

SYM POS IUM

PERSONAL FINANCES AND VULNERABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Presented by Union des consommateurs
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THE SYMPOSIUM

PERSONAL FINANCES AND VULNERABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS



Union des consommateurs is a non-profit organization that brings together 15 consumer advocacy groups.

Its mission is to promote and defend the rights of consumers, with particular consideration for the interests of low- and middle-income households. Union's actions are guided by the core values of its members, namely solidarity, equity, and social justice, as well as the improvement of consumers' living conditions on economic, social, political, and environmental fronts.

Its structure allows for a broad vision of consumer issues while also developing in-depth expertise on specific, timely concerns through its research work. Its actions, which are national in scope, are informed and legitimized by the grassroots work and community involvement of its member associations.

BACKGROUND

Canadians' personal finances have been severely impacted by the economic recession, inflation, and rising interest rates, leading to increased debt, food insecurity, and poverty. Government measures, both federal and provincial, played a crucial role in providing temporary support to households, offering emergency benefits, wage subsidies, mortgage deferrals, and specific assistance for workers and students.

These measures were often temporary and rarely addressed the underlying structural issues. In this regard, Canada is not an exception: countries such as the United States, France, Brazil, New Zealand, and Australia also implemented various measures to provide immediate relief to their populations, but like Canada, their mostly short-lived nature had limited impact on the long-term financial security of households—especially the most vulnerable.

While these short-term emergency measures were generally helpful and necessary, structural reforms aimed at strengthening the social safety net, ensuring equitable access to essential services, and tailoring aid programs to the needs of households—particularly the most vulnerable—are more promising for building long-term resilience in our societies to withstand economic shocks.

The effectiveness of our governments' responses to future crises will depend directly on the lessons learned and the ability of decision-makers to draw from the best measures deployed both here and abroad, in order to adapt our public policies and aid programs before the next crises hit.

This background is based on an extensive literature review conducted by Union des consommateurs' team of analysts. The objective was to paint a picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing inflationary period on consumers in Canada and internationally. It also provides an overview of the various government measures implemented in response. This context serves as an introduction to the symposium **"Personal Finances and Vulnerability in Times of Crisis,"** whose discussions are intended to inform and enrich future conversations about the best ways to support consumers.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM — PERSONAL FINANCES AND VULNERABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

When discussing vulnerability in the context of personal finances, we often think of a range of situations or specific conditions that can weaken individuals: an accident, job loss, separation, or even low financial literacy, social isolation, and organizational difficulties.

We typically distinguish between circumstantial hardships and those stemming from characteristics inherent to the individuals affected. And of course, there are systemic and structural inequalities that create vulnerabilities—ones that individuals often mistakenly believe are due to their own personal failings. These inequalities, we would like to think, are temporary. But they persist!

And what happens when the economic order repeatedly falters, and even those who are theoretically well-off must face crisis after crisis? When hard work no longer guarantees access to decent housing or a healthy diet?

That's when we must harness our creative strength, think outside the box together, combine our analyses, and pool our experiences to generate responses that are up to the task of confronting these complex challenges. In this regard, today's gathering—bringing together such a rich diversity of expertise—is filled with promise. Thank you all for your passionate commitment and your vital contribution to this crucial reflection!

Marie-Claude Desjardins

President, Union des consommateurs
Coordinator, ACEF du Sud-Ouest de Montréal,
a member organization of Union des consommateurs



Pierre Craig, host

A familiar face at Radio-Canada, Pierre Craig hosted *La Facture* from 2003 to 2016, as well as *Montréal ce soir* and the noon newscast *Le Midi*. A giant in the world of news, he began his career in public broadcasting on the radio in Quebec City, before moving to television where he worked as a journalist for some of the most important current affairs programs, including *Le Point* and *Enjeux*.

Pierre Craig also served as Vice-President and then President of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ) from 2013 to 2015. With 2,000 members, the FPJQ is the largest journalist organization in Canada. Its primary mission is to defend freedom of the press.

DAILY PROGRAM

9:15 a.m. Welcome Address / Event Launch

Sophie Roussin, Co-Executive Director, Union des consommateurs
Pierre Craig, Event Host

9:30 a.m. Presentations

Vulnerabilities and the Social Safety Net

What is vulnerability? Who are the most vulnerable populations?

Claude Pinard, President and CEO, Centraide of Greater Montreal

What is the social safety net? What are the strengths and weaknesses of our own safety net?

Alain Noël, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Université de Montréal

11:00 a.m. Panel

Crises from a Grassroots Perspective

Benoît Ouimet, Licensed Insolvency Trustee, MNP

Claudia Castonguay, Director of Communications,
Food Banks of Quebec

Georges Ohana, Director of Homelessness Prevention and Diversion,
Old Brewery Mission

Marie-Edith Trudel, Coordinator, Association coopérative d'économie
familiale (ACEF) Rive-Sud

1:25 p.m. Presentations

Government Response to Crises

**Comparative analysis of government responses to recent crises
(pandemic, inflation and food costs)**

François Delorme, Economist and Professor, Department of Economics,
Université de Sherbrooke

**A critical perspective on government responses from community
groups active in issues of poverty and vulnerability**

Rosalie Dupont, Co-Coordinator, Estrie Anti-Poverty
Action Table (TACAE)

Critical analysis of government responses to the housing crisis

Véronique Laflamme, Spokesperson, Front d'action populaire
en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU)

CONTINUATION OF THE DAILY PROGRAM

3:15 p.m. Panel

Lessons and Solutions, The Grand Discussion

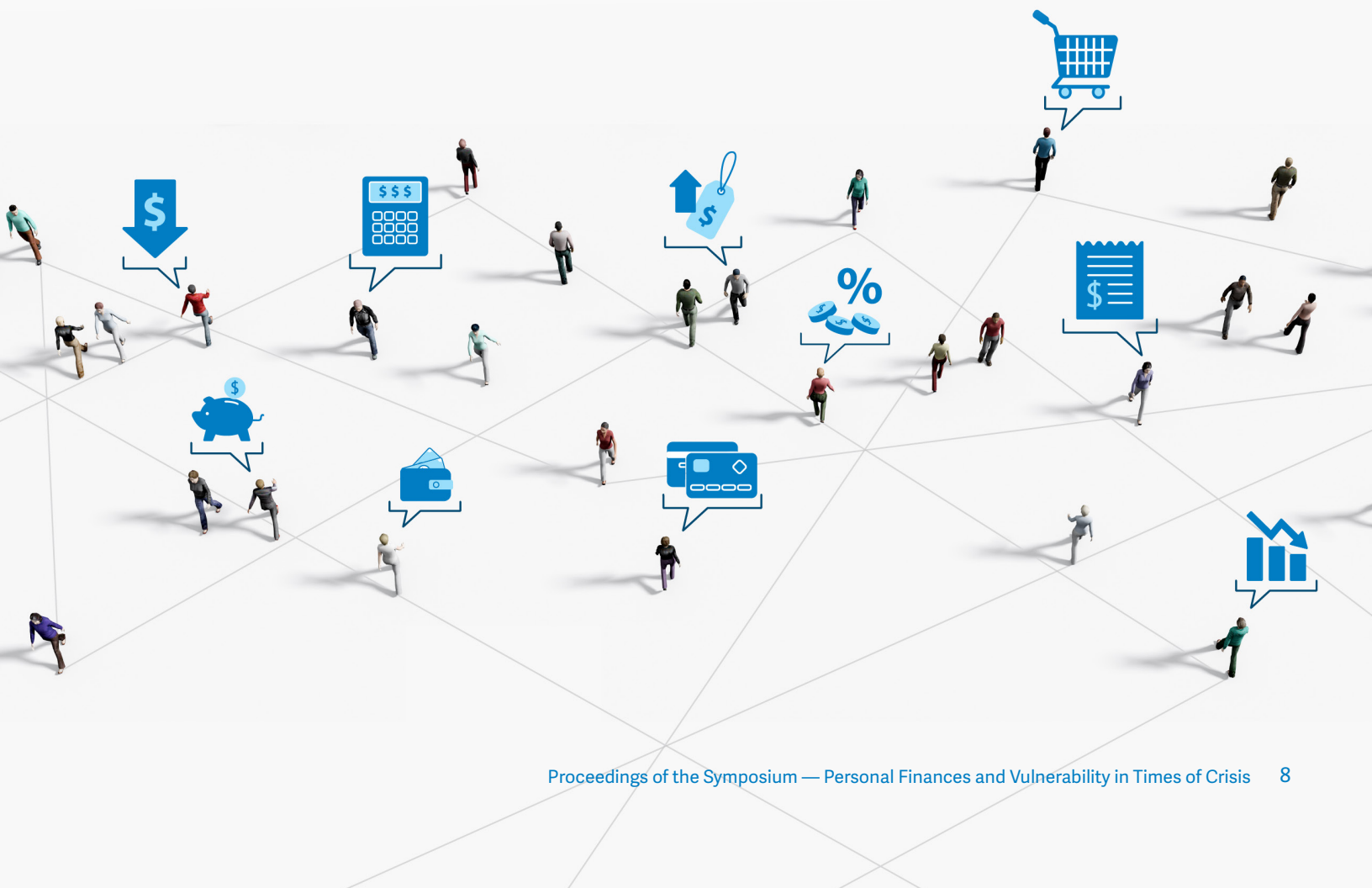
What lessons can be learned from recent crises? What measures should be implemented to reduce consumer vulnerability? Internationally: which models should we look to for inspiration?

Julia Posca, Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS)

Maude Pugliese, Associate Professor, Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS), Canada Research Chair in Family Financial Experiences and Wealth Inequality

Antoine Genest-Grégoire, Assistant Professor, Department of Taxation, Université de Sherbrooke, Researcher, Research Chair in Taxation and Public Finance

Geoffroy Boucher, Economist, Observatoire québécois des inégalités





PRESENTATIONS

VULNERABILITIES AND THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Claude Pinard, CEO, Centraide du Grand Montréal

Alain Noël, Professor Emeritus of Political Science,
Université de Montréal

WHAT IS VULNERABILITY?

WHO ARE THE MOST VULNERABLE POPULATIONS?



Claude Pinard

CEO, Centraide du Grand Montréal

Nearly half of Quebecers (48%) suffer from financial anxiety, while 86% feel economic stress.

Once seen primarily as a phenomenon linked to social assistance and the stereotypes that come with it, poverty has evolved significantly in recent years. It now affects a diverse population, including individuals who are active in the labor market. Its geographic distribution has also changed: far from being limited to central neighborhoods, it now extends to other urban and suburban areas of Quebec. The housing crisis is a major factor that has worsened the situation.

The definition of poverty has also become more refined, and it is important to understand its nuances.

- **Vulnerability:** Reduced capacity to cope with economic and social crises. A vulnerable person has few means to protect themselves from job loss, illness, etc. A vulnerable person is not necessarily poor or in a precarious situation, but they could become so following a shock, crisis, or trauma.
- **Precarity:** Financial instability in which limited resources prevent a person from securing their future. A trauma can cause someone to fall from precarity into poverty.
- **Poverty:** Inability to meet basic needs: food, housing, transportation, and clothing.

Revealing Figures

In Quebec, according to Centraide of Greater Montreal, more than one million people struggle to make ends meet each month. Among them, 50% live below the poverty line, and 50% are in a precarious situation. Greater Montreal alone accounts for nearly half of this vulnerable population, with 315,000 people living below the low-income threshold (\$24,000¹ for a single person and \$48,000 for a family of four). If we include people whose income is only slightly higher - \$27,000 - the number rises to over 500,000. Inflation, the soaring cost of living, and the inability to find adequate housing are making access to basic needs increasingly difficult, even unbearable for many.

The fourth edition of the Financial Anxiety Index, conducted in 2024 by Centraide of Greater Montreal in collaboration with Léger, reveals a troubling reality: nearly half of Quebecers (48%) suffer from financial anxiety, while 86% feel economic stress. Another recent study shows that 18% of respondents experienced poverty within the past 12 months, and 30% know someone who has been affected by poverty.

Certain populations are particularly vulnerable and show significantly higher rates than the average:

- **Visible minorities:** Their poverty rate reaches 12%, which is double that of the rest of the population (6%).
- **Non-permanent residents (temporary workers, international students, and asylum seekers):** Their poverty rate is 40%, five times higher than the general population (7.5%).
- **People living alone:** They are five times more affected, with a poverty rate of 16%, compared to just 3% for two-parent families.
- **Single-parent families:** 11% live in poverty, compared to 3% for two-parent families.
- **People without a diploma:** They are twice as likely to be poor (15% compared to 8% for those with a high school diploma or a vocational diploma).

Although education is a powerful tool against poverty, the gap of more than 15 percentage points in graduation rates between youth in affluent neighborhoods and those in disadvantaged ones is deeply concerning.

Strained by recent crises, the Quebec model in 2025 is under pressure as precarity and poverty intensify. In the face of these growing challenges, collective mobilization is essential to develop a comprehensive approach and implement sustainable solutions that can effectively meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

Claude Pinard has been President and CEO of Centraide of Greater Montreal since July 2021. Centraide is a strategic social investor that annually supports a network of 350 organizations and community projects dedicated to fighting poverty and social exclusion.

From 2013 to 2021, he served as Executive Director of the Mirella and Lino Saputo Foundation, a private family foundation focused on improving the well-being of people living with disabilities, seniors, and individuals from immigrant backgrounds. His career has spanned both the private and public sectors; he has held various management and leadership roles at Saputo Inc. and served as Special Advisor to the President of Hydro-Québec.

Claude is a strategic leader whose vision is driven by innovation and collaboration as key levers in addressing today's social challenges. Among other achievements, he conceptualized, helped establish, and chaired the board of the Maison de l'innovation sociale. He also contributed to the creation of the Academy for Collaboration with Ashoka Canada and Philanthropic Foundations Canada, where he served as a board member.

¹ By defining an absolute poverty line (\$24,000 for a single person), the Market Basket Measure (MBM) does not take economic inequalities and relative deprivations. Alternative indicators, such as the Low Income Cut-offs (LICO), The Low Income Measure (LIM) or the Deprivation Index is being studied to better reflect reality, says the speaker.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET? WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF OUR OWN SOCIAL SAFETY NET?



Alain Noël

Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Université de Montréal

After three decades of stability, inflation surged to nearly 7% in 2022.

A thorough analysis of the evolution of Quebec's social safety net is necessary in order to assess ongoing economic and social transformations. The focus on immediate news often prevents us from recognizing real progress and better understanding the challenges that remain.

The 1980s were marked by a period of major economic turbulence. Inflation peaked in 1981–1982 at 12.5%, prompting strict monetary policies. In an effort to curb soaring prices, governments tolerated rising unemployment and very high interest rates, resulting in stagflation. While this period of austerity succeeded in controlling inflation, it came at a significant social cost.

Since the late 1990s, economic growth has contributed to a substantial transformation of Quebec's labour market. The unemployment rate, once high, has gradually decreased to around 4.5% today. At the same time, the proportion of women in the workforce has risen significantly - surpassing that of Ontario since 2007 - largely due to Quebec's family policies. In addition, the number of people receiving social assistance has fallen from 700,000 in 1995 to around 300,000 today.

Recent inflation and the rising cost of living

After three decades of stability, inflation surged to nearly 7% in 2022. Though it has dropped back below 2% in 2025, its effects are still very tangible for Quebec households. Inflation measures the rate of price increases, not their absolute level, meaning that the sharp increases of recent years have not been reversed. This new economic reality has worsened the burden on the most vulnerable, whose purchasing power continues to erode.

Poverty and Inequality: Improvements, but Persistent Challenges

Despite economic fluctuations, Quebec has succeeded in reducing poverty and inequality:

- In 1996, about 12% of Quebec's population lived below the low-income threshold; by 2022, this level had dropped to 8–9%.
- Child poverty has greatly decreased, falling from 18% in 1996 to about 6% in 2022, largely thanks to Quebec's public policies and the Canada Child Benefit implemented by the federal government.

- In 1996, 40% of single-parent families lived in poverty, a rate that dropped to around 8% in 2020, although this group remains one of the most at risk.
- Seniors have become poorer. In 1996, their poverty rate was lower than that of the rest of the population, but by 2022, it had risen above it. The Guaranteed Income Supplement, insufficient compared to growing wealth, does not cover the increased cost of living, which worsens their precariousness.

Comparison with Canada and OECD countries

Quebec stands out for better wealth redistribution than the rest of Canada, with a lower Gini² index than Ontario, demonstrating more effective social policies to reduce inequalities. However, it still lags far behind the most advanced social protection countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Quebec devotes 23% of its gross domestic product (GDP) to social expenditures, slightly more than the Canadian average (21%), but significantly less than countries like France (32%) or Belgium (30%). Quebec's social assistance is also lower than that of several European countries, with a single person receiving about 40% of the median income, compared to 50–60% in Germany or Sweden.

In conclusion, although Quebec has made significant progress in social justice and economic equity, challenges remain regarding the maintenance of purchasing power in the face of rising prices, especially for the most vulnerable groups. Yet, Quebec has never been collectively richer. Contrary to the discourse advocating cuts in social spending, the real issue lies in more effective wealth redistribution and better adaptation to evolving economic realities.

His research focuses on social policies and federalism in a comparative perspective, and more broadly on politics in Canada and Quebec. His latest book is *Utopies provisoires: essais de politique sociale* (Québec Amérique, 2019).

Alain Noël is also co-author, with Jean-Philippe Thérien, of *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and writes a regular column in the journal *Options politiques*.

From 2006 to 2014, he chaired the Quebec government's Centre for Poverty and Social Exclusion Studies (CEPE). Previously, he was also vice-president of the Quebec Fund for Research on Society and Culture (FQRSC) and a member of the Commission on Fiscal Imbalance. He has been a visiting professor at the Institute of Political Studies of Grenoble, the Institute of Political Studies of Lyon, and the *School of Social Welfare* at the University of California, Berkeley. He also served as president of the Canadian Political Science Association between 2013 and 2014.

² The Gini coefficient, or Gini index, is named after the sociologist and statistician Corrado Gini. This measure compares the distribution of income within a population at a given time to a theoretical situation of perfect equality. The index ranges from 0 to 1, or from 0% to 100%. The closer it is to 0, the closer it is to perfect equality, where all individuals would have the same income. The closer it is to 1, the closer it is to a situation where a single individual holds all the income. (Quebec Observatory of Inequalities, 2021)



PANEL

CRISES FROM A FIELD PERSPECTIVE

Georges Ohana, Director of Homelessness Prevention,
Mission Old Brewery

Claudia Castonguay, Communications Director,
Banques Alimentaires du Québec

Benoît Ouimet, Bankruptcy Trustee, MNP

Marie-Édith Trudel, Coordinator, ACEF de la Rive-Sud



Georges Ohana

Director of Homelessness
Prevention, Mission Old Brewery

HOMELESSNESS: A PERSISTENT AND SYSTEMIC CRISIS

Everyone observes that homelessness is spreading throughout Quebec, now going beyond Montreal. Shelters and transitional housing are saturated, and social housing remains insufficient to meet growing demand.

The prison system, mental health services, and Youth Protection Directorate (DPJ) worsen the situation by leaving many people without adequate support, exposing them to increased risk of homelessness. Without major structural and legislative changes, this problem will remain unresolved. It is urgent to review social policies, particularly those governing access to housing and support for vulnerable populations, as they systematically push some people into homelessness.

Recruitment and retention challenges in the community sector remain significant. Many staff leave after a few years for better-paying jobs in Integrated University Health and Social Services Centers (CIUSSS), for example. This talent drain disrupts service continuity and forces organizations to constantly invest in finding and training new staff, perpetuating a difficult cycle to break.

Georges Ohana is a committed expert dedicated to improving the living conditions of vulnerable, impoverished, and homeless individuals. After studying political science and management, he began his career collaborating with the YMCA on economic development and the Learn \$ ave Quebec project, funded by Employment and Social Development Canada. In 2006, he joined Mission Old Brewery as Director of Housing Support Services, where his responsibilities included leading the research department and establishing partnerships with the academic community. Since 2021, he has held the position of Director of Homelessness Prevention and Diversion, a crucial role involving management of partnerships, funding, and pilot projects aimed at preventing homelessness.

In parallel, he contributes to knowledge development by participating in conferences and symposia and by authoring works such as *Ending Homelessness in Canada: The Case for Homelessness Prevention* (2024) and *Exploring Effective Systems Responses to Homelessness* (2016).



Claudia Castonguay

Director of Communications,
Banques alimentaires du Québec

A FOOD CRISIS AFFECTING EVEN WORKING PEOPLE

The growing distress of those relying on Quebec's food banks is alarming. All indicators are in the red: demand for food assistance is at record levels, with 2.9 million requests answered per month, one million more than in 2021. The number of unique individuals using food banks could soon reach 900,000 per month.

The fact that 20% of food bank users are employed reveals a deeply troubling reality: many wages no longer cover basic needs. For these households, groceries become the only flexible expense, while housing and transportation costs remain inflexible. Despite government financial aid, food banks struggle to meet rapidly increasing demand. Once intended as temporary support, food banks now play a central role, revealing structural gaps in the protection system for the most vulnerable.

A communications professional for nearly 15 years, **Claudia Castonguay** has held various roles in Quebec's advertising and cultural sectors. Building on her experience, she joined Food Banks of Quebec in 2019 as Director of Philanthropy, Communications, and Events during a time of significant organizational change. Today, as Director of Communications, her contributions have helped grow and raise the profile of the organization publicly, as demonstrated by the success of the highly anticipated Hunger Report, a flagship report on food insecurity in Quebec which she oversees. She is also responsible for fundraising campaigns and government relations, and has achieved a major milestone with her colleagues by raising \$30 million for the food banks over the past year.



Benoît Ouimet

Licensed Insolvency Trustee, MNP

AN EXPLOSION OF OVER-INDEBTEDNESS AND FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Over-indebtedness is increasing in Quebec. Among those seeking financial support, many have already filed for bankruptcy or consumer proposals, demonstrating the difficulty of escaping the debt cycle.

Housing costs represent a disproportionate share of income, forcing many households to use credit cards to cover everyday expenses. Added to this is the proliferation of high-interest payday loans, often the only option for those no longer able to access traditional bank credit. Stricter regulation on credit access appears essential to limit excessive debt.

More and more single-parent families and working individuals find themselves in precarious situations, forced to choose between paying rent and repaying debts. Facing these dilemmas, many incur even more debt to cover basic needs, which further increases their financial vulnerability.

Working in insolvency since 1991, **Benoît Ouimet** has specialized in consumer insolvency services since 1995. He holds the position of trustee and advisor at MNP Ltd. in Montreal. Passionate about helping clients improve their financial situations, he is known for his compassionate approach.

Beyond his professional commitment, Benoît is actively involved in various boards of directors, including those of ACEF (Association coopérative d'économie familiale) of North Montreal and the Foundation for Consumers, where he has served for several years.



Marie-Edith Trudel

Coordinator, l'ACEF Rive-Sud

AN UNDIGNIFIED SITUATION

A growing number of low-wage workers are turning to Family Economy Cooperative Associations (ACEF) for help. With income largely absorbed by rent, little remains for food and other essential needs. Furthermore, low-income individuals often face physical health problems, worsened by stress and precarious living conditions.

In this context, it is crucial to help them see themselves differently and regain dignity undermined by their situation. Financial anxiety is a source of deep distress: many must choose between buying medication or food, with food aid being more accessible than healthcare. Additionally, credit cards become a survival tool, fueling growing debt.

ACEFs report increasing referrals from the health sector, showing that community organizations are filling gaps without adequate funding. Yet the community sector is gradually weakening, and the lack of generational renewal in community engagement remains a pressing concern.

With 40 years of experience in the community sector, including 18 years as coordinator of ACEF Rive-Sud, **Marie-Édith Trudel** is a strong and embodied voice for consumer rights and financial education. She has participated in several committees within government and community organizations such as the Autorité des marchés financiers, the Office de la protection du consommateur, Hydro-Québec, and the board of directors of Habitations communautaires Longueuil.

From 2009 to 2016, she served as president of the Coalition of Consumer Associations. Under her leadership, ACEF Rive-Sud joined Union des consommateurs in 2024, and she has since served on its board of directors.

COMMON CONCLUSIONS

Food banks have become essential for hundreds of thousands of Quebecers.

Homelessness and poverty continue to worsen, affecting increasingly diverse populations, including full-time workers. The housing crisis and inflation exacerbate these difficulties, forcing many people to sacrifice food in order to pay rent. Food banks, once seen as temporary solutions, have become essential for hundreds of thousands of Quebecers. Over-indebtedness is growing, largely due to living costs exceeding incomes and easy access to credit with exorbitant interest rates.

The proposed solutions are based on a systemic approach aimed at tackling the root causes of precariousness. Massive investment in social and community housing appears to be a priority to halt the rise in homelessness. At the same time, raising the minimum wage and indexing social assistance benefits, combined with stricter regulation of credit, would offer better protection for precarious workers and vulnerable individuals. Finally, increased funding and stronger recognition of the community sector would consolidate its essential role in the fight against poverty.





PRESENTATIONS

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO CRISES

François Delorme, Economist and teacher,
Department of Economics, Université de Sherbrooke

Rosalie Dupont, Co-coordinator, Table d'action contre
l'appauvrissement de l'Estrie (TACAE)

Véronique Laflamme, Spokesperson, Front d'action
populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU)

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO RECENT CRISES (PANDEMIC, INFLATION, AND GROCERY PRICES)



François Delorme
Economist and professor,
Department of Economics,
Université de Sherbrooke

Three major crises have marked recent years: the COVID-19 pandemic, the inflationary period between 2022 and 2024, and now the imposition of tariffs by the Trump administration.

COVID-19 Crisis (2020-2022)

Governments implemented several programs to support individuals and businesses during the pandemic. In Canada, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) provided direct financial assistance to workers. The Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) supported employers by offering financial compensation to help maintain jobs. To facilitate access to credit, the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA) offered preferential loans and loan guarantees to businesses in difficulty.

In Quebec, specific measures were also put in place to protect businesses. The Emergency Assistance Program for SMEs (PAUPME) offered loans or guarantees up to \$50,000, with reduced interest rates and the possibility of a moratorium on principal repayments. In parallel, the Temporary Concerted Action Program for Businesses (PACTE) provided repayable aid to businesses struggling to overcome the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

Inflation Crisis (2022-2023)

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) jumped **6.8%**, recording its largest increase since 1982. Examples of price changes in 2022 :

- Food: **+9,8%**
- Housing: **+6,9%**
- Transport: **+10,6%**
- Gasoline: **+28,5%**

The distribution of essential expenses in household budgets was as follows:

- Food: 11 à 16 %
- Housing: 30 to 35 %
- Transport: about 15 %



François Delorme is an associate professor in the Department of Economics at the School of Management, University of Sherbrooke, and CEO of Delorme Lajoie Consultation Inc. He is also a researcher at the Chair in Taxation and Public Finance at the University of Sherbrooke and a fellow at the World Inequality Lab led by Thomas Piketty, where he works on the economic conditions of the middle class, inequalities, and wealth concentration.

He has particular interests in macroeconomics, public finance, behavioral economics, inequalities, and environmental economics. As a consultant, he collaborates with numerous industrial clusters and investment funds in Quebec, as well as various community groups, providing economic analyses and strategic advice.

He has served as Chief Economist at Industry Canada, a senior official for about twenty years at the federal Department of Finance, and also held the position of senior economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris.

In Canada, 11 million low-income individuals and families received a one-time grocery rebate (for example, up to \$467 for a couple with two children). Canadian Worker and Housing Benefits were also increased.

In Quebec, the Anti-Inflation Shield, with a budget of \$13 billion over five years, allowed a one-time payment of up to \$600 to 6.5 million people in 2022. The tax credit for senior support was also raised, increasing the maximum amount from \$411 to \$2,000. This increase expanded access to an additional 398,500 seniors, bringing the total number of beneficiaries to over 1.1 million. Additionally, the indexing of government fees on several essential services was capped at 3%, thus limiting the impact of inflation on households.

In Canada, various measures sought to mitigate inflation effects, including a grocery rebate, a call for major chains to stabilize prices in September 2023, and a partial Goods and Services Tax (GST) holiday announced for 2024. In Quebec, initiatives encouraged short supply chains (defined as distribution methods with few or no intermediaries between producer and consumer) and local purchasing, while programs supported agricultural producers facing rising costs.

In Montreal in 2024, with a poverty threshold (Market Basket Measure) set at \$24,476 for a single person, only about \$2,500 per year would remain after covering rent, groceries, clothing, and transportation - a negligible amount.

Despite these measures, the cost of living continues to rise, hitting low-income households especially hard. In Montreal in 2024, with a poverty threshold (Market Basket Measure) set at \$24,476 for a single person, only about \$2,500 per year would remain after covering rent, groceries, clothing, and transportation - a negligible amount.

Trade Tariff Crisis (2024-2025) — An Uncertain Future

The imposition of 25% tariffs on steel and aluminum by the United States threatens between 25,000 and 50,000 jobs in Quebec, notably in aluminum plants and the manufacturing sector.

Canada and Quebec responded by increasing tariffs on several American products. Some contracts with American companies have been suspended, while an economic diversification plan is being developed to reduce dependence on the United States. The SAQ (Société des alcools du Québec) removed certain American products from its stores, and specific support measures were implemented for affected exporting companies. Quebec may be more resilient than Ontario, which is more vulnerable due to its dependence on the automotive industry. However, economic diversification cannot happen overnight, making short-term measures necessary to mitigate immediate effects.

What Economic and Social Model for Tomorrow?

- While public interventions have limited some impacts, they are not enough to sustainably stabilize prices. A long-term structural approach remains essential to guarantee an effective and lasting social safety net.
- The public finances of Quebec and Canada retain some room for maneuver, with a deficit representing only 1.5% of GDP.
- The Canadian Parliamentary Budget Officer has even estimated that there is fiscal space to reduce taxes and increase spending.

The question remains: do we want a more protective social safety net or a model with less state intervention? There is no definitive answer, but this debate deserves to be deepened in order to collectively define the preferred societal model.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GOVERNMENT RESPONSES FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF COMMUNITY GROUPS ACTIVE IN POVERTY AND VULNERABILITY ISSUES



Rosalie Dupont

Co-coordinator, Table d'action contre l'appauvrissement de l'Estrie (TACAE)

Rosalie Dupont analyzes the context and public policies related to poverty, denounces social injustices, and mobilizes community groups in the Estrie region in the fight to eliminate poverty. She has coordinated the Table d'action contre l'appauvrissement de l'Estrie for four years now.

Housing, climate, homelessness: crises are multiplying, yet poverty remains a persistent reality for those who suffer it.

During the COVID-19 crisis, political speeches praised grocery workers, health sector workers, and other essential service providers. Yet beyond the words, only a 35-cent increase in the minimum wage was granted.

An arbitrary distinction still persists today between the “good poor” - those deemed deserving, such as workers who benefited from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) - and others, often subject to punitive measures. This principle still structures the social assistance program: recipients with employment constraints receive slightly higher support, while others are required to join employability programs, failing which their benefits are reduced.

Benefits insufficient to survive

The Market Basket Measure (MBM) represents the bare minimum to cover basic needs: housing, food, clothing, and transportation. This threshold does not guarantee a decent life, only survival. Yet in 2024, a person without employment constraints receiving social assistance received only 46% of this amount. Even the basic income program, meant to provide better financial security, caps at 87% of the MBM, well below its initial objective. In 2017, the government promised to raise these rates, but commitments were abandoned without an action plan, condemning the most vulnerable to increasing precariousness.

2024 Anti-Poverty Plan: a missed opportunity

The 2024 Anti-Poverty Plan could have corrected these inequalities, but it disappoints across the board. Law 112, adopted in 2002, requires the government to submit a plan every four years. Yet, after more than a year's delay, the 2024 plan proposes a budget much lower than previous ones: \$750 million versus \$3.9 and \$3.7 billion before.



Moreover, 57% of this amount funds only two already announced measures - the Alliances for Solidarity (territorial agreements) and adapted transportation. Unlike previous plans, which had introduced major measures such as the family allowance, the solidarity tax credit, or the basic income program, this fourth plan contains no flagship initiatives. With the next plan not due until 2030, a several-year gap opens, leaving current issues without concrete responses.

History has proven this:
social movements constantly revive,
carried by those who refuse to resign
themselves.

A Necessary Mobilization to Break Injustice

Faced with these political choices that perpetuate exclusion, only mobilization can force change. No rights have ever been granted without struggle: women's right to vote, the reduction of working hours, and social achievements have all been won through collective fights. History has proven this: social movements constantly revive, carried by those who refuse to resign themselves.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO THE HOUSING CRISIS



Véronique Laflamme

Spokesperson, Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU)

FRAPRU and other community organizations were already sounding the alarm long before governments officially recognized the housing crisis.

The housing crisis stems more from an affordability problem than from scarcity. Since 2018, the average rent has increased by 47% in Quebec and by 70% in Gatineau, making housing inaccessible to many households even before supply becomes scarce. Real estate speculation and renovictions³ have forced many tenants to spend a disproportionate share of their income on rent or, worse, to become homeless. FRAPRU and other community organizations were already sounding the alarm long before governments officially recognized the crisis.

In 2025, renter households still struggle to find adequate housing. Many live in units that are too expensive, in poor condition, or unsuitable for their needs. The shortage of social housing fuels this crisis - a problem the United Nations (UN) highlighted as early as 2016, recognizing the lack of social housing in Quebec and Canada.

Late and Insufficient Policies

After twenty years of support for social housing, the federal government ended its commitment in 1994, resulting in a loss of approximately 85,000 social housing units in Quebec. It was only in 2017 that the National Housing Strategy was launched, backed by a \$115 billion envelope over ten years. Yet, until 2024, no federal funds had been specifically allocated to social housing. Instead, the amounts spent funded insufficient subsidies to curb rent increases or supported the construction of private housing that was too expensive under the guise of affordability. In 2024, \$4 billion was finally earmarked for non-profit housing.

Despite the construction of new housing units in recent years, the crisis persists because these units remain out of reach for low-income tenants. Even worse, this increase in supply has contributed to pushing rents higher.

In Quebec, the government was slow to recognize the scale of the problem. Some measures were implemented, including a temporary increase in the housing allowance, partly funded by Ottawa, which only compensated for the rent surge (+17.5% in Quebec). In 2023, regulations were adopted to control short-term rentals on platforms like Airbnb, and housing search assistance services were established. In 2024, a three-year moratorium on evictions and enhanced protections for elderly

tenants were introduced. New powers were granted to cities to allow them to override urban planning regulations and accelerate housing construction.

Since 2018, the Legault government has delivered only half of the 15,000 social housing units promised at its outset, despite committing to complete this in its first term. As at the federal level, provincial efforts have focused on “affordable” housing, whose vague definition does not guarantee access for the most.

A Crisis Still Very Present in 2025

Today, more than one in four renter households spends an excessive share of their income on housing costs. In 2021, 373,615 renter households had a median income of \$23,800, and among them, 129,000 spent more than 50% of their income on rent.

Moreover, gaps in legislation undermine the protection of the rental housing stock against real estate speculation and still expose tenants to abusive evictions. To date, 40,000 low-income households are on waiting lists for social housing units (HLM). No student housing programs have been launched, and delays continue to accumulate in delivering the few promised social housing units due to a lack of predictable and stable funding.

A Necessary Shift Toward Social Housing

To sustainably resolve the housing crisis and avoid repeating past mistakes, structural measures must be implemented. This involves strengthening the social safety net and reforming the housing system to prioritize social housing.

Currently, only 11% of rental housing consists of social housing units, about 169,000 units - an essential barrier against the crisis. This proportion remains insufficient. To meet growing needs, the share of social housing should reach at least 20% of the rental stock. Practically, this means doubling the number of social housing units in Quebec within 15 years.

Véronique Laflamme has been a community organizer for 20 years, specializing in housing rights, including 15 years with the Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU), where she currently serves as spokesperson. Her commitment extends beyond housing to issues of social and fiscal justice. In 2015, she was awarded the Tribute Prize - 40 Years of the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, presented by the *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse*. This award, given to 40 recipients, recognizes their contributions to advancing rights and freedoms in Quebec.

³ *Renoviction*: Eviction of a tenant by a landlord with the intent to carry out renovations, followed by a significant increase in rent after the work is completed. (Source: Usito Dictionary)



PANEL

LESSONS, SOLUTIONS, THE BIG SOLUTION

Are there lessons to be learned from the most recent crises? What measures should be implemented to reduce consumer vulnerability? Internationally: what models should we draw inspiration from?

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ADAPTING PROGRAMS IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND RETHINKING THE COMMODIFICATION OF HOUSING



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Antoine Genest-Grégoire's

research focuses on the distributive effects of tax policy and how citizens perceive them. His work has been published in the *National Tax Journal*, the *Canadian Tax Journal*, and *Canadian Public Policy*. He holds a PhD from Carleton University and is an assistant professor in the Department of Taxation at the Université de Sherbrooke.

The pandemic exposed the limitations of existing government programs, notably their rigidity and lack of up-to-date data, which led to the emergency creation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). To avoid relying on such temporary solutions in the future, it would be worthwhile to make some current programs more flexible. The GST credit, for example, could be expanded and adjusted based on the needs of specific regions, population groups, or economic sectors.

Already during COVID-19, measures like the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) and Old Age Security were enhanced, enabling a swift response to the sudden drop in income and the precariousness faced by many families. The “grocery rebate” is a good example, as it was essentially just an enhancement of the GST credit. It could therefore play an even more strategic role in future interventions.

Furthermore, when it comes to housing, the commodification of real estate contributes significantly to the crisis of affordability and accessibility. Treating housing purely as an investment product subject to market forces encourages speculation and profit-seeking. This dynamic exacerbates the housing crisis: rents rise, affordable units become scarce, and securing a roof becomes increasingly difficult for low- and middle-income households.

Yet concrete solutions do exist - for example, revisiting certain tax incentives that primarily benefit large investors and strengthening the development of social and cooperative housing, which provide stable and fair rents.

The distress experienced by individuals often escapes statistics. Reducing the housing crisis to a percentage of income spent on rent oversimplifies a much more complex reality. Today, many young people stay longer in their parents' homes, while others remain in unhappy relationships - or even in situations of abuse - due to a lack of sufficient resources to access housing.

That's why, beyond the essential creation of a rent registry, additional measures are needed to better regulate the market, identify abusive rent increases, and conduct deeper investigations into the real cost of the housing crisis - particularly its impact on life choices, mental health, and safety.

TACKLING DEBT AND REFORMING THE CREDIT SYSTEM



Maude Pugliese

Associate Professor, National Institute of Scientific Research (INRS) and Canada Research Chair in Families' Financial Experiences and Wealth Inequality

It's difficult to consider some of the financial assistance measures introduced after the pandemic as truly effective - particularly the widespread distribution of checks, including to people who didn't actually need them. When added up, these amounts represent significant resources that could have been invested elsewhere, such as in the development of social housing.

During the pandemic, many people turned to credit as a lifeline. In 2022, nearly 30% of indebted individuals reported going into debt in response to a crisis situation - such as job loss, illness, or insufficient income. For many today, credit is no longer a choice, but a necessity - not only to deal with emergencies, but to make ends meet each month.

The problem is that these loans often come with very high, even abusive, interest rates. People then find themselves trapped in a spiral of debt that is difficult to escape. On top of that come feelings of shame and guilt, which lead many to isolate themselves and avoid seeking help - only worsening their situation. Resorting to credit should not be stigmatized; it mostly reflects a failure in our social safety net. These are, in essence, dynamics of financial domination - and it is striking how slow governments have been to respond, or how they have failed to implement adequate measures to protect vulnerable people both during the pandemic and today.

Moreover, in the credit sector, governments far too often leave the field open to financial institutions without meaningful regulation. Why not provide better oversight? Such reform would not only help reduce dependence on credit, but also strengthen the financial stability of households. Why not humanize credit services by creating social economy enterprises that offer responsible, fair, and low-cost loans?

We must also address the growing use of credit scores in employment and housing decisions. Assigning quasi-moral value to someone's financial history only deepens inequality and unfairly penalizes those already in precarious situations.



In addition to her role as an associate professor at INRS, **Maude Pugliese** leads the research partnership *Familles en mouvance* and the *Observatoire des réalités familiales du Québec*. Her current research focuses on intergenerational wealth transmission, debt and savings dynamics, all examined through the lens of gender and family structure. She holds the Canada Research Chair in Family Financial Experiences and Wealth Inequality.

There's also an important paradox to highlight: part of the middle class has actually seen its financial situation improve, largely due to rising property values. But caution is necessary - wealth accumulation through homeownership often comes with very high levels of debt, sometimes over 30 years. Many households are tied to closed variable-rate loans, exposing them to major financial risk if interest rates rise.

Furthermore, in both Canada and Quebec, financial security is largely based on private savings and employer pension plans, which are increasingly out of reach. The tight link between home values and retirement security creates enormous pressure on the housing market. To defuse this speculative dynamic, we should significantly strengthen our public pension and old-age security systems - and rethink our collective relationship with real estate.

RÉDUIRE L'ENDETTEMENT PRIVÉ ET INVESTIR DANS LE LOGEMENT ÉQUITABLE



Julia Posca

Researcher, Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS)

Julia Posca has been a researcher at the Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS) since 2011. Her work focuses on socioeconomic inequalities, household debt, changes in the world of work, the labour market, and the housing situation in Quebec. Her most recent book, *Travailler moins ne suffit pas* (Working Less Is Not Enough), was published by Écosociété in 2023. She holds a master's degree in sociology from the Université du Québec à Montréal.

At the beginning of the pandemic, broad government aid programs led to an increase in the savings rate. With spending down (due to lockdowns), many households managed to set money aside. For a brief moment, some indicators even showed a drop in poverty rates.

This situation clearly illustrates the often-inverse relationship between public and private debt. When the state borrows to support the population, households are less dependent on credit. Conversely, austerity policies force individuals to bear the cost of living on their own - often by going into debt.

Today, calls for budget tightening are multiplying: deficit reduction, spending cuts. In practice, these choices shift the financial burden onto individuals. This shift is not insignificant: an economy that relies too heavily on household debt becomes more vulnerable to economic shocks.

On the housing front, public discourse still focuses on quantity: build more, with little regard for affordability. At the federal level, policies continue to promote homeownership as a primary solution to the housing crisis. Yet having a place to live doesn't necessarily mean becoming a homeowner. What matters is access to adequate housing based on one's financial means.

In Vienna, for example, an ambitious public housing policy was launched nearly a century ago. Today, about 60% of the population lives in non-profit housing, managed by organizations required to reinvest in new construction and limit rent increases. We're talking about 400,000 public housing units.

While not without flaws, this model shows that with political will, a stable, affordable rental market can exist outside speculative logics. The long-term impacts are significant: reducing the share of income spent on housing lowers precarity, strengthens economic resilience, and fosters greater social justice.

It's worth repeating: having a place to live is a fundamental need - an essential condition for human dignity.

ACTING ON INCOME DISTRIBUTION AND PROTECTING THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET



Geoffroy Boucher

Economist, Observatoire québécois
des inégalités

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) filled a gap left by an Employment Insurance system that was unable to serve its role as a macroeconomic stabilizer during a crisis. In times of economic shock, a government must support household income to prevent a collapse in consumption. Without intervention, falling incomes quickly translate into reduced spending, followed by economic slowdown.

Yet our Employment Insurance system protected too few people, offered inadequate benefits, and operated too slowly to meet the urgency of the moment. The Government of Canada had to design a new program within a week. It was a demanding task, but the state managed to distribute aid quickly to nearly eight million people. Though the operation faced criticism, CERB helped stabilize the economy and prevented the anticipated collapse. Even more notably, the financial support exceeded income losses for many, leading to a sharp drop in poverty between 2019 and 2020—a nearly 50% reduction, according to the Market Basket Measure.

This period taught us something vital: governments hold powerful levers to influence income distribution when they make it a priority. The minimum wage, tax credits, family benefits, public pension plans, and social assistance can all help increase income and reduce expenses.

In times of crisis, price controls are another tool worth considering. Historically used during World War II, they re-entered public debate during the energy crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine. Some countries capped gas, electricity, and heating prices. Economic analyses have highlighted the effectiveness of this approach in containing inflation.

In today's socio-economic landscape, a sharp divide separates homeowners from renters. Over the past 50 years, homeowners have seen significant financial gains, while renters' situations have steadily worsened. A recent study shows that homeowners report better overall health—both physical and mental—compared to renters.

Housing quality partly explains this difference. The other factor is mental health: residential insecurity causes constant stress, which over time leads to serious health issues.



Geoffroy Boucher holds a joint bachelor's degree in economics and political science from Université Laval, and a master's degree in economics and social policy from the London School of Economics. A graduate of the Advanced Policy Analyst Program of the Government of Canada, Geoffroy has worked in both Quebec and Canadian public services. As a senior economist at the Department of Finance Canada, he helped develop major public policies such as the COVID-19 emergency benefits (CERB, CRB, EI), the pan-Canadian early learning and child care plan, and the Employment Insurance modernization initiative. He currently works at the *Observatoire québécois des inégalités*, where he raises awareness among policymakers about the challenges stemming from social and economic inequalities.

Housing is therefore a matter of public health, social justice, and economic stability. To address this reality, we must reduce the influence of speculation in the rental market. Concrete measures can help “de-financialize” housing, such as expanding the share of non-market rental housing to preserve affordability.

A major Quebec media outlet recently asked: Can we afford to maintain our social safety net? But perhaps the real question is: Can we, as a society, afford not to?



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Thanks also to the scientific committee for curating a quality program, and to Nicolas Thibault, symposium coordinator and lead for the research project presented today, which will be published in the coming months.

We also extend our deep gratitude to the organizing team, especially Josée Massicotte, whose efficiency and versatility were crucial throughout. And of

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An Event that Inspires Solutions

We hope this symposium has offered stimulating reflections and new perspectives. While not all findings are optimistic, solutions do exist. This event reminds us that dialogue and collaboration are essential in facing challenges. The wide range of expertise gathered today—researchers, grassroots workers, government and community representatives—demonstrates the strength of idea-sharing and collective action in building a better society.

Maxime Dorais, Co-Executive Director
Sophie Roussin, Co-Executive Director
 Union des consommateurs

