



Beyond the Basics: Guaranteed Livable Basic Income & Bill S-233

Senator Kim Pate
Ontario

How Guaranteed Livable Income Benefits and Supports Indigenous Communities & Peoples

“While the effects of colonialism have been devastating to the social, physical, and mental health of our communities, one of its most nefarious objectives was the deliberate exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from sharing in the wealth of this country.”

- National Indigenous Economic Strategy of Canada, 2022

A national guaranteed livable basic income (GLBI) designed in collaboration and through consultation with Indigenous Peoples could be one tool available to Indigenous Nations to enhance self-determination. It could provide individuals in need with pathways out of poverty and ensure Nations have increased financial flexibility to self-govern.

Critically, GLBI would operate as an addition to, not a replacement for, specific programs and supports available to and implemented by and for Indigenous Peoples. A GLBI could represent an investment for Canada in redressing the systemic economic injustice it has perpetuated while also honouring historic and ongoing Treaty obligations.

Chief Darlene Bernard, Chief of the Lennox Island First Nation and Co-Chair of the Epekwitk Assembly of Councils, [supports GLBI](#) to help lift people out of poverty. In PEI, 50% of Mi'kmaq Peoples live below the poverty line. In 2020, Chief Bernard called on the provincial government to implement GLBI with the direct involvement of the Mi'kmaq, to reduce poverty for community members and all Islanders.

Indigenous Support for a Guaranteed Livable Basic Income

Bill S-233 proposes a national framework for implementing a GLBI based on consultation with Indigenous Nations. Consistent with *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, such consultation, cooperation, and informed consent are integral to ensuring the success of GLBI.

NDP Member of Parliament, Leah Gazan, from Treaty One Territory, sponsors Bill C-223 in the House of Commons. Bill C-223 is identical to Bill S-233. [MP Gazan sees](#) GLBI as “the most effective way to eradicate poverty, support the health care and justice systems, and is our best chance at eliminating gender-based violence.” She emphasizes the essential role of consultation and coordination with Indigenous governments and leaders in both bills, in order to advance reconciliation and uphold inherent Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

Anishinaabe writer, scholar and activist, Dr. Niigaan Sinclair, supports MP Gazan’s bill, stating GLBI “would mean those most marginalized by an economy never have to worry about being without. It would act as a safety net, not a luxury ride, for those who access it.”

Indigenous women are disproportionately harmed by the intersections of colonialism, racism, poverty, and sexism. GLBI offers economic and social support and a grassroots approach that can help women and keep communities safe and secure. Responding to social and economic marginalization is one of the four key pathways to end and redress genocide identified in the ***Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*** (MMIWG) Calls for Justice:

MMIWG Call for Justice 4.5: We call upon all governments to establish a guaranteed annual livable income for all Canadians, including Indigenous Peoples, to meet all their social and economic needs. This income must take into account diverse needs, realities, and geographic locations.

Other key findings in the report of the MMIWG Inquiry as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action focus on economic initiatives that could intersect with GLBI.

Colonialism & Poverty

Canada’s current approach to ending poverty is leaving millions behind, especially First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples who experience high levels of poverty. Colonialism and methodical, state-sponsored policies forced Indigenous Peoples and communities from their homes and lands, depriving them of their traditional ways of life, economies, food sources, languages, and culture. The genocidal impact of systemic colonialism is evident in current rates of

marginalization, impoverishment, isolation, and institutionalization – especially when it comes to criminalization and incarceration.

The [Canadian Poverty Institute](#) continuously reports higher rates of Indigenous Peoples living in poverty compared to non-Indigenous individuals. According to data from the [2016 census](#), four out of every five First Nations reserves have median incomes that fall below the poverty line.

Infrastructure Gaps & Lack of Capital in Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities have significant infrastructure gaps in essentials like housing, water treatments, education facilities, and energy grids. A recent report estimated that a total of \$425 billion dollars is needed to close the infrastructure gap.

Colonial policies like the *Indian Act* made Indigenous Peoples wards of the state, displaced them from their traditional territories, and dismantled Indigenous governance and economic systems. These colonial practices denied Indigenous Peoples meaningful participation in the economy, leaving them increasingly dependent on federal funding. Today, many reserves have inadequate and overcrowded housing. The infrastructure gap is a product of purposeful exclusion of Indigenous Nations from full participation in Canada’s economic development, in addition to ongoing failure by Canada to meaningfully and systemically redress this discrimination.

Canadian laws characterize Indigenous reserves as property of the Crown, which means that Indigenous communities have fewer options to secure capital and leverage existing assets as collateral within Canadian financial systems. Too often, the result is increased borrowing rates that create a barrier to equity investments. The reserve system and other practices created and perpetuated by the Indian Act have reduced Indigenous communities' access to capital and equity, and meaningful participation in the economy.

Indigenous GLBI Initiatives and Self-Governance

Assembly of First Nations, National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak has called on the government to provide sufficient funding to close the infrastructure gap and respond to the Calls for Justice of the ***National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls***.¹

The ***United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*** recognizes and upholds inherent rights to self-determination, including the ability to self-govern and finance internal affairs, as well as the right to freely determine economic, social, and cultural development. GLBI could support Indigenous self-determination while also supporting individual entrepreneurship and social mobility.

¹ Assembly of First Nations, 2024 Press Release, “Budget 2024 Leaves a Long Way to Go for First Nations, says AFN National Chief Woodhouse Nepinak”.

Indigenous Children

A financial safety net can help parents maintain custody of their children, provide basic needs, and raise their children within culture and community. Indigenous children are overrepresented in foster care. [As of 2021](#), 26.3% of children in Canadian foster care were registered as Indigenous children from communities off reserve, 7.6% from on reserve communities, 5.8% were Métis children, 2.6% were Inuit, and 9.2% were non-status Indigenous.

A [study](#) conducted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that Indigenous children in Canada are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than non-Indigenous children.² Indigenous children face poverty rates five times higher than the national average. The government reports that Canada's policies [have left 53%](#)—more than half—of children in Indigenous communities in poverty.

One of the first guaranteed income programs in North America was established in 1976. The **Economic Security Program for Cree Hunters** provides income support for Cree families who hunt, trap and fish, as part of the traditional ways of life at the heart of Cree culture and identity. This ongoing initiative has helped ensure financial security and independence for nearly 50 years. It is an example of how an unconditional, national GLBI can facilitate self-governing means of creating and enhancing cultural and economic opportunities.

Dignity and Addressing Systemic Economic Harm

Systemic barriers and racism too often also lead to increased poverty, criminalization, housing insecurity, and other social issues like addiction that disproportionately harm Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples are overrepresented in the criminal legal system, over-surveilled and socially excluded, resulting in mass incarceration and criminalization dating back to the creation of the *Indian Act*. Indigenous Peoples are [ten times more likely](#) than others in Canada to be incarcerated and more likely to serve out their entire sentence. [Indigenous youth are overrepresented](#) in both custody and community supervision, accounting for 50% of custody admissions and 42% of community supervision admissions in Canada.

Criminal records jeopardize access to housing and employment, which in turn is detrimental to reintegration into community and can lead to re-criminalization and entrenched poverty.

Indigenous populations, particularly in northern and remote communities, experience higher rates of homelessness. [As of 2023](#), 29% of people living homeless in Canada are Indigenous. Over 13% of those in core housing need (i.e., paying more than 30% of their income for shelter) are Indigenous. Inuit households are overcrowded at more than [double the rate](#) of non-Indigenous

² Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, [Delivering the Goods: Alternative Federal Budget](#), 2015, page 106.

people living in the same areas and more than triple the rate of Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous households are in need of major repair in most provinces.

Conclusion

Providing a financial safety net could be part of Canada's work to redress colonial barriers rooted in poverty for Inuit, Métis, and First Nations Peoples. A federally funded national GLBI developed through a nation-to-nation process could provide options for Indigenous Peoples that could help redress specific systemic poverty-related inequalities and injustices and enhance economic self-determination and self-governance.

Key References

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