

**Runa Das, Royal Roads University**

**Title:** Qualifying the lived experience of energy poverty in Toronto, Canada

**Abstract:** This paper examines the lived experience of energy poverty in Canada's largest city, Toronto, at a time when the country is implementing policies to transition to a low-carbon economy. According to a widely used definition, people suffer from energy poverty if they have to spend more than 10 percent of their income to meet their basic energy needs. Although energy poverty has not been studied in-depth in Canada, the following estimates provide some context on household spending on energy expenditures (i.e., costs for electricity, natural gas, heating oil, propane for heating and cooking, wood, and other fuels), based on the first author's analysis of the 2016 Survey of Household Spending. With respect to Ontario, and where Toronto is located, we estimate approximately 8.5 percent of households are spending more than 10% of their before-tax income on energy expenditures. When housing costs are accounted for, and therefore providing a better estimate of disposable income, approximately 11% of Ontario households are energy poor. In addition, in 2015, average household income in Ontario was estimated to be approximately \$96,000 but, for households spending more than 10% of their household income on energy expenditures, average household income was estimated to be approximately \$27,000. Examination of energy expenditures alone however cannot reveal the full extent of energy poverty and the particular experiences faced by energy poor households. In this paper we explore energy poverty with in-depth interviews conducted with low-income Torontonians. Participants discussed the importance of energy and energy services to their household; what consequences energy prices have on all aspects of their lives (e.g., their health, their ability to buy food and keep their homes warm, their social, educational, and professional opportunities); challenges they experienced with respect to the use and purchase of energy services; issues with the quality of their homes; strategies for handling ongoing challenges (e.g., cutting back on food, spending, budgeting); and the availability and accessibility of programs for people having trouble meeting their energy needs. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to: describe and humanize the phenomenon of energy poverty; understand types of vulnerabilities associated with energy poverty, such as socio-demographics, disabilities, health, low-incomes, building conditions; and understand the coping strategies being used by those experiencing the phenomenon. As such, this paper provides critical knowledge on the social dimensions of low carbon energy transitions for facilitating equitable and coherent policy development within climate change and energy poverty frameworks.