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• (1540)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to the 34th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 4, 2022, the committee is meeting today for its study on Report 1, Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations, of the 2022 Reports 1 to 4 of the Auditor General of Canada.

[English]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses, who are joining us both here in person and virtually.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Ms. Karen Hogan, the Auditor General. It's nice to see you. Nicolas Swales is returning as well. It's nice to see you as well, sir.

I'm not going to try to find all of you on the screen, because there are at least 12 boxes in front of me. I will acknowledge that you're here, and if you're not, the clerk will inform me in a few minutes.

From the Canada Revenue Agency, by video conference, we have Bob Hamilton, commissioner of revenue and chief executive officer; Maxime Guénette, assistant commissioner, service, innovation and integration branch; and Gillian Pranke, assistant commissioner, assessment, benefit, and service branch.

The next department is the Department of Employment and Social Development. We have, by video conference, Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister of Employment and Social Development, and chief operating officer for Service Canada; Tammy Bélanger, senior assistant deputy minister, benefits and integrated services branch; and Atiq Rahman, assistant deputy minister, learning branch.

Finally, from Statistics Canada, we have, by video conference, Joséé Bégin, director general, labour market, education and socio-economic well-being; and Andrew Heisz, director, centre for income and socio-economic well-being statistics.

Each department and agency will have five minutes right off the top for its opening statement.

Ms. Hogan, we'll begin with you or one of your officials. You have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

Can we verify that the sound tests were conducted with all participants? We have a lot of witnesses on Zoom.

The Chair: Yes, the tests were done as usual.

[English]

It's over to you, Ms. Hogan.

[Translation]

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on the access to benefits for hard-to-reach populations, which was tabled in the House of Commons on May 31, 2022. I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people.

Joining me today is Nicholas Swales, the principal who was responsible for the audit.

The Government of Canada delivers several income support benefits to low-income Canadians to help lift them out of poverty and reduce inequality. These programs can achieve their goals only if those who are eligible to receive benefits are aware of them and can access them.

The Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada know that some individuals are not accessing the benefits available to them. These individuals include low-income members of groups who are not easily served through regular channels, such as Indigenous people, seniors, newcomers to Canada, and people with disabilities. These hard-to-reach populations require more help from the government.

For this audit, we wanted to know whether the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada ensured that hard-to-reach populations were made aware of, and could access, the Canada child benefit, the Canada workers benefit, the guaranteed income supplement, and the Canada learning bond.

We found that the government lacked a clear and complete picture of the people who were not accessing benefits. The government estimated that overall, a high proportion of low-income people were receiving the benefits. However, the agency and department overstated the rates of people accessing benefits because they did not always account for people who had not filed income tax returns. Filing a tax return is required to access most benefits.

• (1545)

[English]

Since 2018, the agency and the department have increased their efforts to raise awareness of benefits among people who most need them. Outreach activities have focused on hard-to-reach populations, who are more likely to have modest incomes and often face barriers to accessing benefits. These populations include people who may be unaware of available benefits or reluctant to interact with government organizations.

We found that, despite these efforts, the department and the agency had not developed measures to assess the impacts of outreach activities. For example, they could not measure increases in the rate of benefit take-up for targeted groups over time, or related impacts, such as increased tax filing by those groups over time.

Finally, we found that service approaches for helping people who required more personalized support were not sufficiently integrated between the agency and the department. The agency and the department had initiated some pilot projects to work with community groups on more individualized support, but they had not established an integrated service delivery approach.

Better collection and use of disaggregated data would improve their ability to understand and identify barriers and target outreach. Statistics Canada is an important partner in data collection, measurement and analysis. Although the agency and the department have taken some action, they still have not done enough to connect people with benefits. As a result, they are failing to improve the lives of some individuals and families who may need these benefits the most.

We made three recommendations as a result of this audit. The Canada Revenue Agency, Employment and Social Development Canada and Statistics Canada agreed with these recommendations.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Auditor General.

I'll turn now to the CRA for their opening remarks.

Mr. Hamilton, you have five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Canada Revenue Agency's response to the Auditor General of Canada's Report 1—Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations.

Today, I am accompanied by two agency assistant commissioners, namely Gillian Pranke and Maxime Guénette.

First, I want to recognize the excellent work of agency employees during the COVID-19 pandemic who have been supporting Canadians in accessing benefits and credits to which they are entitled.

[English]

They have gone to great lengths to do so, and despite the impacts of the pandemic over the past three filing seasons, our employees have been able to provide billions of dollars in urgent support to help millions of Canadians.

When it comes to hard-to-reach populations, the agency has taken many steps to continue to reach the most vulnerable. In fact, when many tax clinics that are part of the community volunteer income tax program—the CVITP—were set to close in March 2020, the CRA quickly pivoted to alter processes so as to keep these clinics up and running, many in a virtual format. These approaches remain in place and provide much greater flexibility and access to those in need.

Over the 2017 to 2020 period, there has been a roughly 7% increase in individuals who have accessed the CRA's CVITP. The number of tax returns filed has increased by over 11%, and the number of individuals who were assisted during outreach sessions has increased by over 15%. The CRA is making it easier for individuals, especially those from at-risk populations, to access important benefits and credits by enhancing the funding available to CVITP clinics.

Minister LeBouthillier recently announced a new formula for the CVITP grant that will increase the amount of money awarded to organizations through the grant each year, helping them to cover the cost of hosting free tax clinics. It also recognizes the unique challenges of organizations that serve northern and indigenous communities. Thus, we are proud to have been able to implement this important part of the Minister of National Revenue's mandate letters for the past five years.

With respect to the specific recommendations in report 1, the CRA has noted that it agrees with all three recommendations from the Auditor General. Although we are proud of our achievements in this area, we also recognize that there is more work to be done. Indeed, the CRA has provided a detailed action plan to the committee already, outlining how we will work towards meeting all of the recommendations and the timelines for those initiatives.

• (1550)

[Translation]

This will include, among other things, continuing to work with ESDC to ensure alignment in the prioritization, planning, and monitoring of work related to the take-up of benefits by hard-to-reach populations, and, as well, continuing to leverage Statistics Canada's expertise, including the most recent Census data, to gain more insight into hard-to-reach populations.

[English]

In closing, CRA is committed to improving its client service to Canada, including our country's most vulnerable, through its "people first" service philosophy.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am now happy to answer any questions you have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Questions are still a few minutes out, but I appreciate that.

We'll now turn to the Department of Employment and Social Development.

You have five minutes for one of your officials to make an opening statement.

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the invitation to appear before the committee today and the opportunity to discuss the Auditor General's report on benefits for hard-to-reach Canadian populations.

I am joined today by assistant deputy ministers Tammy Bélanger and Atiq Rahman, and by the director general of social policy and strategic service policy, Hugues Vaillancourt.

[Translation]

First, let me say that the Government of Canada welcomes the Auditor General's report and we fully accept her recommendations.

[English]

We are always looking for ways to improve services to Canadians and better support hard-to-reach people across the country.

Many vulnerable Canadians face barriers in accessing government services or benefits, for a variety of reasons. For example, certain people do not appear in administrative databases. They do not, and are not required to, file taxes. In cases like these, it becomes difficult—even impossible—to remind them to apply for a benefit by mail or phone, because we can't find them and don't know where they are, and they may not know how to access us.

The audit's main finding was that the government did not have a clear and complete picture of the people who were not receiving benefits to which they may be entitled. Our department has been working to overcome this challenge for some time.

• (1555)

[Translation]

We strive to reach all Canadians, no matter where they live or in what circumstances. But I agree that we need to do more.

[English]

That is why, in 2020, Service Canada introduced the reaching all Canadians initiative, which is specifically designed to increase benefit uptake and eliminate barriers to access and delivery. Through this initiative, we have been connecting directly with communities and organizations that can refer clients to us or help us identify new clients who wouldn't otherwise be known to us.

For example, working with the Rainbow Resource Centre in Winnipeg, we help members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community regarding benefit entitlements associated with common-law partnerships. We also work directly with their trans ID clinic coordinator to help those with questions about changing gender designations on government identification, social insurance numbers, passports and employment insurance. Those are just examples of where we're reaching out to hard-to-reach populations to make those connections.

We also work with service delivery providers, such as Islington Seniors' Shelter in Ontario, to reach seniors living in homelessness or poverty. Partnerships like these deliver help to clients who may face accessibility, literacy or technological barriers, and ensure they are obtaining their GIS, CPP, OAS and potentially other benefits to which they may be entitled.

We have also resumed regular community and outreach liaison services to residents of rural, remote, northern and indigenous communities. Last year, almost 100,000 clients were served directly through this work, and almost 80,000 this year, as of September 30. We meet directly with individuals within these communities to help them with their unique needs.

[Translation]

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic did have an impact on our ability to reach some communities and individuals.

In April 2020, we launched the Outreach Support Centre to provide immediate, direct and personalized toll-free phone service to Indigenous communities and clients facing the same barriers identified within the Auditor General's report.

[English]

This expansion of service now helps tens of thousands of Canadians every year. Last year, the support centre received over 27,000 calls and provided nearly 32,000 services to hard-to-reach Canadians.

We also reach as many Canadians as we can through the mail and by phone. Over the last five years, Service Canada and the CRA mailed over 425,000 GIS applications and received over a quarter of a million completed applications. By phone, we contact seniors directly to help ensure that they can renew their GIS benefits. For example, last year, we called 100,000 seniors, which helped result in 43,000 renewed GIS benefits.

[Translation]

We will also continue to work closely with our colleagues at Canada Revenue Agency to share information, identify best practices and collaborate on data collection, where needed and where appropriate.

[English]

Our work includes ensuring that as many people as possible automatically receive benefits when entitled. For example, all individuals eligible for OAS are automatically put into pay in the month after they turn 65. Since 2014, 1.4 million Canadians were auto-enrolled in OAS.

Ensuring reliable and accessible services to all Canadians, regardless of where they live, remains a top priority for my department. This is how we will achieve improved outcomes for Canadians from all walks of life.

Thank you for asking us to be here today.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

Lastly, we have Josée Bégin from Statistics Canada. You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Josée Bégin (Director General, Labour Market, Education and Socio-Economic Well-Being, Statistics Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to be here on behalf of Statistics Canada to discuss the government's action in assessing and measuring access to benefits for hard-to-reach populations.

Statistics Canada is participating with the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada on a joint action plan, with specific activities and deliverables geared towards improving understanding of benefit take-up. Since the summer of 2022, we have been working together to identify governance for the joint program and discuss strategies to develop performance measures.

[English]

Regarding benefit uptake and performance measures, in our response to the OAG recommendation we highlighted the substantial statistical difficulties with calculating accurate benefit take-up rates. The statistical system relies on data from programs that are taken up by the population. Thus, inherently, when someone does

not use these programs, or is ineligible or not aware of them, it creates a challenge. This relates to the importance of developing new strategies to assess benefit take-up, as indicated in the action plan.

We do, however, have data sources and methods to estimate the population that is missed or not in scope and provide their characteristics, such that policy-makers can target efforts to better include them. Through data integration of administrative data with other data holdings of StatCan, we can describe the numbers of recipients belonging to particular age, sex, racialized, indigenous identity, or another population or at-risk group.

Statistics Canada is also well placed to provide information on groups that are more or less at risk of not receiving benefits to which they may be entitled for reasons of not filing their taxes. Through tabulation of linked datasets, Statistics Canada can determine population groups that are less likely to be tax filers. While these measures only approximate the benefit take-up rate, this information can be used to target our outreach to particular communities.

It is important to underscore that Statistics Canada's actions cannot include the sharing of confidential microdata. This means that we cannot identify individuals, but rather can provide information about the characteristics of those who are at risk of not receiving benefits. However, CRA and ESDC can access anonymized microdata through a Statistics Canada research data centre hub or through other secure means.

StatCan has a number of other initiatives that are designed to better understand this important group, with the necessary safeguards that protect privacy and confidentiality, and is continuing to explore new, innovative ways to shed important light on this element of our population.

For example, an existing partnership that will be leveraged to respond to the recommendation is the tax research advisory group, co-led by Statistics Canada and CRA. This group serves as a collaborative partnership between CRA and StatCan to share knowledge and expertise relating to methodology, tax data, tax administration and tax process understanding. The tax data research group is already discussing new research that is relevant to the OAG recommendations on using behavioural economic analysis to investigate the value of "nudges" to encourage people to file taxes, and an analysis of benefit receipt among marginalized groups, notably new immigrants, including refugee claimants.

In another initiative, ESDC and Statistics Canada are working toward the establishment of a joint data strategy that will build on existing collaboration and data-sharing agreements to create a more strategic partnership that goes beyond data. The joint data strategy proposes to prioritize action on data access and data acquisition for statistical purposes and the development of data standards.

• (1600)

[*Translation*]

In summary, Statistics Canada is well prepared to carry out the action plan with the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada to improve the measurement of benefit take-up. Once the details of a plan have been agreed upon, Statistics Canada will present funding requirements to federal partners to allow for the work to proceed, if necessary.

I thank you again for having Statistics Canada to speak here today, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: I'd like to thank all the witnesses who joined us today.

[*English*]

We're now going to begin the first round, which will have every recognized party, four members, asking questions for up to six minutes.

I'll turn now to Mr. McCauley, from the official opposition, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

AG Hogan, Mr. Swales, welcome back again, and welcome, other witnesses.

I want to start with you, Ms. Hogan.

We're talking about vulnerable populations. Who is defining vulnerable populations, or what do we have to define what is "vulnerable", so they're not just lumped into one group? Not all in northern hard-to-reach areas are actually vulnerable.

I'm curious how we're defining that, so we can target, so to speak, the right people we need to be directing resources to.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We actually started off our audit with asking exactly that question when we did this. We started with the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada and how they defined it. We included that information in exhibit 1.2.

As we went through our work, we focused on the fact that these are benefit programs meant to lift people out of poverty. It would be individuals within target groups that are at that lower-than-poverty level. It isn't the entire group of people who are elderly. It's really about that income-based approach. That's why we included the definition in here, because we thought it was really important for the readers of our report to understand who was being targeted.

• (1605)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

You stated that—and this has come up in previous studies—the departments lack a clear picture of whom their outreach helps. How long has this been going on? Is this a new issue for them? Has it been repeatedly brought to them? Is this a brand new issue?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Well, I feel like I should start with telling you why we actually launched this audit.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Sure.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Back in 2019, we did an audit on the Canada child benefit. We found in that report that the Canada Revenue Agency did a great job in a timely way of delivering the child benefit to those who had applied. The outstanding question was, are you reaching those who are most vulnerable, those who need it the most? When they're in the system, it works effectively for them.

That's when we started looking at a whole bunch of programs. I can't tell you how long it has existed, but we looked at a period between April 2019 and August 2021 and looked at—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Let me pose the question to the CRA, then.

How long has this been on your radar? Is it just a recent phenomenon?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I wouldn't call it a recent phenomenon. It's a challenge.

I think the one thing, when you read the Auditor General's report, that we would all—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry. How long has this been an issue that CRA has been aware of?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Chair, I have a point of order.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Well, certainly since—

The Chair: Excuse me for just one second. I heard a point of order, I think.

Did I hear a point of order?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes. Just so we're on the same page... Mr. McCauley is a new member of the committee, but he has served on many committees in the past. Let's allow witnesses to complete their sentences. Let's not interrupt them after they've spoken two or three words, as a courtesy.

The Chair: I can address it, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Fragiskatos, I give latitude to members to use their time as they see fit. Should a member want to come back to a question that they feel another member has not permitted a witness to give time to, they're free to do that. Time is limited here. In particular, some members have only two and a half minutes. I think members do have the ability and the right to end the question if they think it's going down a path that they do not think is helpful.

Having said that, I take your point that we do want to show courtesy to our witnesses, and if questions are asked, witnesses should be given the chance to provide at least a brief retort.

I'm going to turn it back over to you, Mr. McCauley. Don't argue with me, because the time is now running and you're eating into your time.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'll repeat the question: How long has this been on CRA's radar? How many years?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I can't speak to how long it's been on the radar totally. It's been on the radar ever since I became the commissioner six years ago. I know it was on before that—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Can I interrupt?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm going to ask ESDC the same question.

How long has it been on ESDC's radar?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: This is a constant source of work for us, because it's a population that's hard to reach, so each year, year over year, and certainly since 2016, we've been working on addressing this issue across the spectrum of vulnerable populations across the country.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The reason I ask this question is, if we've been aware of it for six years now, does the AG's recommendation set the way on how to address this? Or is this just going to be one small step in a long process to addressing this? And why is it taking so long?

I'll start with CRA, please.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Sure. This one might need more than 15 seconds, but I won't take more than a minute and a half.

It's not new. It's an evolving challenge. It's one that we've spent a lot of time thinking about.

What I was going to say was that, if you read the Auditor General's report, one thing that I think we all agree on is that it is a challenging area to reach those who are hard to reach. There has been lots of work done, but there's more that's left to be done.

There are improvements that have to be made to overcome some of the challenges that we have in reaching these people and in amassing data to be able to measure our results. I think the Auditor General's report points to some things that are positive developments, but it will be a continuing journey.

• (1610)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you believe the Auditor General is correct when she says that we don't know if the outreach actually helped, and that perhaps the department has overstated how much their outreach worked? That's a pretty concerning comment if the government's overstating—

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Well, I think we—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: —such a—

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Sorry.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No, go ahead.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I'll just carry on. If you want to hear from the other witnesses, let me know.

I think we always try to be clear with what we are measuring. As I think the Auditor General referenced, we measure take-up based on how many people have filed. Where we have difficulty measuring is those people who haven't filed. That's part of the work we're doing together with StatsCan, to see if we can overcome those—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. Thanks very much.

Just quickly to the AG, please, your comment is that the department “overstated” the results. Do you think your recommendations, as you've presented them, are clear enough for them to end overstating the results?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I believe the other witness was accurate, that it's about the take-up. We have an exhibit that tells you that there's been an increase in the child benefit take-up rate to 97%, but that doesn't talk about those individuals who have not filed a tax return. That's where you're overstating your take-up rate. It's 97% of those eligible who have filed. You need to be able to think about those who haven't, or who won't or can't.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move on to Mr. Fragiskatos.

You have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

Commissioner Hamilton, I want to begin with you. You spoke about community volunteer income tax programs, or CVITPs, as a key example of the challenge of how hard-to-reach populations are accessed, if I can put it that way. Could you expand on that?

Could you also give more information to the committee about something else you talked about, that being the recent enhancements to the program as announced by our Minister of National Revenue, Minister LeBouthillier, pertaining to populations in the north and indigenous individuals as well?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Yes. Thank you.

I would start by saying that the community volunteer income tax program is a very important one that we've worked on quite aggressively over the last number of years. At the core of it, it's really an effort by us to try to reach some of these people whom we might not normally be able to reach. How do you do that? How do you encourage them to file a tax return so that they can get the benefits they're eligible for? The laws of the land say that you can't get them unless you file.

This is our effort to get into the community, build the trust we can with some of the community members, and have some volunteers help people file their tax returns and get the benefits they need. It's something we've had for a while now. We've been trying to improve it over time. As I noted, during the pandemic we had to pivot a little bit to go more to a virtual format, because these were predominantly in person, and we couldn't do that at the beginning of the pandemic. We did pivot, and we have great support from the communities that we're engaged with.

What we did recently, and that was in the announcement, was provide some grants to these community associations to help defray some of the costs they have to incur when they're providing the support. It could be something like paper, computers, that sort of thing. As they're trying to help the members of their community in these hard-to-reach areas, we have a program that allows us to compensate them for some of those expenses.

Minister LeBouthillier announced recently some changes to that to make it more effective, provide greater assistance, and target better some communities across the land, including indigenous communities. It's a way for us to get into the communities and try to help the people within those communities, with the support of others.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I've seen the work of the CVITPs up close in a number of different parts of the country. I can tell you specifically about my home riding in London, where we have a number of CVITPs that have helped individuals gain access to things like the Canada child benefit. As you know, for families finally getting access to it, if they haven't filed for it for a number of years especially, it's transformational for them, and obviously for the kids.

Would you say, Commissioner, that the trust relationship—this is something I've noticed about CVITPs—is fundamental? These are usually locally based organizations that do a number of other things. They're not-for-profits or charities. They're known in their communities. There's a relationship of trust that exists toward citizens and vice versa. Would you say that is fundamental to CVITPs, and how potentially they can be a key actor in confronting this challenge of hard-to-reach populations?

• (1615)

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I think it's absolutely key. The trust that the people of the community and the hard-to-reach populations have in the government or in community organizations is really important.

In the CVITP, they help us to get that trust to allow us to help them. I think the trust, though, goes beyond the CVITP. It goes into every effort that we make to reach out to communities, be they indigenous or otherwise. Some people don't like to see the CRA coming, and we have to make sure that we go out of our way to say, "We are here to help you get access to the benefits that you're entitled to" and tell them how they can trust us.

Sometimes that trust takes some time to build, and community volunteers certainly help us in that regard.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I also wanted to ask you, Commissioner, a question beyond the CVITP. Specifically, as you know, the Minister of National Revenue has reaching out as part of her mandate let-

ter. The Prime Minister has tasked not just her, but also the CRA, with reaching out and finding ways to engage newcomers and youth.

What is the CRA doing beyond the CVITP to engage with them?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Again, it is a very active program for us to try to raise awareness of the tax system and the benefits that one can get through the tax system.

We have a three-pillar approach. We are looking at improving financial and tax literacy through educational efforts that we provide. We are raising that awareness I spoke about, so that people recognize that filing their taxes is an important key to enabling some of the benefits to come through. We're supporting the filing and helping people who might be challenged in filing their tax return. We can provide that support.

We just talked about the CVITP, but a lot of what we're doing is making it easier for people to access the tax system. That can be through things such as videos that we prepare. Sometimes they're in different languages to help newcomers. You mentioned newcomers coming to the country. How can they get a familiarity with the tax system? We have educational materials and, in some cases, we're able to translate them into languages that are easier for them to access.

Those are some of the things we're doing in that area to try to increase awareness and help people by making it simpler for them to file their taxes and understand the tax system.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their speeches and those who travelled to be here in person.

A good government clearly sees protecting vulnerable populations as its top priority. The natural role of government is to protect those who really need it. First you need to be able to identify those individuals and differentiate between them. We've talked about various populations. They work and live differently. They will probably require different incentives too.

I'd like to understand how well we know the vulnerable populations who have not responded or don't have access to resources right now. How do we go about identifying and collecting data about them, and then reaching out to them?

My question is for the CRA or ESDC.

[English]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I can start it off.

[Translation]

Thank you for your question, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné.

[English]

We've been looking at the traditional ways we've been trying to reach people to deliver benefits, and then deconstructing them to make a determination of how we find those people who aren't accessing our benefits because they're not using our traditional methods. They're not calling us; they're not coming into Service Canada centres; they're not in any databases and they're not filing taxes.

What we're looking at, and what we've been doing for the past few years, is using third party resources, such as NGOs or advocacy and help groups that are on the ground and accessing these people. We've been using them, for example, as an intermediary to connect with us, so that we can connect them with services.

We're also using outreach services across the country—not just in rural and northern areas, but also in urban centres—because this is an issue regardless of geography or where people are living.

• (1620)

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you for your answer.

Are we able to estimate how many people we can't reach, other than those who didn't file a tax return? That 100% doesn't include everyone who might need it. Do we know how many vulnerable individuals don't file tax returns.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: One of the challenges in this field is having statistics on the overall population. We have good statistics for those who file their tax return.

However, I don't have a good estimate of the number of vulnerable individuals we are unable to reach. As Ms. MacDonald said, we're still working with Statistics Canada to figure out ways to make those estimates. We can, however, provide estimates with respect to Indigenous people.

Perhaps Ms. Pranke or Mr. Guénette have a closer estimate than I do, but I don't think so, because that's very hard to estimate. If we're unable to answer you today, I will ask the CRA to check into it.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: We'd appreciate it.

Thank you, Mr. Hamilton

[English]

Ms. Gillian Pranke (Assistant Commissioner, Assessment, Benefit and Service Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner Hamilton is absolutely correct in that it's very challenging to identify, with any degree of certainty, how many individuals are not filing, but I'd just like to highlight two things that we've been doing.

For over five years now, for a number of years, we've been working with Statistics Canada to conduct what we call linkage studies, where we actually can discreetly link up citizens who complete the census with tax data. It's anonymized, of course. That gives us an idea as far as individuals who aren't availing themselves of benefits and credits are concerned.

For the past five years, in the Canada Revenue Agency we've been conducting what we call a non-filer benefit outreach program, where we are in touch with individuals who, according to our records, our holdings, didn't file a return, but who, according to our data, would be entitled to a benefit or a credit. They would not be in a situation where they'd owe taxes, but they're entitled to benefits.

[Translation]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you very much for your answer, Ms. Pranke. It's really very fascinating.

How long has the Canada Revenue Agency been doing this study in tandem with Statistics Canada?

[English]

Ms. Gillian Pranke: Mr. Chair, we've been conducting this study and we're in the process of conducting it a second time with Statistics Canada, based on the 2001 census. The benefit outreach program that I referred to has been going on for five years. We've issued over 1.3 million letters to citizens, which has resulted in over \$40 million in refunds being generated, almost \$16 million in Canada child benefit payments, and just over \$17 million in GST payments. It's an important program.

One last item I'd like to—

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you off there. I wanted to hear all those numbers, but thank you very much.

I turn now to MP Desjarlais.

You have the floor for six minutes, sir.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the Auditor General and her office for being present today. I want to thank the witnesses, as well, who have been able to enlighten us on some of the realities facing hard-to-reach populations.

I understand how difficult this work is in light of the lack of data, and I want to focus there.

I want to make a positive mention about the efforts that have been undertaken, particularly on reserves. I had an opportunity to speak with some of the communities about some of the supports they received, allowing for intake. I think that's a good portion of this.

However, I think the gaps that are present in that framework are obvious to many folks, particularly in urban settings. When I talk about urban settings, it seems strange to think about people being unable to access services. However, we're seeing the growing number of folks struggling in urban centres. On top of that, places like Service Canada, in my city of Edmonton, haven't been open in almost two years. It's a concern for populations.

There are 3,400 houseless folks in my community. In Edmonton Griesbach, it's 3,400. In the last two years, 462 have died. When I think about hard-to-reach populations, I think about these people in my community who are unable to access these services. When I think about the work that is being undertaken, particularly in relation to recommendation 1.59 by the Auditor General's office, "To improve the integration and effectiveness of targeted outreach," I think about those populations, my relatives in Edmonton Griesbach who are living in this reality right now.

I see that there was work related to several departments, including Employment and Social Development Canada and Indigenous Services Canada, that looked at uptake for rural and reserve settings. Was there any comparable work that's taken place to ensure that indigenous urban populations—which make up the majority of indigenous people in Canada today—had a comparable level of service, or an application to help overcome these barriers? Was there any working group in urban settings for indigenous folks?

I will ask that of the assistant deputy minister from ESDC.

• (1625)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: There are a couple of things. For clarity, all Service Canada centres are open across the country and in Edmonton. We are in the process of finalizing retraining to all of our outreach centres, where people are still looking for us to join them. Certainly, we are present and available in urban centres for accessing services.

We have been tracking a number of our benefit delivery pieces. I know your question is specific to urban centres, but I want to give you a couple of statistics. In our indigenous community, we did a significant amount of work on OAS and CPP take-up rates between 2016 and 2020. That's with respect to an earlier question about how long we have been working on this. With respect to OAS, between 2016 and 2020, we found an increase of—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'm sorry; I have to apologize, Assistant Deputy Minister. The member will likely bring that question up again about the timing. We'll reserve that perhaps for him.

I really need an answer related to urban population consultation or support. Has it happened?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes. We do consultation and outreach in urban centres very frequently across the country. That's not just in

Edmonton, but in other major centres. We also do it with CRA and Indigenous Services Canada. We actually have working groups that work together. We also do it with provincial and territorial colleagues as well, as part of our outreach services across the country.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much for that.

To the Auditor General, when we're talking, for example, about recommendation 1.59 and looking at ways to integrate better services for this population, are you satisfied...? When you were reviewing this information, was there any evidence that there was a working group that was similar or equivalent to that working group within urban centres specifically for urban indigenous people?

This is for the Auditor General's office.

Ms. Karen Hogan: No, we did not see that statistic. We were encouraging both the Canada Revenue Agency and ESDC to delve into more disaggregated data. I acknowledge that it's difficult to measure uptake when you're looking at the entire population.

By definition, these people are hard to reach. You need to go into the granularity to understand the individual barriers for different types of subgroups within hard-to-reach populations in order to target your outreach. The recommendation was addressing getting to the real crux of the matter: What is the barrier for that individual group, because the majority of people are being served by normal outreach activities?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: You have just under a minute.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'll leave my second question and I'll try to wrap this one up quickly. It relates to recommendation 1.58.

Back to the assistant deputy minister, I hear in your words that you seem to be satisfied in some ways with the level of consultation in urban centres. I've demonstrated in my own testimony just now that this is not the case for many folks. The Auditor General has highlighted the lack of work there.

Is your department...? I see that they've agreed to this point. What plans do you have to establish a working group, especially with Indigenous Services Canada, to tackle the challenges and understand the challenges of urban indigenous community members?

• (1630)

The Chair: Keep your answer as focused as possible, please.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: For clarity, we're never satisfied. We're always working to improve those services. We do outreach to communities across the country, and we're very motivated by the Auditor General's recommendation. We agree with it wholeheartedly. That's part of our action plan going forward, to put more precise working groups together to tackle those hard-to-find [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll just remind members to avoid banter, particularly banter across the aisle. I gave Mr. Desjarlais a little more time there because of that, and I'm looking more at my Conservative colleagues on this than at the government side. Thank you.

Turning to our second round, Mr. Kram, it's over to you.

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today, and thank you for all of your work on this very important matter.

I would like to start with Mr. Hamilton from the CRA. We've heard a couple of times now about the importance of getting people to file their income tax in the first place, because, if they don't file their income tax, we don't know that they're out there and we don't know how to help them.

Mr. Hamilton, can you give us a breakdown about how Canadians file their income tax these days? Is it mostly online? Is it mostly driving down to H&R Block? Is it mailing in the paper forms? How does it happen?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a mix, certainly, and we do try to tailor our services so that people can use the channel of their choice. Predominantly, over 90% of tax returns are filed electronically, based on last year. I forget the exact number, but let's say it's 92%—something like that.

If you're looking at individuals, a large portion of them, over 50%, go to tax preparers. Others use software that's available on the market, and then the balance.... We have a service called "File my Return", which is particularly helpful for this group. You can use it to file by phone, and we're expanding that. A million or so people use paper forms, and we mail the forms out to them to make it easier. That's how people file their tax returns.

I think one of the focal points, and my final point, is that we're trying to make that process as easy as possible for people. From a system perspective, it's obviously better for us if it's filed electronically, but we're trying to make sure that we're accommodating how people want to file their returns.

Mr. Michael Kram: That's 90% or 92% for the general population. Is it a similar figure for these hard-to-reach populations, or have you noticed an uptick in different ways among these hard-to-reach populations?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I don't have a specific figure on what it is for the hard-to-reach populations. We would be talking about peo-

ple who are hard to reach but who still file. I think that is the premise of your question.

There would be another bunch of people who are hard to reach and whom we haven't been able to get access to, but probably less of a percentage would be in electronic form. Unless Gillian has a specific statistic, I'd have to get back to you with the breakdown that we have.

Mr. Michael Kram: Yes, if you can provide a written submission specific to some of the outreach that you've done and how that would up getting submitted after your outreach activities, I think that would be helpful. If the people we are reaching out to don't have high-speed Internet access, or what have you, that may be worth considering.

I'll follow up. Do you see any role for tax code simplification or tax form simplification that could make it easier for the forms to get filled out and submitted so that we can get them in the door in the first place, so to speak?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Certainly, Mr. Chair, part of our effort is simplifying the process as much as we can, so the person filling it out faces a simple task. We have ways of doing that. Community volunteering is one example—people can go out and actually help you file it. We have "File my Return", where, if you're in a relatively simple tax situation, you can do it by phone. We have a simplified return for indigenous communities—that would be both rural and urban, going back to the previous question. We are doing the best we can. The system works better when it's as simple as possible to navigate.

I think that's where another Auditor General recommendation rings true. How can we, together with ESDC, work to streamline the process for people overall, and for all governments? How can we work with provinces? We have things called "super clinics", because the federal government isn't the only one providing benefits in this space. How can we consolidate our efforts, if we want to make it simpler for people?

The premise of your question.... Is the tax system a simple thing? No. We're doing everything we can to try to make it simple for the people trying to use it.

• (1635)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, including an answer.

Mr. Michael Kram: Could you quickly provide some advice for politicians to make the tax code simpler?

The Chair: Okay, that's not going to be a short answer.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I can't in this forum.

Mr. Michael Kram: That's fair enough.

Mr. Chair, I see I'm just about out of time.

The Chair: You can use your time next time to suggest a tax form. You'll have a whole five minutes.

We'll turn now to Ms. Bradford.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today.

The overwhelming and recurring theme here is “we don't know what we don't know”. That's the whole problem. We have these invisible people we could potentially help, but they're under the radar.

I know that, when they collapsed the long-form census—I was working in a municipality at the time this happened—it was a struggle for municipalities to help identify some of the service needs, because we just didn't have the data.

Ms. MacDonald, could you tell me whether it was impactful on your department when we dropped the collection of more extensive data through the long-form census? Did that limit the kind of information you had access to?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We have an umbrella MOU agreement in place with Stats Canada, and we share and gather information back and forth with them, so I can't specifically say whether that, in and of itself, had a very specific impact on us.

What I can say is that, as reflected in the AG's report, it's really important that we share data with Stats Canada and they share data with us, so we can get at these hard-to-find populations.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Following up on that, I suppose this is a question, then, for the Canada Revenue Agency. I know that, in their opening statement, they indicated there is a lot of information that is personal and identifiable, so they can't share that, of course.

In response to recommendation 1.45 on understanding “the effectiveness of outreach approaches”, the agency responded that it “does not currently collect personal data of those individuals who participate in outreach events.”

Is it possible for the Canada Revenue Agency to collect certain demographic data confidentially, which would enable it to better assess the effectiveness of its awareness strategy without violating the Privacy Act? Is that possible?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Mr. Chair, in response to that question... This is one of the trade-offs we always face as we try to collect information to help us guide future actions. We face privacy laws, as does every other organization. We also have, within the Income Tax Act, section 241, which declares the confidentiality of information we receive. We are not able, at the moment—we'll see how time evolves—to collect information on, for example, the people who

get helped by the CVITP. We can track the effort—how many volunteers there are and how many people came in—but we can't collect that information and use it.

That's part of what we're looking at, together with StatsCan and ESDC: Are there things we can do to better enable us to have that helpful information without breaching privacy or confidentiality under the Income Tax Act? It's an area of continuing work.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you very much.

One program that seems to be greatly underutilized is the Canada learning bond, and it's such a shame. In 2020, only 42% of children under age 21 who were already eligible actually used it. There was an RESP opened in their name, and the federal government deposited money into it, but it wasn't being utilized. This is free money from the government.

Do you have any idea what explains the low take-up rate for the Canada learning bond, Ms. MacDonald?

• (1640)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask my colleague Atiq Rahman to respond to this question.

Mr. Atiq Rahman (Assistant Deputy Minister, Learning Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Deputy.

The explanation is... The member already mentioned that families need to open a registered education savings plan in order to receive the Canada learning bond. The program design is part of a savings incentive scheme. Families need to go to a financial institution and open an account, open an RESP, and then apply for the Canada learning bond. That administrative complexity adds to the reasons for the low uptake.

We have been trying our best, and you are right that the uptake rate has slightly increased over time. However, at this point, given everything that we have done, I think there is a ceiling beyond which we may not be able to reach, given the administrative complexity in applying for the benefit.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I was wondering if it couldn't be done more automatically, like we're doing with the OAS. At age 65, the OAS happens automatically.

Could these accounts not be opened when children are born? The government will pay \$500 for the first year and \$100 in subsequent years. Even if the parents in some of these hard-to-reach areas were financially unable to contribute anything further, at least they'd have that. If there was an automatic process, like when you apply for a birth certificate or whatever, boom, there's your account. It might be something you could—

The Chair: Give a very brief answer, if you have one.

Mr. Atiq Rahman: The legislation currently does not allow that, but it is one of the things that the department continues to look into.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to expand on what we were talking about a few minutes ago, data collection, which the Canada Revenue Agency, Employment and Social Development Canada and Statistics Canada are doing together.

I don't know who could answer my question. It's a simple one: How does Canada's Privacy Act compare to the legislation in other countries that conduct a census similar to Canada's?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: That's not a very simple question. I would ask Mr. Guénette to answer it.

Mr. Maxime Guénette (Assistant Commissioner, Service, Innovation and Integration Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): Thank you for your question, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné. It is quite extensive.

The European legislation is actually a little stricter than Canada's. However, Canada is trying to align itself as much as possible with the new European regulations, which place a lot of emphasis on limiting the use of data to the purposes for which it is collected.

That's the challenge we're facing right now. Some departments have data, but it was collected for a specific purpose and it can't be used by another agency for a different reason.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

Would a more flexible legislative framework not help improve outcomes, particularly when it comes to accessibility for vulnerable individuals?

Mr. Maxime Guénette: Certainly, a more flexible legislative framework might allow for wider usage of personal information by various organizations for different purposes, but that would perhaps run counter to the privacy principles built into Canada's legislative framework.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I do get that you have to strike a balance between protecting people's privacy and putting an end to poverty.

• (1645)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to continue in the vein of Ms. Bradford's questions related to the Canada learning bond. We have some information here related to the deplorable uptake rates for that program. As Ms. Bradford mentioned, it's a seemingly good project for a lot of folks, but there seems to be such little uptake. She asked about the reasons for that, but I want to be a bit more specific on that question in relation to the kinds of folks who are accessing the program.

I'm guessing, largely, that the folks who are accessing this program are accessing it by way of financial institutions. I'm not certain if a member of the CRA or ESDC can mention what the typical access point is for this benefit.

Mr. Atiq Rahman: Could I jump in, Deputy?

Yes, a financial institution has to be an access point. Families who want to apply for a Canada learning bond have to open an RESP, which can only be opened with a financial institution. That has to be an access point.

For the families who have difficulty doing that, we have about 350 community organizations that we work with to help them open RESP accounts with financial institutions. Sometimes we hold events to bring in our partners from CRA, from financial institutions and from provincial governments to help them open an account. Sometimes they need to apply for a social insurance number, and Service Canada will provide a social insurance number on the spot. There would be members of the financial institutions helping them open an account to facilitate that, but it is true that the access point needs to be a financial institution for the RESP.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much for that very clear and concise answer.

For members of this committee, including me, I think one of the most important facts around financial institutions as the access point is knowing that there isn't an alternative. That's a present issue and a massive barrier to folks who want to access this public program. They'd have to go to another institution, like a financial institution, to get that. I think in some ways that's a barrier that I can immediately see here in relation to these numbers.

To the Auditor General, was that something that you folks looked into—

The Chair: I'm afraid you're out of time, but you will have another round.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's an honour for me to be joining the public accounts committee. I grew up during the period of the sponsorship scandal, so the Auditor General was, in my mind, always a celebrity. I know I'm among great people here.

I dug into this audit. It's my first one at this committee. I was very struck by what was in it. It's a study into the ability of the government to get benefits to people who may not be aware of those benefits or may struggle to apply for them, and so forth. The conclusion that I got from it was that we don't really know. We can't really measure. The government has spent a bunch of money in this area, but we can't really figure out if it's working.

It seemed pretty disappointing and borderline scandalous that we recognize that there's this problem, but the government's efforts to address it are not being measured. We have no sense of whether we're progressing towards that objective.

Ms. Hogan, am I correct in my summary of this? Am I missing something? Those were my take-aways from the information you provided us about the lack of measurable results from the government in terms of this money they're spending on trying to do outreach here.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think you used different words than the words we used in our report, but the sentiment is absolutely there. The typical recipe reaches the majority of people. Now, if the goal is to try to reach those who are on the edges, those who are harder to reach, who are reluctant to interact with the government or who might not be aware, it's time to try a different recipe, think differently or act differently.

That's what we were hoping to highlight here, that need to really try to do things differently.

• (1650)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: The very purpose of government benefits should be to reach those who are on the edge, those who are most vulnerable and those who are on the margins. It's a particular problem if we're saying that those who are perhaps in greatest need of government benefits and supports may not be accessing them very much because of that marginalization.

Another thing that struck me about this whole discussion was that the focus from the government seems to be that we need to spend more money going out and talking to people about these benefits, but not the discussion that maybe we need to simplify the structure of these benefits, make more benefits automatic or look at things like automatic tax filing, which exists in other countries.

I'll direct my next questions to the folks at the CRA.

What concrete steps are you taking to try to improve the simplicity of benefits that are available or make this automatic? It seems to me that the trend of government policy is to make things more complex, to say we're going to have an additional benefit for this and an additional benefit for that, rather than talking about large, simpler benefits that are targeted to vulnerable people and that they have more flexibility around.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to respond to that.

I mentioned that we are trying to make things simpler for people. I'll give you a couple of examples of things we have done, and it feeds into your automating principle.

For the child benefit, we do have an automatic benefit application where we can automatically enrol someone at the time of birth,

and that's been very effective. For the Canada workers benefit, we brought in a number of people to be eligible for that automatically.

We are trying to use that automation where we can, but in other cases we've used different routes to try to simplify things for people. We have provided a form for indigenous communities—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Sorry, can I just clarify my question? Some of these things are now becoming automatic for those who file. Some countries have worked to create mechanisms where filing is automatic.

Can you talk about any measures under consideration to follow the British model in making that filing automatic and reducing the paper burden for everybody, but also making these benefits easier to access?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: We do have the auto-fill feature, which will fill in your tax form for you with information that we have. The issue that you run into is that for lots of people there are a number of discretionary elements in the tax system and it's hard for us to fill it in, or we don't have the information. Where we have it, we do have a process for auto-filling certain elements on your tax form.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Even if you have that information—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Genuis. I'm afraid you are out of time but there'll be another round for your side.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here with us today in person and on screen. This is a topic that is very close to my heart. I remember being part of advocacy groups back in the early 2000s around the whole issue of old age security and finding out that thousands of people, if not tens of thousands, were not getting their OAS because they weren't aware of how to apply for it, and so on. I'm very glad to see that there has been auto-enrolment since 2014.

In my work, too, as a social worker in financial autonomy, I'm finding out that behavioural economics—a term that we've heard here today—and let's just say a reluctance to engage with the tax system is very much a reality. This is why I'm very heartened to hear that the community groups are playing a large part in working with the CRA and ESDC in reaching out to folks.

I have a question now for both of the witnesses from those agencies. Do the department and the agency have estimates of the take-up rates for benefits such as the guaranteed income supplement, the Canada child benefit, the Canada workers benefit and the Canada learning bond in various vulnerable populations, such as indigenous people and people with disabilities? Can you provide those estimates to the committee in writing?

I'm asking Commissioner Hamilton and/or Ms. MacDonald.

• (1655)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I can jump in first and say that we'd be happy to provide whatever statistics we have in relation to uptake in terms of our OAS and GIS programs. We do track uptake. Again, the difficulty is that we don't know what we don't know—to the point made earlier in terms of who's not accessing it—but we can certainly give some statistics around our auto-enrolment and so on.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's very good.

Of course I understand this would be a rate that you would have for people who have completed their income tax returns, but we have heard also from Statistics Canada that there is a way of estimating, using linked datasets, the take-up rates for people who do not file tax returns.

Is it possible to get an estimate of those numbers regarding the programs that I mentioned earlier, the GIS and the Canada child benefit?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We could take a look at that and see what we can provide to you, for sure.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Excellent.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I would just echo that. I think Lori set out that we don't know what we don't know. However, we did some work with Statistics Canada and ESDC to try to use that statistical method to estimate take-up rates of the child benefit in indigenous communities. I don't have the numbers at my fingertips, but we can endeavour to get you something in writing after the meeting.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you.

I have a question for Statistics Canada.

We're seeing some very innovative ways of learning about hard-to-reach populations—for example, the street count that happens in a lot of Canadian cities regarding the homeless population. There was one in Montreal just a few weeks ago using trained volunteers. Is this something that is helpful in your work?

Ms. Josée Bégin: Statistics Canada has a large number of surveys that are designed to report on the quality of life of Canadians. We use different kinds of statistical methods to measure those indicators.

We also have some initiatives in terms of disaggregation of data. There's always a challenge with disaggregation of data in terms of respecting the confidentiality and privacy of our respondents. You can think of efforts to go to the lowest geographic level possible or to collect additional information from various population groups.

We've been working with partners because it's part of our mandate to ensure that we provide data and insights that are relevant to our partners, to inform the policy work they do.

I'll conclude here. Thank you.

The Chair: That's perfect. Thank you very much.

That concludes the time.

Turning now to our next round, we're going back to Mr. McCauley.

You have the floor for five minutes, sir.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to follow up on, and perhaps add to, Mrs. Shanahan's request.

I may have missed it, but is the CRA able to provide us with the percentage of those we term as “vulnerable” who are completing their tax returns? Also, can you provide to the committee a breakdown of the numbers, whether we consider as “vulnerable” refugees, first nation or indigenous...? Can you break it down like that?

To the CRA, we were talking about this having been kind of a work in progress for six years. I'm looking at your departmental plan for this year, and it doesn't actually mention this issue of the vulnerable. It talks about the Canada workers benefit and to “ensure Canadians who qualify...” It's not in your departmental plan, but apparently it's been on the radar for six years. Is that just an oversight, or is there just not enough space in your departmental plan to note this?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I would have to go back and review the departmental plan—the corporate business plan I think you're referring to—but it certainly has been a priority.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's your CRA departmental plan, not a corporate plan, but that's fine.

I have a question for you. We talked about its being kind of a continual work in progress and there being almost moving targets with this, and I understand. We hear from StatsCan that it's difficult to identify sometimes. Do we believe we'll ever get to our goal, or will the goalposts keep moving on us? Do you believe that the recommendations put forward by the AG will get this settled satisfactorily, or will it just improve how we're doing it?

• (1700)

Mr. Bob Hamilton: I think we're going to continually be working on this. The nature of the challenge is such that we will make progress towards it.

With regard to an earlier question, when it was said that we don't know where we're going and how we're doing, we are making progress. We can see it through the CVITP. What the Auditor General said—that we need to do a better job of measuring and coordinating our efforts—is true. I believe we're going to continue to see progress, but I think that, by the nature of issue, we will always have more to do.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I understand.

Have we approached the provinces for the sharing of information? I think of Alberta. They are the ones delivering, by far, most of the services to the vulnerable, whether it's through the AISH program or other programs. I realize there are privacy issues and this and that, but are we using the information that the provinces have?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Maybe I'll start on that and then turn it over to Max, who looks after that area.

Definitely, working with the provinces and bringing them in, together with ESDC, because they are players in delivering benefits—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have we been or are we going to?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: We have been.

I'll turn it over to Max. He can describe some of what we are doing.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Please be brief, because I have another question for you.

Mr. Maxime Guénette: Yes, we have been, insofar as we manage some tax information for the provinces. There are a number of tax information-sharing agreements with provinces so that—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: But are we using that tax information to identify the vulnerable in order to deliver services? This is what I'm after. Are we proactively going to Alberta for a list of who's on AISH, the support system, so you can match up to see if they're getting benefits?

That's oversimplifying it, but are we proactively approaching the provinces, seeing as they are the ones who deliver most of the services to the vulnerable?

Mr. Maxime Guénette: There are inherent exchanges of the type of information you described as part of the work we do with provinces.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great.

I have one minute left and one final question. I notice that there's a recommendation to work together between StatsCan, CRA and ESDC. We've seen repeatedly through other departments that when you don't have a lead department, it becomes three or two or four departments pointing at each other when it comes to accountability.

Which is the lead agency or lead department on this so that we actually have accountability and someone pushing this, as opposed to, "Well, ESDC is not here today—can't answer for you"? You can't run things by committee. That's basically what I'm saying.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Mr. Chair, maybe I'll take a stab at that.

I think it truly is a joint effort between us and ESDC. There are certain programs that ESDC is responsible for—you mentioned OAS and GIS—and certain ones that we are, but we share the same challenge. I don't think it's a problem that we have to do it in partnership. We both feel accountable for this.

To your point about the departmental plan, this has been in the minister's priority mandate letter for years, and it is a priority for us, to make efforts to get access to benefits for youth, newcomers and vulnerable Canadians. So it's there as a priority—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. McCauley, you had asked for some information. I just wanted to make sure you got a response on that. That was to the CRA, wasn't it?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Yes.

The Chair: I just wanted to make sure that the CRA heard that request from Mr. McCauley for some information and that it was acknowledged.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Yes. We will come back with—

The Chair: Thank you. I appreciate it. I just wanted to double-check that.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: We'll want to check the text of it, on whether it was looking for information on people who have filed their returns or not.

Mr. Chair, there was a previous question on whether we have done any work with indigenous communities and StatsCan on the—

The Chair: I'm going to stop you there. It's not that we're not interested—I know that several members will be—but I'm going to leave the questioning to the members. I do appreciate your enthusiasm. Should you feel there's more to be said that you didn't get a chance to say, please send it off to the committee. I just need to be careful that I don't abuse my time and take time away from the members.

We'll turn now to Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for five minutes.

• (1705)

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Hamilton, would you like to finish your point, just briefly?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Okay. I'll be very quick.

I said that we would get back with some estimates from the work we did with StatsCan. It's actually in the Auditor General's report. I was just looking at it here: The take-up rate in indigenous communities was lower than among the population in general, at 79% versus 97%. However, the point was made that it used old census data. We're now updating some of that work to use new census data.

I just wanted to add that for the committee members.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

I've reset your clock as well. Go ahead.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you.

Madame Bégin, in your opening statement, you said, "Through data integration of administrative data with other data holdings of StatCan, we can describe the numbers of recipients belonging to particular age, sex, racialized, indigenous identity, or another population or at-risk group."

In my riding of Scarborough—Agincourt, and I'm sure in many ridings around the country, there are large immigrant populations whose first language is neither English nor French. I know that this population is definitely hard to reach because of the language barriers and other factors that make it more difficult for them to engage in things like filing taxes or filling out census forms. Not all of these people are newcomers.

Do you have a special way to identify people in this particular at-risk group?

Ms. Josée Bégin: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question.

Depending on the objective of the study or the research we do, one source for us would be to look at the census data, which collects lots of information around language spoken at home. Again, depending on the objective, and the integration of data, we maybe could derive at-risk populations. That's one example.

I do want to say that we collect a large number of surveys. We also have access to administrative data, whether it's from ESDC, CRA or the provinces and the territories. On a regular basis, we do integration of data because the power of data is there when you combine it. We do that respecting confidentiality and the privacy of the information. We also do that through a secure environment, and we use different statistical methods to combine the information.

Ms. Jean Yip: Has the work of the tax research advisory group been helpful on this front?

Ms. Josée Bégin: As I said in my opening remarks, the tax research advisory group has been very helpful. We have looked at various initiatives so far. It has been a very active group, and I am very confident that we will be able to support ESDC and CRA with this tax research advisory group.

Ms. Jean Yip: My next question is directed to Ms. MacDonald. It's similar to the question that I just asked Madame Bégin.

Have you had any success in identifying and targeting outreach to people who, as I mentioned, are immigrants whose first language is neither English nor French and who have other barriers such as digital literacy or distrust of government?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Absolutely, for sure. We're actually working very closely with IRCC right now. We're working with them on their newcomer program, as an example, to meet with individuals, newcomers, as soon as they come to Canada, so that we can attach them to things like social insurance numbers, which a newcomer needs to access essentially any services or benefits.

We're doing work with IRCC, but we also use outreach groups. We have hundreds of partners in the community. As an example, we hold super clinics to support, because we don't know where these individuals are. We actually use groups that they gravitate towards as a way to pivot to them, to go to them, versus waiting for them to come to us, in order to help in terms of being able to connect them to services.

We work with provinces and territories as well—to the question earlier—to help them in sharing information and data with respect to newcomers coming to Canada and people who have been in Canada for a while but have never been able to access services.

• (1710)

The Chair: That really is all of your time, Ms. Yip. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My series of questions is for you, Madam Auditor General.

In your report, you state that you found that, overall, the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada have not done enough to help hard-to-reach populations. In addition, you say you found that no tangible progress has yet been made in collecting, measuring or analyzing data on benefit take-up.

Also, we know that Canada has set a goal to cut poverty in half by 2030. Do you feel that the government is doing enough in its efforts to reduce poverty?

Ms. Karen Hogan: In our reports, we looked at four benefits designed to reduce poverty.

As I mentioned, the usual process helps reach many people. However, if we truly want to reach those individuals who are harder to contact, we need to tweak the approach or target it so we can overcome the barriers we face.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Will the government be able to meet its poverty reduction goals by 2030?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a big question.

I know that the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development said in one of his reports that the government was on track with poverty reduction. This goal is a good example of an area where we could bring about significant change if we target the barriers preventing us from reaching those who need help.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: You say there hasn't yet been enough tangible progress. When it comes down to it, we may be on the right track, but that doesn't necessarily mean we'll meet our objectives, isn't that right?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's very hard to answer that. We're not gathering any data to find out if things are changing right now. The other witnesses said it this morning as well: we can list all the initiatives that have been undertaken, but we're unable to clearly demonstrate that the goal is going to be achieved.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to finish up that last portion, related to the barriers at financial institutions, to get the Auditor General's comments on record.

We've heard, of course, from some of the folks at CRA and ES-DC. Thank you for that contribution. I think it was a really clear answer for me to know that you must do that work within a financial institution before you access the Canada learning bond, which is evidence as to why there's a significant barrier.

It leads me to think of the people who can't access financial institutions. We saw in Vancouver, just two years ago, a high-profile case in the news of discrimination at financial institutions, bodies outside our regulation. There was a 12-year-old girl with her indigenous grandfather, and she was going to open a bank account for the first time. She is still traumatized today. What happened is that the bank called the cops, and these two people were removed from the financial institution, and that young, 12-year-old girl was arrested for no purpose. That is a reality in Canada today at our financial institutions. When I talk about the need to understand barriers, that's a real thing happening in Canada. They are a real family we know of in Vancouver, and it's a real issue.

When we're looking at these barriers, in particular to the Canada learning bond, is it appropriate to be utilizing oftentimes private sector corporations to do the vetting for us?

• (1715)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I don't believe that the private institutions are doing the vetting for the federal government. They are the gateway to gain access to the benefits. I think that's why we talked about really needing to have an integrated approach to help those who are hard to reach.

Other witnesses have mentioned how complex it is to gain access to any of these benefits. When individuals have to go to many places, institutions they may not trust, that is a barrier, so how are you doing it differently to try to reduce that? It's a big challenge to get this hard-to-reach group.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thanks so much, Auditor General.

That leads me to a question about the effectiveness of Canadian programs and how we get that support to folks.

How do we get to that point? I see that these barriers are quite significant, but they are also matched with significant investments. Without diving too far into policy, simpler, larger benefits were mentioned by my colleague from the Conservative bench. I really enjoyed that idea, because a guaranteed level of basic income is one of those larger benefits. We can eliminate many of these patchwork programs and institute an income-based program that assists people.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Desjarlais.

Turning now to MP Kram, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Kram: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to continue with the Auditor General for my next round of questions.

Page 4 of the report reads, "We estimated that the department and agency collectively spent more than \$18 million in the 2020-21 fiscal year on targeted outreach activities."

In your opinion, did the taxpayers get good value for their money?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think our report highlights that the department is unable to tell us if good value for money was achieved. They couldn't demonstrate that their initiatives resulted in an increase in uptake and those hard-to-reach people accessing benefits.

Mr. Michael Kram: That's pretty much what it says on page 11, a bit further on: "The agency and department did not know whether most of their targeted outreach activities had helped to increase benefit take-up rates for hard-to-reach populations."

Why does there seem to be this lack of measurement or lack of initiative to measure their activities from the beginning of the program?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think that's a great question to ask the departments you have here.

I think we've heard some reasons, some of the privacy concerns and some of the difficulty of knowing, when it's a third party that is the referral source, whether or not the outcome of a tax return filed and a benefit sent is there.

Mr. Michael Kram: Okay, so maybe I will pose the same question to the representatives from the departments.

Why does there seem to be this lack of measurement from the beginning, and why does it seem to be an afterthought or not done at all?

The Chair: Do you want to name which department will go first?

Mr. Michael Kram: We will go around. Let's start with the CRA.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think we've talked about some of the challenges there in terms of privacy and confidentiality, where we can target a specific initiative to a particular individual. However, it goes too far, I think, to say that we don't have any sense of the success we're having with these outreach activities.

I will go back to a point that we talked about earlier—trust, which can sometimes take a bit of time to build. As we do outreach into the communities, whether that's through the community volunteer program or our own officers, we can see the tangible benefits of what we're providing to the people.

Can we document that it actually means somebody filed their return and got their benefit? We know that in some cases it does, but we don't have the good aggregate statistics. That's something we're trying to work on. However, it does bump up against privacy concerns, and I think that's just a challenge we are going to have.

I think it goes too far to say that we don't have any idea that these aren't doing good. My prescription would not be to stop doing them because we can't measure them accurately, but to try to find ways to better measure them within the constraints we have.

The Chair: To Employment and Social Development, do you have any answer to Mr. Kram's question?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thanks so much.

I will just build on Bob's response. All of the issues he identified that we struggle with in terms of barriers we have in terms of tracking are true. At the same time, one thing that the Auditor General identified, and that we all agree with, is that we need to work more collectively in terms of tracking the same information, and sharing that information and measuring it the same way. One of the obstacles we have is that we measure and track differently.

Our focus has been on the actual outreach portion of it, to get out there and find those people and figure out how we get in touch with them in non-traditional ways. That has been our focus. This conversation and the audit help us in terms of what that means with respect to actual outcomes.

I agree with Bob. We do have outcomes. We have some very good examples of where we see the impact, whether that's providing virtual services and virtual clinics online or an increase in uptake in the child care benefit. The fact that it can't be exactly attributed to that outreach initiative is something we need to work on. However, overall, we're seeing positive results in terms of reaching those hard-to-reach populations, and we will continue to evolve our methodologies over the course of the coming months.

• (1720)

Mr. Michael Kram: Don't you have, though, a central database to keep track of the new applications that come in after you visit a particular region or community?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes, for sure we do. We don't track them by individuals, but I will give you an example.

In 2021-22, we did 5,605 engagements with community partners working with the vulnerable populations. We went to 579 indigenous communities. We served them through virtual activities and outreach support centres. That resulted in over 30,000 services being provided.

Now, we don't identify exactly what that service is—

The Chair: I appreciate that. I'm going to have to end the questioning there.

Our last member is Mr. Fragiskatos.

You have the floor for five minutes. I don't know if you want to continue this. These numbers sounded interesting, but it is your time.

It's over to you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

The question I want to put is to ESDC, on the reaching all Canadians initiative. What insights have been gained there that could help our understanding of the factors that contribute to hard-to-reach populations having such a difficult time getting access to key benefits and other supports? Are there lessons you can share with us specifically from that initiative?

Again, that goes to ESDC.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes, for sure.

One of the things we've struggled with, as I said previously, is that because they're an unknown population, they don't respond to what we traditionally do as government, whether that's mail-outs, phone calls out, a stagnant Service Canada centre or government department. We have to rethink how we connect with them.

The example I would give you is from during the pandemic. When they were trying to give people vaccinations, one of the things they discovered, particularly in urban centres, was that a number of people were shut-in. A number of people over the age of 65 were not coming out and were not in care. We went to third party organizations and people working directly with seniors to get them to access those people who were shut-in. As a result, we were able to put people on GIS and OAS and back-pay them with money.

That lesson learned is that we can't do things in very traditional government ways. We need to access the services that are already on the ground doing a lot of this work and that know those people.

We obviously have other lessons learned, as well, in terms of building relationships with communities, such as not going into a community and dropping off papers. We have to build those relationships, and then connect with the individuals in those communities and support groups so that we can go back. We did that with CRA. We helped people fill out their short-form tax forms, so that we could get people on child care benefits. Another lesson learned is to help them fill out the forms. It's not enough.... They're complicated forms, so we help them fill out the forms.

Finally, I would say that we had to change the literacy on our websites. We were putting our pages at a university one level. We've reduced it now, so that on average, as it is benchmarked in a number of other countries, it's at grade eight.

Those kinds of things, like lessons learned in understanding pain points in the communities and with these individuals, help us think about how we get them the services they are qualified for.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

My final question goes to Commissioner Hamilton.

Commissioner, in the introductory remarks you made to the committee today, you made reference to a detailed action plan that you have submitted to the committee. I think it's worth asking you specifically, because you talked about key points there that would help to bring to life the recommendations that were put forward by the Auditor General's office and that the CRA has agreed to.

Could you point to which key points those would be?

● (1725)

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Certainly, Mr. Chair. I'm happy to respond to that.

When I look at our action plan, the first recommendation is that we should establish a joint effort and be more coordinated with ES-DC and Stats Canada to find ways to better report on what we're doing and improve the measures. We've talked about that extensively during this meeting.

We detailed a timeline that would see us form the governance for the ongoing participation of the three agencies. That has been done. We're going to keep working on that to look at better ways to update our data and to use different tools to try to get at the data we really need, but work together as three departments and agencies on that.

The other thing we've talked about, which is another recommendation, is how we get a better sense of what the results are, and better measures and better performance indicators. What are we striving to achieve, and can we measure that better than we are now, given some of the constraints that we've talked about in terms of privacy and confidentiality? We're working together on that to see what we can do together to come up with better key performance indicators that will be meaningful.

I would agree with what Lori said. When we do the outreach into communities, it may not be a one-to-one efficiency. We go in, we build trust, we get relationships and then the benefits start to come. Sometimes it takes a bit of time and effort to build that, because you can have some resistance in those communities.

We know there are benefits. How do we do a better job together of constructing good measures that tell us what we want to achieve and what success looks like, and then report on that?

The final thing is how we do a better job of presenting a seamless experience for vulnerable, hard-to-reach people. There are many benefits out there. We have some from ESDC, some from us, some from other departments and some from provincial governments, and we need to try to find a way to make that all make better sense to the people who are applying for them and who are eligible for them. I think that's the other key part of our action plan, that we put—

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm afraid the time is all out. We went a little over there, but I wanted to hear the full answer to that.

I want to thank all our witnesses for appearing today, both virtually and in person. It's good to see you. I know the auditor and her team will be back here very soon.

To our witnesses online, thank you for sharing your time with us today. We all appreciate it. We look forward to seeing you at some point down the road as well.

I'm going to keep the committee members here for a few minutes just for some announcements, but everyone else is excused. I'm going to suspend for 30 or 40 seconds, so if members could hold their seats, I will have them out of here by the half hour. Thank you.

● (1725)

(Pause)

● (1725)

The Chair: We will resume.

Committee members, very briefly, I had to make a change to the calendar. This is hydrogen, which I know is Mr. Dong's priority, and it will remain that, but unfortunately the deputy ministers were not available and the analysts recommended that we defer until they are. They're actually off to the COP meeting, so they have a reasonable excuse to not be available. In place, for next Friday, November 4, I've scheduled in systemic barriers in the Correctional Service of Canada.

Mr. Desjarlais might wonder why not the marine study, and that is because I have a similar challenge with the environment commissioner not being here for that either, because he's off to COP. I'm aware of priorities that I hear from members.

That's a change. We're going to try to get the hydrogen potential scheduled for November 18. I wanted to bring that to your attention.

As well, I'm in the process of coordinating our meeting with Ms. Hogan, and I think I'm going to aim for a Monday evening outside committee hours, but I'll be in touch with you. Wednesdays here are difficult because of caucus. Thursdays people tend to travel, and even Tuesdays, so my preference is a Monday evening meeting with her, but I will coordinate with you.

● (1730)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I have a three-hour meeting. Is there another time?

The Chair: What time is your meeting?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: It's 6:30 to 9:30.

The Chair: Okay. I'll send an email out to everyone and I'll get some times sent. Thank you.

If there are no other issues, I will end the meeting. I just wanted to bring that up. We will have time. We will be discussing committee business again very soon.

I declare the meeting adjourned.

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