

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.

A significant change during the holiday season is the extent 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. Is this the result of Christmas, a

holiday with traditions stressing prosocial behaviour and charitable giving, is it the effect of end of year tax planning to take advantage of tax breaks, or finally, is it the pressures of giving campaigns?

Recent [research](#) suggests that even after controlling for these other influences, 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 lessons and reminders from all faiths about the importance of generosity and forgiveness.

The social safety net is by no means limited to government programs, nor is it funded solely from our taxes. It is far larger and broader than that. The social safety net includes faith-based organizations and private charities such as violence against women shelters, immigration services, food banks, and homeless shelters. Often in the first instance the safety net includes family and friends. Unlike government programs that tend to focus on solutions to problems arising from very broadly defined long-term issues, the rest of the social safety net exhibits greater flexibility and is more responsive to local needs and more immediate crises. For these reasons non-government organizations form an indispensable and irreplaceable part of the social safety net. They deserve our support.

Individuals and families rely on those parts of the social safety net that best meet their needs when those needs arise. As a result, they interact with the social safety net in different ways and at different times. In whatever way you choose to give, your gift has a strong impact that is widely felt.

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.

חג שמחה!

¡Felices fiestas!

سال نوی خوبی داشته باشید!

All the best for the holidays!