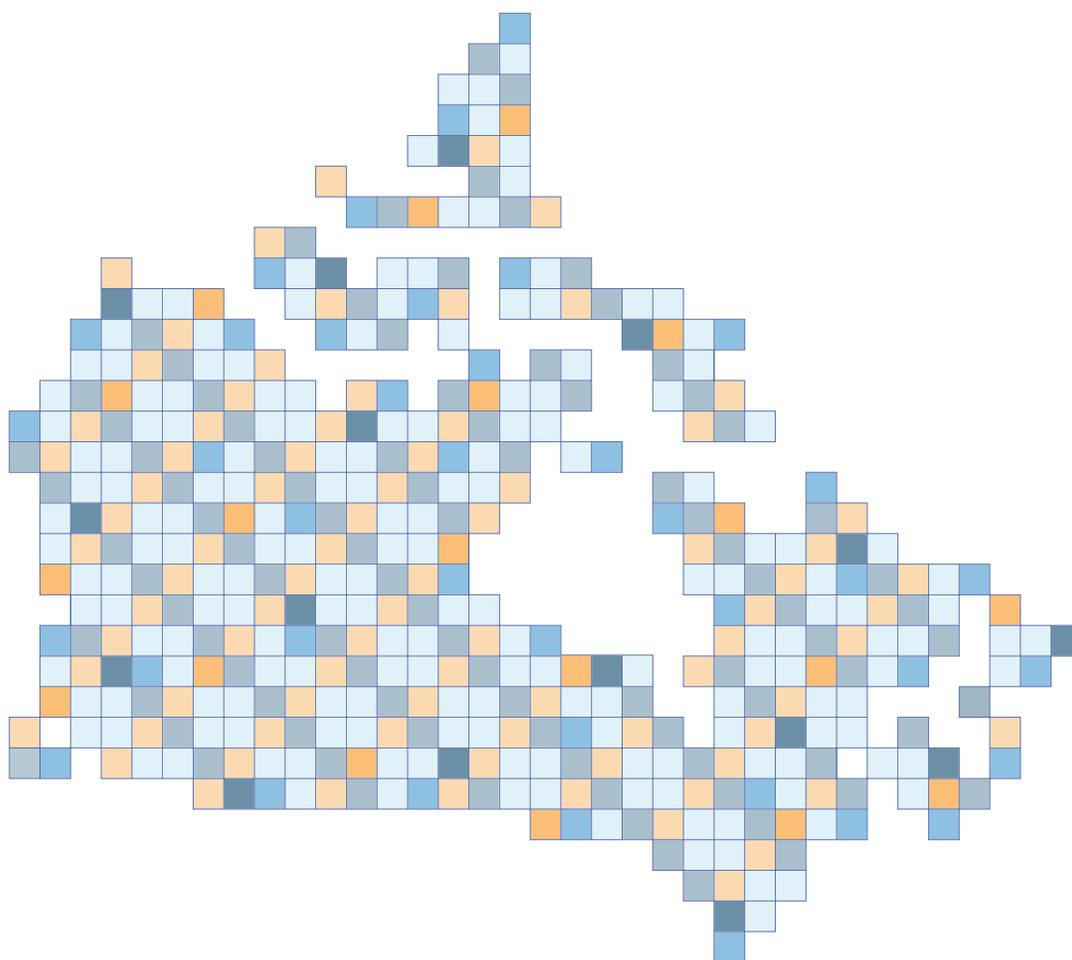


British Columbia Poverty Progress Profile



2016



CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY
CANADA SANS PAUVRETÉ

Poverty is a violation of human rights.

OVERVIEW

Over the past seventeen years, British Columbia (BC) has held one of the highest rates of poverty in Canada.¹ Despite this, BC is the only province or territory that has not made a commitment to create an anti-poverty strategy. The cost of poverty in BC is estimated at \$8-9 billion per year — as opposed to the estimated \$3-4 billion necessary to put a provincial poverty plan in place.²

Poverty in BC is a confluence of low wages and stagnant welfare rates alongside a soaring cost of living. Many people living in poverty are employed, but their earnings are not enough to stay above the poverty line.³ Housing and childcare are two of the largest costs for BC families living in poverty.⁴ Vancouver's average monthly rent prices are the highest in the country; a two-bedroom unit averages \$1,368 per month, well above social assistance rates.⁵

Poverty continues to be most prominent in marginalized populations, including Indigenous peoples, persons who identify as LGBTQ2, individuals with disabilities, recent immigrants and refugees, single mother households, and single senior women.⁶

Action on the Ground

The BC Government has yet to implement an anti-poverty plan or legislation. In 2015, a private member's bill calling for a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy, *The Poverty Reduction and Economic Inclusion Act*, was introduced to the legislature by the Official Opposition for the fourth time.⁷ The bill did not receive a second reading despite strong support.

In 2012, the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) began a pilot project to develop Community Poverty Reduction Plans in seven communities in BC.⁸ However, in October 2015, the UBCM (as well as one of the communities, Prince George) pulled out of the project and reverted back to advocating for a provincial anti-poverty strategy.⁹ The government has hosted a second Community Poverty Reduction Strategies Forum in order to bring community stakeholders together. Since this approach has been initiated, there have only been 99 families in seven municipalities who have directly benefitted from the resulting program.¹⁰

It has been estimated that a third of children experiencing poverty in BC live with at least one working parent. In 2014, the average single parent in BC making minimum wage and working full-time makes \$18,655 per year. This is extremely low when compared to the estimated poverty line for a single parent with one child of \$28,192 per year.¹¹

There is widespread public support in BC for raising the minimum wage.¹² In November 2014, the BC Federation of Labour launched the Fight for \$15 campaign and continues to work with a coalition of allied organizations to encourage the provincial government to implement a \$15 per hour minimum wage.¹³ The Premier

has expressed opposition to implementing the \$15 wage because of its negative impact on small businesses; however, critics of that position, including Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, argue that minimum wage hikes do not drastically affect businesses but do make significant differences for people living in poverty.¹⁴

A Model Poverty Reduction Plan for BC

The Government of BC has not created its own poverty reduction plan. Therefore, this section focuses on the plan first drafted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives¹⁵ and adopted by the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (BCPRC), a broad-based network of over 400 organizations.¹⁶

Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed

- Increase income assistance and disability benefit rates significantly.
- Ensure income support is accessible to those in need by removing arbitrary barriers.

Improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce

- Increase minimum wage to \$15 per hour; restore the number of employment standards officers.
- Increase proactive enforcement of the *Employment Standards Act* and eliminate the “self-help” kit, so that workers can more readily report workplace violations and access the earnings to which they are entitled.

Address the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty

- Establish anti-poverty initiatives that recognize those vulnerable to, and constantly living with, high poverty rates. This includes: Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ2, persons with disabilities, recent immigrants and refugees, single mothers, and single senior women.

Implement initiatives to address homelessness and the lack of affordable housing

- Re-commit to building thousands of new units of social housing per year (not including conversions, rental subsidies, or shelter spaces).
- Increase number of supportive housing for those with mental health challenges or addictions.

Provide universal publicly-funded childcare

- Provide a comprehensive early learning and childcare program including necessities for children with special needs.
- Adopt the plan for \$10 per day childcare published by the Coalition of Childcare Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC.

Provide support for training and education

- Reduce tuition fees by 50% and increase the availability of post-secondary grants for low-income students.
- Allow welfare recipients to attend post-secondary education and get

- apprenticeships.
- Adequately fund K-12 education to mitigate inequalities and to ensure adequate library, special needs, and ESL programs.

Promote the health of all British Columbians

- Improve and expand fundamental health services and community healthcare which includes home care, home support, assisted living, long-term care, and community mental health services.¹⁷

MEASURING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

Statistical Indicators of Poverty (unofficial measurement tools)[†]

	LICO Low-Income Cut-off After-tax ¹⁸	LIM Low-Income Measure After Tax ¹⁹	MBM Market Basket Measure ²⁰	Food Bank Usage ²¹	Social Assistance** Recipients ²²	Minimum Wage ²³
2005	547,000, 13.2%	694,880	656,000, 15.8%	75,413, 1.8%	148,475	\$8.00
2009	538,000, 12.5%	708,350	698,000, 16.2%	89,886, 2.0%	146,902	\$8.00
2010	515,000, 11.8%	723,370	708,000, 16.2%	94,359, 2.1%	170,032	\$8.00
2011	509,000, 11.6%	714,820	755,000, 17.2%	90,193, 2.0%	178,921	\$9.50
2012	459,000, 10.4%	695,100	635,000, 14.3%	94,966, 2.1%	181,229	\$10.25
2013	437,000, 9.8%	714,960	581,000, 13.0%	94,002, 2.1%	177,898	\$10.25
2014	432,000, 9.6%	710,160	595,000, 13.2%	97,369, 2.1%	176,944	\$10.25
2015	*	*	*	100,086, 2.1%	175,164	\$10.45
2016	*	*	*	103,464, 2.2%	*	\$10.85

[†] The LICO, LIM and MBM rates in this chart should be compared vertically to understand trends in poverty from year-to-year. As there is no official low-income threshold, and data is calculated differently based on a variety of factors, these rates are not comparable horizontally

* Data not available

** "Social Assistance" refers to the total number of people assisted by all Social Assistance programs in the province. The Social Assistance rates do not include individuals receiving support who are also living on a First Nations Reserve. This lowers the rates significantly.²⁴

Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

Human Rights: The BCPRC has recognized the existence of poverty in BC as a human rights violation and officially adopted a human rights framework for poverty reduction in December 2014.²⁵ The provincial government has not taken this approach in its policy measures.

Income and Employment Support: Income assistance and support for the poorest populations in BC are inadequate and inaccessible to those in need. Currently, the welfare rate, which has been frozen since 2007,²⁶ is \$610 per month for a single employable person — far less than the average rent for a bachelor suite in BC. The rates for on-reserve Indigenous peoples are even worse; a single

employable person receives merely \$235 per month. This rate has not been changed since 1994.²⁷

There have been some recent successes regarding income assistance. As of September 2015, single parents receiving child-support payments from former partners do not experience income assistance reductions.²⁸ The 2015 budget officially announced an end to the clawback of child support from single parents on income and disability assistance.²⁹ This has led to the return of approximately \$13 million to 3,200 families across the province, reportedly benefitting 5,400 children.³⁰

Disability benefits were increased by \$77 per month in September 2016, which critics have argued is an inadequate improvement on the already low rates of \$906. Further, for those who receive a disability pension the annual bus-pass fee is increasing from \$45 to \$669. This results in an actual increase of \$255 annually, not the \$924 highlighted by the monthly increase.³¹

In September 2016, the minimum wage increased from \$10.45 to \$10.85 per hour and will increase to \$11.25 in September 2017.³² However, the minor increases do not bring individuals up to even the lowest living wage in province, which is \$16.28 per hour in the Fraser Valley. For those living in Vancouver, the living wage is estimated to be much higher at \$20.64 per hour.³³

Housing: The benchmark price for purchasing residential properties rose to over \$800,000 in Metro Vancouver in 2016.³⁴ To afford an average mortgage in the area, the household income needs to be \$123,000.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, 1 out of 5 residents of Metro Vancouver are dissatisfied with the housing systems.³⁶

In June 2016, Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson proposed a new vacancy tax to be introduced in 2017. In June, the city's rental vacancy rate was 0.6% and an estimated 10,800 homes and condos were empty. The new vacancy tax is expected to increase rental housing availability in the city.

The latest agreement between the federal and provincial governments for affordable housing has been renewed until 2019. This made it possible to develop several new supportive housing projects, including 110 units in Vancouver.³⁷ Additionally, Mayor Robertson made an announcement in August 2016 that 400 new units worth \$50 million would be constructed in city-owned sites.³⁸

The provincial government also prides itself on its *Rental Assistance Program* (RAP), which provides support to low-income families for housing costs. If the family makes under \$35,000 per year, the government will provide a monthly benefit to help with rental costs. However, individuals receiving income assistance are not eligible for RAP funding.

Municipal governments continue to appeal to the provincial government to fund increased social and affordable housing in light of the "high-cost housing crisis" in BC.³⁹ An estimated 116,000 people were still either homeless or living in insecure housing conditions in BC in 2014.⁴⁰ A point-in-time count conducted in March 2016

revealed 1,847 individuals were visibly homeless, living 'rough' on the street or in shelters in Vancouver. Despite the city's 2011 commitment to end street homelessness by 2015⁴¹, the 2016 point-in-time count represents a 6% increase in the visible homeless population since 2015.⁴² First Nations on-reserve statistics for the marginally housed are not included in the provincial data, which significantly downplays the severity.⁴³

A lack of affordable housing options has led to 'tent city' encampments that are host to hundreds of individuals experiencing homelessness. These encampments have surfaced in communities including Abbotsford, Victoria and Vancouver – and are indicative of the affordable housing crisis in the province.

Education: A recent inquiry revealed that BC university students are graduating with roughly \$35,000 of student debt which is \$10,000 higher than the national average. Indeed, post-secondary education in the province is so expensive that many students are now turning to food banks to survive.⁴⁴ This is hardly surprising considering that BC offers the lowest levels of non-loan student aid in Canada.⁴⁵ Advocates call for a reduction in tuition fees by 50% to allow more low-income students to obtain post-secondary education.⁴⁶

Early Childhood Education and Care: Childcare is the second-largest family expense after housing. In fact, Vancouver has the second highest childcare cost of any major city in Canada at approximately \$1,325 a month for toddlers.⁴⁷ There is a widespread call for the adoption of a "\$10 A Day" plan for regulated, safe childcare modelled after Québec's system. Under the current system, less than 20% of BC children have a space in regulated childcare and the waitlists are quite long. Unsurprisingly, the costs burden an estimated 81% of families. The provincial government contributes the second-lowest amount in Canada per regulated space – \$2,207 annually while the Canadian average is \$4,070.⁴⁸

Healthcare: Poverty is directly linked to poor health and, by extension, costs to the healthcare system. Estimates place this cost in BC to be up to \$1.2 billion a year.⁴⁹ In order to tackle these mounting costs, healthcare spending has been increased in the 2016 budget by 3% to \$1.6 billion.⁵⁰ A 2012 study published in the Canadian Medical Association showed that people in BC were the least able to afford prescription drugs in Canada.⁵¹ The provincial government joined a Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance that focuses on bulk buying prescription drugs to keep costs down.⁵² However, the BC Government has made further reductions to prescription coverage in 2016 making it difficult for low-income individuals to afford critical medications.⁵³

Rural British Columbians face a shortage of family physicians, hospital and emergency room closures, and substandard care at aging hospitals. They are also more likely to travel long distances to urban centres for medical care and experience long ambulance wait times.⁵⁴ The costs associated with travel to urban areas for medical care are especially burdensome for those living in poverty.

Inequality: BC has among the highest income inequality in Canada; tax rebates for the top 1% of households in BC have returned an average of \$41,000 per year

since 2001. By contrast, minimum wage earners make roughly \$20,000 per year.⁵⁵ The richest 10% of BC families control 56% of the province's wealth, compared to the national average of 48%. This is compounded by the fact that BC has the worst record of housing affordability in Canada.

Food insecurity: In 2016, more than 103,000 people visited food banks in a month, 32.2% of which were children. This represents a total usage increase of 32.5% since 2008.⁵⁶ A recent report from PROOF revealed that 12.7% of BC households experience food insecurity.⁵⁷

Views From Outside the BC Government

The lack of governmental initiatives has led to the formation of several coalitions in the non-governmental sector to address the growing poverty issues in BC. The BCPRC has taken a leading role in advocating for a provincial strategy with a focus on a comprehensive plan with legislated targets and timelines.⁵⁸ The BCPRC also disseminates categorical information to highlight the effects and/or causes of poverty within the province. One foundational contributor to poverty in BC is extensive income inequality. The BCPRC is very clear in explaining the consequences which stem from these determinants. Those living in poverty suffer mental and physical health ailments at much higher rates and are often criminalized by an oppressive justice system.⁵⁹

Pivot Legal Society focuses on challenging current and/or future legislation through a human rights lens to break down systemic barriers for the most marginalized groups in the province and Canada as a whole. Pivot's work ranges from accountable policing measures for the benefit of poverty-stricken groups in Canada, to a federal housing strategy to mitigate the cost and suffering of homelessness.⁶⁰ In February 2016, both Pivot and the BCPRC participated in the review of Canada by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, with concerns about Canada's failure to adhere to a human rights framework in policy implementation and the need for a rights-based national housing strategy, respectively.

Resources created by anti-poverty groups in the province provide critical guidelines for BC policy makers. For example, First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition publishes annual report cards on child poverty in BC and often calls for the provincial government to make reducing child poverty a real priority.⁶¹ Additionally, the Coalition of Childcare Advocates of BC created the \$10 per day model childcare plan for safe, affordable, and regulated childcare across the province.⁶²

Adequate housing for low-income individuals in the province is nearly impossible to attain — in particular in major cities like Vancouver. Civil society organizations have been vocal about the lack of intervention by the government to improve the housing situation, especially with regard to rental supply and maintenance of single room occupancy units — often lived in by people in poverty. In response to the affordable housing crisis and the growing rates of homelessness in the province, the Alliance Against Displacement is calling for 10,000 social housing units to be built a year until homelessness is solved.⁶³ The Alliance has also been critical of efforts by the city of Burnaby to evict individuals living in affordable housing units because

condominiums are being constructed. These evictions, called 'demovictions', have been met with significant push-back from homeless individuals who have no other housing options.⁶⁴

Groups such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Federation of Post Secondary Educators and BCPRC have also raised serious concerns about adequate funding for education initiatives, in particular those efforts for children in low-income households. In collaboration with a number of other groups in the coalition, the BCPRC launched the #RethinkEducation campaign. Among the group's recommendations are for the BC government to "[a]dequately fund K-12 education to mitigate inequalities and to ensure adequate library, special needs and ESL programs."⁶⁵

THE BOTTOM LINE

BC is the only province or territory without a poverty reduction strategy, despite a vocal non-governmental sector that has been calling for change. BC has high income inequality, low minimum wages and social assistance supports, and long waitlists for childcare, health, and housing services. The housing market offers very few options for people living in poverty. Poverty in BC is rampant, and with a provincial election around the corner in 2017, the high rates of homelessness, inequality, food insecurity, and poverty will likely be a significant issue for voters.

FOR MORE INFORMATION



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