests that

even after controlling for pressures exerted by giving campaigns and the incentive to make charitable donations before the end of the tax year, charitable giving is positively and significantly affected by the Christmas holiday. This is undoubtedly true of other religious holidays as well and speaks to the influence of the lessons and reminders from all faiths about generosity and forgiveness.

The social safety net is by no means limited to government programs, nor is it funded solely from our taxes. It consists of families and friends in the first instance, but also faith-based organizations and a myriad of charitable organizations. Unique to Canada is the very large role of private citizens in sponsoring refugees from around the world – [welcoming them at the airport](#), finding them housing, and supporting their economic and social integration.

With the recent fall of Damascus, it is worthwhile considering the role private Canadians played in resettling Syrians. December 2015 marked the first arrival of Syrian refugees en masse. Of the 102,000 Syrian refugees since then, half have been resettled by private citizens, faith communities, and other organizations. Worldwide, this represents almost 1 in 5 of all Syrians resettled since that period.

Almost 69,000 Syrians have become Canadian citizens since that time, at a rate that is 1.5x higher than other immigrants arrived over roughly the same period. Some of this may be explained by a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and better integration with the local economy and society. [New research](#) highlights that relative to government refugees, those sponsored privately enjoy closer friendships with those outside their co-ethnic communities. The welcome provided by private sponsors, exemplified during the 2015 holiday period, demonstrates the lasting impacts of kindness and generosity towards others.

The Social Policy research team at the School of Public Policy wish you the very best for the holidays and for a safe and healthy New Year.