

Alberta's Social Issues Magazine

# FIRST READING

Volume 16 Number 2, June 1998



Measuring Social Health



e d m o n t o n

SOCIAL PLANNING

c o u n c i l

First Reading is published four times a year by the Edmonton Social Planning Council. The Council is an independent, not-for-profit organization, whose activities include social research, policy analysis and advocacy.

We welcome new members, and the opinions and suggestions of our current members. All membership requests or magazine contributions can be forwarded to:

Edmonton Social Planning Council
Suite 41, 9912-106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 1C5
Tel. 403.423.2031 Fax 403 425.6244
e-mail>edmspc@compusmart.ab.ca
Homepage>http://www.compusmart.ab.ca/espc

We reserve the right to edit all contributions.

Managing Editor: Brian Bechtel

Editor: Sheila Hallett-Kushniruk

Contributors: Jean Lafrance, Dougal MacDonald, Mark Anielski, Brian Bechtel, Brenda Caston, Noel Keough, Steven A. Friedenthal, Nicole Martel, Suzette C. Chan, Jason Brown, Isabel Marangoni, Winnipeg Social Planning Council, Duff Conacher and Heather Rennebohm.

Cover Photo: Sheila Hallett-Kushniruk

Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

Contents may be reprinted or broadcast without permission of the Council, providing full credit is given and a copy of the publication or broadcast is forwarded to the Council.

Please report any address changes to our office.
Copyright © 1998 by the ESPC

Table listing articles such as 'Reflecting on Standards', 'Survey Results From the Frontline', 'Is Alberta Measuring Up?', etc., with corresponding page numbers.

Vision

A community where all people have a commitment social justice and shared responsibility as the foundation for community well-being.

Mission

Responding to the changing political and social environment, the

# T

The development of quality of life or social health indicators is the big thing in social policy development today. There are entire websites dedicated to indicators and there is even an organization in San Francisco called *Redefining Progress* whose only function is the dissemination of information related to the development of indicators. The Edmonton Social Planning Council itself currently has two indicator-based projects underway.

So in light of all this activity, I think it's a good time for us to ask; are social indicators the key to effective social planning in the post welfare state, or is it just the latest fad.

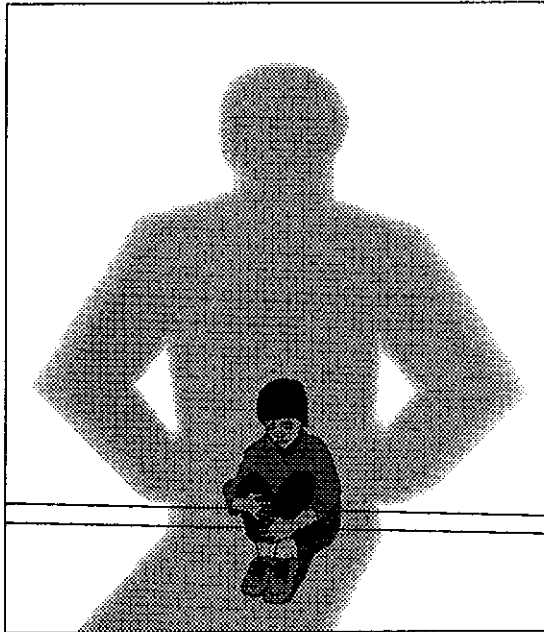
If we were to try to define in a reasonably concise way what was the fundamental social policy change in Alberta in the 1990s, I would describe it as the end of a public commitment to fundamental social supports. The most profound change was not just the dollars that were cut, but also a conscious decision by governments to no longer accept any fundamental responsibility for ensuring that all Albertans have access to the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Access to benefits would now be determined based on "deservedness" and not need. Now we know that focusing on deservedness will not by itself eliminate need, in fact it will enhance the level of need for many. So how do we identify unmet needs in the absence of a government which believes that it has any responsibility whatsoever to monitor the general social condition?

Many of us are looking at indicators as a way of creating consensus around a mechanism to identify gaps in service, rebuilding public confidence in shared solutions and forming the basis for a report card on the social health of our communities. In this edition of *First Reading*, we wanted to provide a look at the different ways in which the development of indicators is proceeding in Canada. I find it very interesting that the two provinces where indicator activity seems the most advanced are Alberta and Ontario: the two provinces where governments have been the most aggressive in extracting themselves from any active social role. This is not a coincidence. When governments pull away, communities may step forward.

The question which is as yet unanswered is whether or not indicators will form the basis for continued government withdrawal, or whether it is the beginning of a return to shared problem solving and a renewed social consensus. It has the potential to be either one. The ESPC is committed to ensuring that it will be the latter.

# Proposed Provincial Standards for Services for Children and Families

*By Jean Lafrance*



Following extensive community consultation, the Children's Services Initiative is near to finalizing the standards that will govern the delivery of children's services in Alberta. The architects of this document have seriously attempted to balance the important requirement of ministerial accountability while providing local communities with the flexibility necessary to develop services that are relevant and responsive to local needs, no easy task in a time of uncertainty. There are few successful models to guide the way and many pitfalls for the unwary. This collaborative process has culminated in a document that reflects a not unanticipated ambivalence regarding the role of communities and that of government. At this stage, the need for flexibility and creativity at the community level appears to be

communities and the government on these important considerations is encouraging.

The provincial standards reflect a belief that communities are capable of generating improved solutions to the problems of families and children. The province has wisely resisted the temptation of imposing unnecessary standards that could inhibit the creative energies of local communities and discourage them from "owning" the problems that plague their families. While this is an important consideration, neither the communities nor the province should forget the lessons about quality child welfare practice that have been learnt in the past. It may be tempting to promote a fresh new beginning without historical baggage, but communities who assume responsibility for the delivery of children's services can benefit from these lessons and the province has an obligation to share them. Local community perspectives could ideally be enriched by the experience of competent practitioners and an exposure to sound research, both dimensions of which are essential for success.

The Ministry of Family and Social Services is focusing its efforts on the provision of an enhanced leadership role in the development of policy and standards that prescribe how regional authorities are to meet new expectations. These provincial standards place an expectation upon regional authorities to develop their own policy, procedures and practices within established provincial parameters. The province has provided sufficient flexibility for the development of local standards that are sensitive to local and cultural conditions. This expectation will hopefully lead to

clearer as a result of these standards, specifics on how the province will exercise its accountability vis-a-vis regional authorities have not yet been announced.

The provincial standards place an onus on regional authorities to develop an integrated and coordinated service system. Regional authorities are meeting this challenge by developing mechanisms such as local service centers to improve the coordination of services. There is no evidence, however, that partnering ministries such as Justice, Health, and Education have made the adjustments necessary to minimize the systemic obstacles to service integration created by government structures themselves. Communities will continue to grapple with barriers imposed by "stovepipe" program structures that impede rather than facilitate local collaborative efforts. For example, many young offenders originate from the child welfare system, but no modifications to provincial structural arrangements to enable more comprehensive and consistent case planning for these young people appear to have yet been established. Similarly, parents whose children exhibit serious mental health problems must continue to rely on the good graces of child protection services, not because their children are neglected or abused, but because of serious deficits in the provision of mental health services for children in Alberta.

The government's inability to resolve these long-standing problems points to a long-standing social policy deficit regarding Alberta's children that requires urgent attention. If the province fails to develop a comprehensive social policy statement on Alberta's children, it could well inhibit the creation of a fully integrated community service system. Communities will be faced with the resolution of systemic problems that government promised to untangle when the Children's Services Initiative was first announced.

transformed from a reactive to a proactive system. This direction deserves more than lip service. The funds required for such programs must be committed for the long term. Prevention by definition cannot demonstrate its benefits in the short term. It requires a long-term vision for which existing governments receive little credit. If these programs are subjected to the vagaries of political and fiscal cycles, they will certainly not attain the benefits they are intended to achieve.

Finally, this document cannot be expected to satisfy everyone. But it is not written in stone. These standards will remain open to modifications as the regional authorities and the province try out new arrangements. This receptivity to new learning based upon the experiences of clients, professional staff and community members may ultimately be its saving grace. It may even help to heal the problematic relationships that have plagued the regional authorities and existing child welfare staff since this initiative was first announced. A "living" document of this nature could become a vehicle for new learning that is grounded in client and staff experience. It is only with this kind of partnership that the vision of an improved system of children's services will finally come about. Alberta's children deserve no less! ❏

*Jean Lafrance Ph. D. has been Assistant Professor with the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work, Edmonton Division since September of 1997. Prior to this Jean was the Children's Advocate for the Province of Alberta.*

# —Survey Results From the Frontline

By Douglas MacDonald

*"Government needs to make children a priority above all else." Survey respondent.*

## Redesign

The Government of Alberta introduced its plan to redesign Child and Family Services in its 1993 report, *Reshaping Child Welfare*. Child and Family Services include child welfare (child protection, residential care, adoption, etc.), handicapped children's services and social care facilities (day care, group homes, foster homes, women's shelters, etc.).

Various individuals and organizations, e.g., former Children's Advocate Bernd Walter and Alberta Union of Public Employees, have expressed concerns with the direction of redesign. Despite these concerns, the government continues to implement its 1993 plan.

The plan includes creation of regional authorities similar to those set up for health care, which will take over many of the Child and Family Services responsibilities originally held by government. The government plans to remain responsible for at least the following: standards for services, funding of services and monitoring and evaluation of services.

## Standards, Funding and Monitoring and Evaluation

Standards are sets of expectations for how and what services will be provided to children and families. An example of a standard is "children and families are safe."

The overall level of funding for Child and Family Services will continue to be decided by the provincial government. Under the new regionalized system,

The provincial government and the new regional authorities will monitor and evaluate delivery of Child and Family Services. Monitoring and evaluation means:

- measuring if standards are being complied with,
- determining whether performance measures such as "reduction in barriers to accessing services and support" indicate outcomes are being achieved,
- evaluating people's experiences in receiving and providing services and
- evaluating trends such as waiting lists.

## The ESPC Survey

In February-March 1998, the Edmonton Social Planning Council surveyed frontline views on the redesign of Child and Family Services in Region 10—240 people responded to the survey. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents had over five years experience working with children and families; 57 per cent had over 10 years experience. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents had been directly involved in the redesign. Respondents included individuals involved with foster care, day care, child protection, nursing, social work, women's shelters, pediatrics, teaching, residential care, home care, literacy, children with disabilities and Aboriginal organizations.

## Survey Responses—General Issues

*"If we neglect social programs now we shall pay heavily in years to come." Survey respondent.*

- 80 per cent of respondents felt that non-profit

collaboration with one or more of regional authorities, elected local authorities, communities and/or service providers.

- 50 per cent of respondents indicated that the provincial government, rather than, for example, regional authorities, should have primary responsibility both for managing Child and Family Services and for monitoring and evaluating services.
- 60 per cent of respondents preferred to use provincial revenues to fund social programs to meet society's needs and then pay down the debt with the rest. Only 27 per cent opted for the opposite, i.e., to make the debt the first priority and then to fund social programs with what is "left."

(Note: Responses to questions do not sum to 100 per cent due to neutral responses and non-responses.)

### Standards for Services

*"Standards are too general to be more than "motherhood" statements paying lip service—need to be more specific." Survey respondent.*

- 44 per cent of survey respondents disagreed that the new standards developed by the province will ensure the needs of children are addressed, while 22 per cent agreed. Fifty-four per cent of respondents disagreed that overall funding for services was high enough to meet the new standards, while only 12 per cent agreed.
- 52 per cent of respondents disagreed that standards set in the last decade had been appropriate, while 28 per cent agreed. Sixty-six per cent disagreed that in the last decade government had ensured that the standards which were set had been adhered to, while only 19 per cent agreed.

*Janus. Survey respondent.*

- 87 per cent of survey respondents agreed that the overall level of funding for Child and Family Services should be based on social needs rather than on predetermined budgets.
- 59 per cent of respondents disagreed that the overall level of provincial funding is sufficient to ensure that children and families in need can access the services they require, while only 9 per cent agreed. Fifty-four per cent of respondents disagreed that there has been meaningful involvement in setting the overall level of provincial funding, while only 18 per cent agreed.
- 89 per cent of respondents agreed that the need for child protection services increases when funding is cut for other social programs. This finding concurs with research showing that rising poverty is the main cause of rising caseloads in child and family services, for example, government documents on child abuse investigations from 1990-95 show the chief cause by far for child protection is "guardian unable/unwilling to provide necessities of life." Seventy-six per cent of respondents agreed that child welfare workers should receive extra funds to provide short-term income support to clients in a crisis.

### Monitoring and Evaluation of Child and Family Services

*"Monitoring is essential but it needs to be done with reason, common sense, caring, and good follow through." Survey respondent.*

- 79 per cent of survey respondents agreed that proper monitoring and evaluation will require additional provincial funds specifically allocated for that purpose. Forty-eight per cent of respondents disagreed that there has been meaningful involvement in developing the new

# or Down?



By Mark Anielski

Most Albertans have become accustomed to the political mantra of the so-called “Alberta Advantage.” One is led to believe that Alberta is the land of plenty. But is it? According to the United Nation’s own Human Development Index, Canada ranks number 1 in the world as the best place to live. Using the same UN criteria to measure quality of life, Alberta might rank as number 1 in Canada, making us the undisputed quality of life champion in the world. Looking at *Measuring Up*, the Government of Alberta’s annual performance report, seems to confirm that the “Alberta Advantage” is real. But how balanced is our scorecard on Alberta’s quality of life? Are we measuring the right things? What about Alberta’s disadvantages?

Credit must go to the vision of former Treasurer Jim Dinning for conceiving and implementing Canada’s first public accounting of government policy performance. Indeed *Measuring Up* and the Alberta government’s performance measurement system has been recognized internationally for its excellence in measuring government policy outcomes. Some 23 macro measures and roughly 220 ministerial measures of government performance are now being tracked. However, when stepping back for a moment, does this account constitute a balance between Alberta’s advantages and disadvantages; between both good and poor performance; between indicators that are both complimentary and those which reflect the darker side of Alberta? That requires a forensic audit of the system and measures that exist today.

bureaucrats without the extensive public and stakeholder consultation used in benchmark jurisdictions such as Oregon, Minnesota and Florida. In Alberta to date the focus has tended to be on government performance as opposed to a robust societal well-being or quality of life accounting. This may result in some indicators of societal well-being that are not accounted for in Alberta’s government performance measurement system based on the argument that government alone is not fully responsible for their performance outcomes.

Performance measurement systems in Alberta, indeed elsewhere, tend to rely on traditional measures of economic prosperity as proxies for quality of life. To date, there has been no “ground truthing” of these measures by matching them with public perceptions or experiences of citizens with these traditional measures. Often there is a disconnect between a traditional measure (e.g. declining crime rate statistics) and people perception (e.g. people feeling more vulnerable).

Traditional measures of economic health (“prosperity”) used in Alberta’s *Measuring Up* include GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita, job creation, exports, tax load and net debt. Measures of the health of people include educational attainment, life expectancy at birth, health status, crime rates and family income distribution. Measures of environmental quality (“preservation”) include the quality of water, air and land and resource sustainability of forests and energy resources. There are 23 macro measures in *Measuring Up* that could be used as a measurement of quality of life in Alberta.



appeared in appendices as societal indicators (*Measuring Up* 1996). These include declining real family incomes (especially for single mothers), rising levels of air pollution, declining conventional crude oil and natural gas reserves, stubbornly high rates of cancer, fewer doctors per 1,000 and rising net debts for students upon graduation. These are just some of Alberta's disadvantages which have no explicit policy action plan or response.

Many other indicators of Alberta's disadvantages exist that are not accounted for in the government's performance measurement system. These include:

- one of Canada's lowest minimum wages in a super-GDP-rich province,
- single working moms in relatively impoverished conditions and low income jobs,
- children in poverty,
- rising foodbank usage,
- increased disparity between rich and poor (e.g. the President of Safeway (USA) earns 175 times the salary of an Alberta Safeway clerk),
- Albertans working longer hours and thus declining real hourly wages,
- the value of women's work,
- degradation of ground water quality,
- gambling (VLT) addictions,
- addiction to money,
- spiritual poverty and
- intergenerational inequities.

You can certainly add to this list.

In our penchant for measuring everything and our trust in traditional economic measures as measures of progress, we must ask ourselves if we are truly

as the GDP, stock markets, and, exports show continued growth. Yet we seem to lack evidence to confirm our gut feelings.

We are working longer hours, lament the lack of quality family time and are caught in a consumption trance. Have you ever calculated your "real" take home pay, after accounting for all the overtime, commuting time and time vacationing to relieve job stress? You will be surprised to discover that your adjusted "real" hourly wage might mean working at McDonald's is more economical in terms of maximizing on your quality of time and life. In measuring societal performance, we must ask ourselves what constitutes quality of life and do we have the right measures?

The next time you call or write your elected official ask them for a balanced accounting of Alberta's quality of life, with our advantages and disadvantages. Is Alberta measuring up or down? 🇨🇦

*Mark Anielski is a member of the Board of Directors for the ESPC.*

# the Canada West Foundation

By Brian Bechtel

Anyone who has spent any amount of time observing the development of social policy in Alberta has probably noted that the Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) and Calgary's Canada West Foundation (CWF) often come to the table with vastly different agendas. The ESPC is a strong advocate for a continued public (government) role in the delivery of core social programs like income support and hence, is generally critical of social policy developments in Alberta over the past decade. The CWF, on the other hand, is often more supportive of attempts by government to devolve services to the community or private interests. Many times in the past, it has appeared to me as if the CWF has functioned like the unofficial policy arm of the Department of Family and Social Services.

From time to time, however, it's good to avoid the temptation to dismiss the work of those with whom you have customarily disagreed. I found this to be the case while reviewing a CWF document entitled *Issues and Options for Change: Social Services for the 21st Century*. This document is part of a larger project, funded by the generally conservative Kahanoff Foundation which has as its formal objective to inform the debate about the changes occurring in social services funding and delivery.

The thesis underlying this project generally, and the "Issues and Options" document specifically, is that we are undergoing a transition from a welfare "state" to a welfare "society" (pages 4,5). The primary difference between a welfare state and a welfare society, of course, is that in a welfare society the community undertakes a greater role in the provision of social services. Community presumably includes individuals, families, charities and churches. Government's role is severely diminished.

The CWF document doesn't explicitly provide us with an opinion as to whether or not this trend is a good thing. For the record, I don't think it is, but the document merely states it as a fact. Fair enough. But what the authors do provide is a fairly good analysis of what's needed to complete the transition to community-based services in a reasonably planned and responsible way, because even the most conservative architects of social services reform said that cutting services was only part of the plan. The second half of the plan was to have been investment in the community and the development of a broadly shared consensus about outcomes and priorities. To date this hasn't happened and all government has really done is cut services. There has been no significant effort to empower the community or create consensus about how to address unmet needs.

The "Issues and Options" document presents four recommendations:

1. Improve systematic information collection.
2. Develop and implement Alberta social benchmarks.
3. Encourage alternate social services delivery models.
4. Create a social services investment fund.

Of these, the first two recommendations are the most interesting because they have the potential to create a mechanism for identifying current and future gaps in services which are currently non-existent in government.

The development of some capacity to identify gaps to which government actually might pay some attention is significant because the biggest obstacle

government work with the community to feed hungry children when Ministers of Social Services deny that hungry children even exist in Alberta? How do you sit down to a constructive debate when concerns raised by the community about gaps in service are routinely dismissed?

The response of many social advocacy groups, including the ESPC, has been to focus some energy on the development of credible social health, or quality of life, indicators. If we can no longer look to government as the custodian of the social health of the community, then we must develop the mechanisms in the community itself to gauge the general social condition. Only by demonstrating the social impact of government cutbacks and other social policy trends, the thinking goes, can we rebuild consensus about the importance of a strong public role in social policy. If, for example, the number of children suffering the effects of poor nutrition can be shown to be increasing, the community might care enough to want something done about it and will, I think, look to public institutions to provide leadership.

Interestingly, it is around the development of indicators that the ESPC and the CWF appear to meet, at least on a theoretical level. Now it may be that conservative groups like the CWF see indicators, or benchmarks as they refer to them, as a way of planning for an even greater role by the "community" and as a way for government to ease itself even further out of the picture, but there may be reason to hope that thoughtful people can come together around credible indicators and arrive at some consensus about what needs to be done, even if they start from broadly differing positions.

Only time will tell whether social health indicators offer the potential for a renewed public discussion about social policy; one that will break through the current logjam that exists between the various

some potential for a renewed social consensus.

*Brian Bechtel is the Executive Director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council.*

**The Edmonton Social  
Planning Council  
is a member agency of the**



**United Way**

Alberta Capital Region

# Index for Ontario



By Malcolm Shookner

Major changes are taking place in Ontario which are having dramatic effects on the health and well-being of residents. They include:

- economic re-structuring and high unemployment,
- government cuts in social programs,
- devolution of responsibilities to the provinces and municipalities,
- reduced roles of governments in economic and social development and
- increasing poverty, especially for young families.

Social development councils (i.e. social planning councils, community development councils) across Ontario have documented the impact of cutbacks on communities. Yet while the damage reports were being compiled, including the count of jobs lost and the closure of social programs, there was also the determination to rebuild the capacity of their communities to cope with problems and care for their people in these turbulent times. The Quality of Life Index (QLI) was conceived in this environment as a community development strategy to monitor the living and working conditions of Ontarians.

This project has been designed and developed by the Ontario Social Development Council (OSDC), working in partnership with the Social Planning Network of Ontario and in association with the Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, with financial support from Health Canada. We also have 21 community partners, including Healthy Communities projects and United Ways.

Quality of life is defined as:

*"The product of the interplay among social, health, economic and environmental conditions which affect human and social development."*

The purpose of the QLI is to provide a tool for community development which can be used to monitor key indicators that encompass the social, health, environmental and economic dimensions of the quality of life. The QLI can be used to comment frequently on key issues that affect people and contribute to the public debate about how to improve the quality of life in our communities and our province.

The following indicators are included in the QLI for 1997:

**SOCIAL**: Children admitted to care of Children's Aid Societies; social assistance beneficiaries; public housing waiting lists.

**HEALTH**: Low birth weight babies; elderly waiting for placement in long term care facilities; suicides.

**ECONOMIC**: Number of people unemployed; number of people working; bankruptcies (personal and business).

**ENVIRONMENTAL**: Hours of poor air quality; environmental spills; tonnes diverted from landfill to blue box recycling.

The Quality of Life Index has been calculated for 1997. Based on these calculations, the quality of life has declined in Ontario from a base value of 100 in 1990 to 86.4 in 1997.

A closer look at the 12 indicators reveals progress in some areas and setbacks in others. On the

part of individuals, community organizations, governments and the private sector to make changes to improve the environment.

On the economic and social fronts, there are significant problems. We have seen a dramatic increase in the number of bankruptcies, both individual and business, through the prolonged recession of the early '90s. The number of people who are unemployed has increased significantly, while the number of people working has decreased, when population growth is taken into account.

The social problems which are symptomatic of the economic problems include lack of access to public housing, large numbers of people forced onto welfare and an increase in the number of children being cared for by child welfare authorities. These social problems are sowing the seeds for long-term problems which cannot be ignored.

Access to information has raised a number of problems and issues. One of the findings of this project relates to the difficulty experienced in obtaining information about QLI indicators from public institutions, governments and government funded non-profit organizations with provincial responsibilities for major program areas in health, social services, the environment, the economy and housing. The bottom line is that many publicly funded organizations do not have the information technology or information systems necessary to give them the capability of answering basic questions about the number of people served or the range of services provided. It may be speculated that there are fewer resources and staff available in these organizations to collect, organize and distribute this information as a result of the significant reductions in Ontario's public spending in the 1990s.

- reviewed the literature and compiled an extensive bibliography,
- collected data for each of the indicators in the QLI,
- computed the QLI for Ontario,
- refined the methodology for calculating the QLI,
- developed communications strategies at provincial and local levels and
- released the first QLI report for Ontario.

Looking ahead, we plan to undertake the following activities:

- distribute the report widely in electronic and print formats,
- implement communications strategies at provincial and local levels,
- evaluate the impact of strategies and performance of indicators,
- document community development initiatives arising from QLI,
- contribute to public policy discourse,
- compile and release regular updates of the QLI,
- release a QLI update in the spring of 1998,
- release a second annual report in the fall of 1998 and
- release at least two QLI reports in 1999. ■■

*Malcolm Shookner works for the Ontario Social Development Council as the Project Director for the Quality of Life Index Project, in collaboration with the Social Planning Network of Ontario, representing 30 local social planning organizations. You can visit the Index website @:*

[www.lks.net/~cdc/spno/qli](http://www.lks.net/~cdc/spno/qli)



By Christopher Smith

In 1995 the Edmonton Social Planning Council received funding from the Wild Rose Foundation to develop and implement a series of quality of life measures for the City of Edmonton. The Edmonton LIFE (Local Indicators for Excellence) project emerged as a collaborative initiative that involved representatives from the different sectors of the community. Together these representatives identified key attributes of city life that contributed to residents' overall well-being in the areas of the economy, the community, the environment and people. The result was a comprehensive set of quality of life indicators for the provincial capital.

As a follow up to the Edmonton LIFE initiative, the Council received funding in 1998 from Health Canada to look at the development of a suitable framework for the introduction of quality of life indicators on a provincial scale. The impetus for the development of a provincial indicator framework came from Ontario. The Ontario Social Development Council, working with the Social Planning Network of Ontario, the Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto, as well as the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition and a large number of community partners, developed a series of quality of life indicators in 1997. It seemed reasonable to consider the possibility of a similar model for the province of Alberta.

The review of the specific indicators included within the Ontario initiative revealed numerous similarities to the Council's Edmonton LIFE project, with indicators selected or developed in the key areas of social, health, economic and environmental well-being. These numerous points of contact underscored a common conceptualization of the key dimensions of community quality of life in both the

variations in the specific individual measures identified within these dimensions. Further parallels also emerged when the work of other Alberta communities involved in measuring their own local quality of life was considered.

Again, the experiences of communities such as Calgary and Canmore in the development of their own local measures of quality of life revealed similar core areas of concern, which were then subsequently captured through the identification of specific local measures. In each community, these local measures reflect the character of the community itself, embodying the key elements of social, environmental, economic, demographic and political life.

These common broad dimensions of quality of life, supported by the subsequent identification of local measures of well-being, suggested the basis for the development of a provincial quality of life framework. This framework includes both a broad conceptualization of the major dimensions of quality of life, as well as the description of a valid community review process for the development of specific local measures which capture community well-being. Thus, individual communities can identify their own particular set of local indicators of quality of life using a similar process and approach.

Over the next couple of months the Council will continue to work on this framework as the basis for the development of a provincial quality of life measure. ■

*Christopher Smith is the Program Director for the Edmonton Social Planning Council.*

per cent of respondents ~~disagreed~~ that in the last decade monitoring and evaluation has been properly carried out by the provincial government, while 21 per cent agreed.

- 75 per cent of respondents agreed that the office of the Children's Advocate should be retained with at least the same powers it has now. Sixty-three per cent of respondents agreed that the Children's Advocate should report directly to the legislature. This last recommendation means that the Children's Advocate's annual reports will be released immediately, rather than suppressed for months by the minister.
- 77 per cent of respondents agreed that the performance measures used to evaluate services should be measures which cannot be influenced by arbitrarily denying access to services. (An example of an appropriate performance measure would be length of waiting lists for subsidized day care.)

### Confidence in Redesign

*"Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to respond to the changes in children's services. I wrote a letter to the Region 10 report on the redesign of children's services and I was left feeling very discouraged. I just don't think anyone is listening to the real concerns from the community." Survey respondent.*

- The survey showed a low level of confidence in government redesign of Child and Family Services. Forty-five per cent of respondents disagreed that redesign will result in services which better meet the needs of children, while only 16 per cent agreed. Fifty-eight per cent disagreed that since redesign began their confidence has INCREASED that redesign will result in better services, while only 14 per cent agreed.

shifting responsibility for delivery and management of services away from the provincial government,

- inadequate funding,
- lack of meaningful involvement in redesign with respect to funding and monitoring and evaluation,
- inadequate standards and enforcement of standards,
- funding cuts in other related programs (e.g., Supports for Independence),
- lack of adequate monitoring and evaluation and
- lack of confidence in the redesign process.

### Current Policy Implications

The survey suggests a number of policy implications. These include:

- maintaining responsibility for services with the provincial government,
- establishment of mechanisms to ensure meaningful involvement in the redesign,
- improved standards and enforcement of standards,
- increased funding in the areas of service delivery and monitoring and evaluation,
- improved monitoring and evaluation and
- better integration of policy and program (e.g., between child welfare and income support programs).

### Final Thoughts

The survey calls into question the positive statements the government has made about the nature and direction of the redesign process, for example, that

*Survey Conclusion on page 21*

In an effort to track quality of life three Alberta communities have developed their own set of indicators. Canmore, Calgary and Edmonton have launched index projects which can be updated annually to monitor local environment, health and development. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has also initiated a quality of life indicators project. We asked workers from each project to describe the goals and if possible talk about the finished indicators product.



## The Canmore Experience



There have been two very significant community awareness and social planning initiatives completed in Canmore in the 1990s. Our "population boom" has caused community citizens and leaders from all walks of life to band together to discuss the environment in which we live.

### 1992 Social Planning Taskforce

This taskforce was created to recommend an appropriate social planning process to the Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) board. The board wanted help to achieve the following objectives:

- a better understanding of the demographic, social and economic changes that are occurring in the community,
- to identify changing human service needs in the community and to be better able to respond with appropriate programs and services,
- to develop a set of "social goals" for the community that would be included in the General Municipal Plan (GMP) and
- to be in a position to offer informed response on the social impact of proposed developments in the area.

The members of the Social Planning Taskforce were drawn from a wide range of interests which ensured that as many groups as possible were represented. As a result the taskforce benefited from well-informed

and varied opinions. The diverse representation also allowed the taskforce to feel more confident in their conclusions because they were seen by others to be in the best interests of the community.

In five months, through four meetings with over 40 participants, the process resulted in a definition of "community values" defined as those things we think are fundamentally important for the future of our community. The result was a set of "social goals" defined as statements concerned with the collective welfare and social well being of the community that help us define what we would like it to be like in the future. The next step in the process included a discussion of the possible contribution of the various "social goals" to the GMP and the on-going planning process. The final task was to set some "recommendations for action" for the community and indicators to measure progress toward the goals.

The FCSS board and the town staff utilized the following quote to illustrate the relationship between municipal government and the citizens of the municipality: "Individual citizens in fact do make a tremendous difference in community after community. The challenge for local leaders is therefore to find ways of channeling these energies constructively in a proactive manner that truly benefits the entire community."

As a result of this social goals process, the Town of Canmore included the goals in the GMP and some preliminary work was done on the indicators.



In 1996, I was among a group of citizens who formed "Sustainable Calgary" to pursue the creation of a set of indicators of sustainability for our city. Sustainable Calgary was born out of a series of educational workshops of the Arusha Centre. Our inspiration came from the work of "Sustainable Seattle," which had already published its first indicators report.

Our mission is to promote, encourage and support community-level actions and initiatives that move Calgary toward a sustainable future. We have no particular political affiliation. Our core group reside all over the city of Calgary and have diverse backgrounds. We are small business persons, engineers, educators, students and community planners. We want to contribute to the local debate about sustainability issues—to promote a healthy and ecologically and economically sustainable city. Our quality of life, here in Calgary, is sustainable only if the processes that support it generate long term health and vitality for all.

In the first *State of Our City Report* we have documented a broad spectrum of 24 indicators in the health, education, community, natural resource use, natural environment and economic sectors.

To date approximately 300 community members from all walks of life and all areas of the city have contributed over 3,500 volunteer hours to the project. In the winter of 1996, the process began with a series of open meetings to gauge the interest in a sustainability indicators project for Calgary. Approximately 100 people attended those meetings and pledged concrete and moral support for the initiative.

In preparation for the first workshop over 200 Calgarians from business, government, health, education, social and community development sectors were contacted. We also wanted to ensure the participation of immigrants, ethnic groups,

youth, disabled people and women's groups. The first workshop was held in March 1997 and was attended by approximately 85 Calgarians. From that workshop approximately 55 people participated in the five sectoral 'think tanks.' Each think tank met three times in the spring of 1997 and in June the final selection of a set of 24 indicators was made.

In October 1997, 24 indicator stewards volunteered to carry out the detailed research for each indicator. Each steward worked alone or recruited others to work with him/her to research each indicator, identify appropriate information sources, decide how the indicator could be (or is being) measured and how it is linked to other indicators.

One of the most important elements of our indicator report is the linkages across sectors. For example we report on unemployment and its effects on incidence of low weight births, adult literacy and Calgarians' sense of community. We report on how Calgarians spend leisure time and its effects on personal health, the use of pesticides and the quality of our air. Did you know that at minimum wage a Calgarian would have to work approximately 69 hours a week to meet their basic needs?—and that low income people make up a considerable percentage of food bank users?

From a global ecological perspective Calgary, although a city with a relatively high quality of life, is also relatively unsustainable. Canadians in general and Calgarians in particular consume a high percentage of the natural wealth of the planet to live as we do. What we have found from our research is that our biggest challenges lay in reducing the amount of resources we consume and in distributing the fruits of our society more equitably. Our strength is our social capital—the strong sense of community Calgarians take pride in and our contributions to making Calgary a better place to live.

In the mid 1990s the federal government, in consultation with the provinces, made major changes to federal social programs. Changes included the creation of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) and Employment Insurance.

The CHST resulted from combining the Canada Assistance Plan with the Established Program Financing program. The main component of the Canada Assistance Plan was open-ended cost sharing for social services, while the Established Program Financing program included funding for health and post-secondary education. A significant drawback of the new CHST was reduced funding to the provinces for social services, health and post-secondary education. Unemployment Insurance, primarily a financial assistance program to unemployed individuals, was transformed into Employment Insurance that emphasized training and employment opportunities with reduced financial benefits for individuals.

Many municipalities expressed concerns about these major changes. Some of the concerns included the potential for: other levels of government downloading responsibilities onto municipalities, negative impacts of reduced benefits to citizens and reduced financial support to municipalities as the federal government reduced cost-sharing with the provinces.

Despite these concerns, municipalities did not have the opportunity to take part in senior government discussions of social policy and programs. As well, few municipalities were able to provide real data on the potential impacts of these major policy and program changes.

In 1995/96, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), in conjunction with its Big City Mayors Caucus, undertook an analysis of the local impact of the federal policy and program decisions.

A national report recommended that FCM and municipal governments take an active interest in social policy decisions of all governments, regardless whether they were themselves involved in delivery of social services. Member municipalities of FCM recognized that policies from all levels of government must be coordinated to best serve the interests of rapidly evolving communities and urban regions.

The first step in FCM's social policy strategy is to develop appropriate policy and planning tools. The Quality of Life Reporting System (QOLRS), coordinated by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities is a national-scale quality of life indicators project. It currently involves 15 Canadian municipalities from British Columbia to Nova Scotia—both Edmonton and Calgary are participants.

The primary objectives of the project are: to provide a critical monitoring capacity which is currently not available to any other level of government and to give municipal leaders a powerful voice on behalf of their communities.

The indicator areas to be included in the reporting system include: community affordability, quality of employment, health of community, quality of housing, community social infrastructure, human resources, community stress/population at risk, community safety and community participation.

The City of Edmonton Community Services Department, assisted by the City of Windsor and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, assumed leadership for developing the community stress/population at-risk measures. These measures attempt to gauge the impacts of the changes on the most vulnerable groups within our society.

The community stress/populations at risk measures for the QOLRS builds upon previous quality of life indicator work that has been developed in

The 1997 release of the Local Indicators For Excellence report signified an important step in assessing the well-being of Edmontonians. The report is part of a collaborative, ongoing project monitoring the city's social, environmental and economic health. It is a valuable tool, creating a benchmark from which people can begin to monitor change and assess trends.

The Edmonton LIFE project was a two-year undertaking which involved a broad spectrum of representatives from business, government agencies, social service organizations, environmental groups and educational associations. Together, the participants identified four integral elements and corresponding indicators to measure quality of life in Edmonton.

The Edmonton LIFE report is divided into four sections: healthy economy, healthy people, healthy environment and healthy community. In each section, indicators monitor the well-being of their element. For example, life-long learning and the Nutritious Food Basket Index are indicators for the healthy people section. Each section contains 11 indicators which will be monitored on an annual basis.

The quality of life indicators constitute an important tool which decision makers can use to gauge the health of the community and to identify areas for action. For example, if the student academic achievement indicator displays a downward trend, decision makers can develop initiatives to address the problem. Also, if an indicator is improving at a rapid rate, policy makers can examine factors behind the improvement and perhaps encourage a positive change in other areas. It is difficult to make decisions one way or another without understanding the reasons behind change and appreciating how one indicator can affect others. Edmonton LIFE provides this knowledge in a comprehensive manner.

Recognizing the interdependence of healthy people, environment, communities and the economy was the first challenge in creating an effective yardstick for the quality of life in Edmonton. The next challenge is for policy makers, business owners, schools, communities and individuals who live and work in Edmonton to recognize their responsibilities to the community. Edmontonians need to act together on initiatives that will foster the integrated health of city's environment, economy, neighbourhoods and individuals.

The potential for collective, community action is great. The tools are there for Edmonton to use and there are many motivated people, businesses and groups promoting positive changes. Edmonton LIFE invites all Edmontonians to participate. ■■

*Nicole Martel M.A. is a Project Assistant for the Edmonton Social Planning Council.*

*Federation—Continued from page 18*

Edmonton under the Local Indicators For Excellence (LIFE) project. Members of the LIFE project formed a new working group and have developed a series of 20 measures. Special and significant populations were defined. The list is currently being prioritized and overlaps with other indicator areas (e.g., employment area, affordability area) are being noted.

Together the RCM, the City of Edmonton Community Services and the City of Windsor will determine ways to obtain the necessary data and information from their sources, reflect the information in a meaningful and consistent way and prepare a report to be released later in 1998. The report on the community stress/populations at risk measures will be issued in conjunction with reports on about three other indicator measures. ■■

*Steven A. Friedenthal B.A., M.A. is the Executive*

consensus building process resulted in a number of strategies to manage growth in Canmore without damaging our "sense of community." Similar to the social goals process, over 40 volunteers from many walks of life and representing diverse points of view came together to look to the future and to develop strategies in a collaborative and consensus building process.

Looking to the year 2015, the group created the following over-riding statements describing its sense of community:

- Canmore prides itself on its friendly, caring and neighbourly lifestyle,
- the quality and beauty of the Bow Valley is a source of community pride for citizens of Canmore,
- Canmore is a vibrant community enjoying a healthy tax base and broad economic well being for its citizens,
- Canmore is a community that nurtures a creative and productive cultural sector,
- Canmore is recognized as an ideal community which has learned how to manage its own growth in a very wise and strategic way for the betterment of all who live and visit our special mountain community.

The core strategy include four pillars.

1. Defining the lands: a land base map of all known information about local environment and future growth was developed and recommendations on growth presented.
2. Residential development: a recommendation was made that Canmore's growth rate be brought to six per cent per annum.
3. Commercial development: recommendations to ensure long term financial health for the

fabric.

Currently this fourth pillar is the focus for the Town of Canmore. FCSS, in conjunction with the growth management strategy monitoring committee, is involved in the design and implementation of an ongoing process of monitoring and evaluating the social fabric of Canmore. Utilizing our experience from the social goals document, as well as the growth management recommendations, we are planning for the future.

In 1997-98 we developed a set of social indicators which will illustrate trends and changes to the social fabric of the community. We have 50 indicators for the social environment as a result of consultation with experts in many social agencies and lay groups. This is a starting point and we are excited to see the results of the data collection. As information is collected it will be necessary to change some indicators or add new ones.

Agencies included in the data collection: AADAC, AFSS, mental health, Headwaters Health, RCMP, Job Resource Centre, daycare, ministerial, education, Alberta Gaming and Liquor Control Board, FCSS, recreation, culture, municipal enforcement and food bank. When we're done we will have an overview of the environment in Canmore, both physical and social. In the fall we will host an open house to present the data we have collected and to discuss with community residents the types of initiatives they would like to see happen in the coming years. We will use that input in our budgeting process for 1999 and into the future. ■■

*Brenda Caston has worked as the manager of Family and Community Support Services with the Town of Canmore for six years. Brenda works to assist the community to "build" social infrastructures.*

our report. By highlighting a broad spectrum of indicators of sustainability, beyond but including economic indicators, we hope to move all sectors of society—government, business and civil society—in the direction of sustainability .

The majority of funding for this project came from the Health and Environment Canada, Community Animation Program. Our task now is to make the report itself sustainable. We hope to recruit government, private sector and community groups to provide us with the information needed for the indicators on an annual basis and in that way make the report process itself sustainable. ■■

*Noel Keough is currently co-ordinator of Sustainable Calgary's Indicator Project. Noel has 10 years of experience in community and international development. He has published on globalization, bioregionalism, participatory development and community-based environmental education.*

---

*Survey conclusion—Continued from page 15*

provincial funding is sufficient to ensure that children and families in need can access required services. The survey also shows that over one-half of the respondents felt that their confidence in redesign had not increased since redesign began.

Redesign of Child and Family Services must be re-evaluated to determine whether it will result in better services for children and their families, as the government claims. One starting point would be to initiate a broad discussion on the findings of this survey. Another constructive step would be a regional replication of the ESPC survey. These initiatives would provide an informed basis for conducting an objective re-evaluation of redesign. ■■

*Dougal MacDonald served as a project consultant for the ESPC's survey of frontline perspectives on the redesign of Child and Family Services in Region 10. Dougal is a former professor of education and now works as an independent researcher for various organizations in Edmonton and Calgary.*

---

## **News from our 58th AGM**

The ESPC held its 58th Annual General Meeting April 28th. A new Board of Directors was elected and two Awards of Recognition were presented—one to Rev. Dr. Don Mayne for his commitment to quality of life for all Albertans and to Rosemarie Solomon for her commitment to social justice in Alberta. Rev. Dr. Don Mayne is a retired United Church minister and a founding member of the Quality of Life Commission. Rosemarie Solomon is a social worker with Community Services and she is a strong supporter of community development and empowerment.

Nine Board members will be continuing to serve on the Board of Directors—they will be joined by five new Board members. Our new members are Karren Brown, John Eagle, Kenn Hample, Kate Herbert Battigelli and Jeji Varghese. Continuing members include Mark Anielski, Frank Berland, Sharon Downs, Ron Gaunce, Kirk MacDonald, Scott McLeod, Nancy McPherson, Anita Murphy and Edmond O'Neill. A tribute was paid to two

## Internet Resources for Social Indicators

I recently received a visit from a Vancouverite who lived in Edmonton over 15 years ago and his traveling companion, a native Montrealer newly settled in Calgary. Besides asking how I was doing, they wanted to know how the city was faring.

What to answer? Edmonton is a city that can seem to find \$2.4 million a year to subsidize a private professional hockey club, yet has Canada's highest rate of child welfare cases, most due to poverty.

Whether and in what ways a city is prosperous or poor is much more than a diverting topic of dinner conversation. It's a discussion that forms the foundation of public policy making.

While I could get away with describing to my friends how I felt about and what I wished for the city, I'll be the first to admit that my subjective measures would not adequately reflect the realities and values of a city the size of Edmonton.

So I asked myself where I would start if I were to come up with a slate of indicators that could both answer my friends' question while also providing the framework for further community development, so that the next time they visit, I can demonstrate how the city is progressing in crucial areas.

I began by looking to traditional library book resources. However, because social indicator work is entering a sophisticated second stage after an enthusiastic but brief-lived start in the late 1960s and early 70s, I found these resources to be scarce. There were volumes which provide invaluable historical and theoretical perspectives (most notably *Social Indicators*, ed. Raymond A. Bauer, 1966 and *Social Measurement and Social Indicators: Issues of Policy and Theory*, Michael Carley, 1981), but there was little in the way of current, on-the-ground demon-

This is where the Internet comes in handy.

Once you've read up on the finer points of social indicator theory, you can find a host of indicator projects in various stages of development. You can see how a finished process like the Oregon Benchmarks looks and functions in a community, you can check in on the challenges faced by projects that are in mid-stream and you can network with people who are just starting to establish an indicator process.

The Canadian Council on Social Development recently set up a social indicator page which serves as an excellent starting point for indicator novices. The page ([www.ccsd.ca/soc\\_ind.html](http://www.ccsd.ca/soc_ind.html)) opens with excerpts from a 1997 symposium the CCSD hosted on social indicators. This collection of speeches and conference reports are plain language introductions to what social indicators are, their history and their applications.

The jewel of the site is the Social Indicators Launchpad ([www.ccsd.ca/lp.html](http://www.ccsd.ca/lp.html)), which at the time of this writing lists websites from Canada, the United States and Australia. From this launch pad, you can directly access the official websites of such projects as Campaign 2000: Child Poverty in Canada, Social Demographic and Economic Indicators for Calgary (actually a collection of social statistics compiled by the City of Calgary Community and Social Development Research Unit) and State of the World's Children 1997. The launchpad also takes you to the Alberta government's *Measuring Up* performance evaluation site.

The one weakness of the launchpad is that it does not sort through the links for you, without differentiating between social statistics sites (often a collection of census statistics with little in the way of

a link to the comprehensive internet resource on social indicators, the Community Indicators Network, or CINet ([www.rprogress.org/progsum.cinet](http://www.rprogress.org/progsum.cinet)).

This site is operated by Redefining Progress, a San Francisco-based organization with a non-partisan mandate to build a multi-sectoral consensus to "promote accountability."

The CINet site lists 150 community indicator projects world wide, most located in the United States of America, with almost one dozen Canadian entries, including the Edmonton Social Planning Council's Edmonton LIFE (Local Indicators For Excellence) quality of life indicators project.

Each entry lists when the project began; whether it applies to a neighbourhood, rural, municipal, regional or larger environment; whether the project was spearheaded by a government, a grassroots group, academics or a partnership (giving an idea of what resources were required to undertake the project); and the type of project, whether the goal was to measure quality of life, sustainability or to establish community benchmarking or evaluation.

CINet even lets you search according to these terms. In other words, if you are one of a group of citizens proposing a neighbourhood planning initiative, you can ask CINet to identify neighbourhood projects carried out by non-profit groups. From there, you can read up on examples from other communities, or contact people who have set up similar projects.

The project descriptions are particularly noteworthy. Rather than simply including an abstract from the authors of a particular project, CINet goes a step further by placing each project within a larger context of indicator work.

notes:

"Some indicators will require date collection which is unique to indicator work; that is, comparing individual perceptions of quality of life with traditional indicators."

Full contact information is available for each indicator project and e-mail addresses and web links are provided if available.

Aside from the CCSD Social Indicators Site and the CINet directory, you always have the option of hunting and pecking through the various Internet search engines. However, this process demonstrates the weakness of an unmitigated search and will go a long way to proving Michael Carley's fear that "there is always the possibility that social indicators will be used to advance particular political stances, or will be distorted by bureaucratic wrangling or poorly provided data."

One site promised it could help me win a presidential election. I have yet to test this boast.

While the Internet is the perfect arena by which to explore the dynamic work being done in the social indicators field, I'll have to admit that my research into the topic makes for a very long (and belated!) attempt to answer to my friends' questions about the well-being of our community.

The terms by which we define, promote, shape and sustain the social health of our communities is a new but fast-evolving process. Social indicators may not provide quick, sound bite answers, but they are crucial in building a holistic community development vocabulary. ■

*Suzette C. Chan is a freelance writer and the Administrative Assistant for the Edmonton Social Planning Council.*

A discussion of poverty lines may be qualified according to two dimensions. First, minimum standards may be classified in terms of what should be, versus what is. Often this distinction fits the description of “poverty lines” as opposed to income security benefit levels and minimum wage levels respectively. Although the former is a more pure indicator of poverty threshold, the others are still important to consider because they imply a standard minimum level of income necessary for at least subsistence existence and are among the most high profile indicators that we have. Second, there is generally a distinction between absolute and relative measures of poverty. Absolute measures are frequently associated with the necessary minimum: the materials needed to sustain physical life. Relative measures are frequently associated with a level of poverty that includes attention to issues of social participation, beyond simple physical existence. From this one could expect that absolute poverty lines would consistently be lower than relative poverty lines. However, that is not always the case (Leadbeater, D, *Setting Minimum Standards in Canada: A Review*, Ottawa: Economic Council of Canada, 1992). Another distinction between absolute and relative measures concerns the degree to which the measure is context-bound or related to economic or social change. However, as Christopher Sarlo (*Poverty in Canada*, 2nd ed., Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1996) points out, there is no such thing as a completely absolute measure. Indeed, such a measure would quickly become useless if it was not updated with changes in population income or commonly used items and their associated costs.

Although there are implied lines that distinguish between the incomes for the poor and the non-poor, through minimum wage legislation and social assistance rates and through surveying public

employ one of two approaches: the commodity budget approach or the relative income approach.

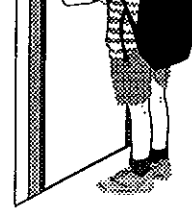
### Implied “Poverty Line” Approaches

Although Canada has never had an official poverty line, churches, private philanthropy, labour movements, as well as municipal, federal, and provincial governments have played a large role in determining what people need in terms of goods and/or income to get by. For example, it was noted in 1935 that “the relief office in Edmonton gave liberal food orders, and were also liberal in their distribution of clothing. . . there was a large Communistic element in the city of Edmonton who had been able to force the City Council to make almost annual increases in the relief scale.” (Canadian Welfare Council, *Notes on Relief Services—Northern Ontario-Western Canada*, Ottawa, 1935)

Such “poverty lines” are implied presently through entitlements to private and government assistance (Canadian Council on Social Development, *Not Enough: The Meaning and Measurement of Poverty in Canada*, Ottawa, 1984), legislated minimum wages and direct surveys of public opinion. While they are not “poverty lines” per se, this group of indicators have probably the highest public profile and the longest history.

### “Less-Eligibility,” Social Assistance and Minimum Wage

The principle of less eligibility, dating back to the late 16th century Elizabethan Poor Laws, is historically associated with the development of social assistance benefit rates in Canada and refers to the need for assistance to be lower than the minimum standard wage so as to provide incentive for people to work. When minimum wage legislation was developed in





wage.

Some quick rough calculations suggest that current social assistance rates (Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC), *The Other Welfare Manual*, 1994) for many single-parent families and most two-parent families in Alberta are lower than minimum wage. The minimum wage is currently \$5 per hour, which amounts to a gross yearly income, based on 40 hours a week for 52 weeks, of \$10,400 per full time worker. The current social assistance rate for a single employable person in Alberta is \$4,728 per year. For a single parent with one child, the benefit rates increase to \$9,588 per year, but with two children, the single parent receives \$12,516. Two-parent families with one and two children respectively receive \$12,516 and \$14,868, and with four children, the benefit increases to \$19,452. However, these two-parent families may potentially have two income earners and therefore a potential family minimum wage income of \$20,800. Those worthy of government assistance in Alberta, according to the principle of less-eligibility, are single-parents with more than one child and two-parent families with more than four children.

### **Public opinion polls**

Until 1988, the Gallup organization conducted an annual poll that contained a question about what the minimum amount of weekly income required for a family of four including two adults and two children (Ross, D.P., Shillington, E.R., & Lochhead, C., *The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty*, Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 1994). In 1988, the average response was \$452 per week or \$23,504 per year (Sarlo, Christopher, *Poverty in Canada*, 2nd ed., Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1996). The Statistics Canada Survey of Consumer Finances (Morissette, R., & Poulin, S., *Income Satisfaction Supplementary Summary of Four Survey Years*, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Labour and Household

more closely.

### **Critique of "Implied" Poverty Line Approaches**

A recent study (Edmonton Social Planning Council and Edmonton Gleaners Association, *Two Paycheques Away: Hunger and Social Policy in Edmonton*, 1996), quite strongly indicates that public assistance rates in Alberta do not provide enough income to meet basic needs of many Edmonton families. Therefore, these rates may underestimate the level of income necessary for providing basic needs and imply an inaccurate level of necessary income.

The utility of the findings from public opinion polls have been questioned. If estimates of after-tax income are inaccurate, can we expect that income required for basic needs is reported accurately? The ESPC's social research with low income families suggests that people can identify what they spend and do so in a reasonably reliable manner if asked in an appropriate way: through specification of various expenses by category.

### **Commodity Budget Approaches**

Approaches involving the determination of a necessary minimum group of goods and services and calculating their associated costs were first employed during the First World War in response to increased trade union pressure for general social minimum standards of living. These government initiatives in the U.S. and Canada yielded levels that were generally far in excess of what all unskilled and many skilled workers were earning at the time (Statistics Canada, *Census of Canada*, Ottawa, 1921). The levels were therefore reduced by eliminating more "discretionary" items such as health expenditure, life insurance, books and postage (Leadbeater, D., *Setting Minimum Standards in Canada: A Review*, Ottawa: Economic Council of Canada, 1992). This brought the levels to a more acceptable standard: below what

the Montreal Diet Dispensary, the Frasier Institute, and most recently by the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

The Metro Toronto Social Planning Council (MTSPC), (*Guides for Family Budgeting*, Toronto, 1992) with the assistance of experts and advisory panels drawn from the community, determined what necessary components should be contained in a basket of goods, based on the contents of what other community members have in theirs. The MTSPC commodity budget approach includes 13 categories of family expenses. For 1994, the MTSPC budget guidelines for Toronto were \$18,850 for a single employable, \$33,630 for a single parent with two children and \$40,560 for two parents with two children.

The Montreal Diet Dispensary Guideline's (MDDG) (*Budgeting for Basic Needs and Budgeting for Minimum Adequate Standard of Living*, Montreal, 1993) is separated into two levels: a basic needs and a standard for minimum adequate living. For the purposes of calculating dollar amount guidelines, the first level of costs are simply added to the second level. The physical minimum level that is described by MDDG contains 10 items and is intended to "maintain the family as a unit and preserve the health and self-respect of the individuals therein", while the 10 items in the health and decency level are designed for "minimal integration into society and to ensure good physical maintenance of the family" (Greene, 1993). For 1994, the MTSPC budget guidelines for Montreal were \$8,600 (Basic Need) and \$10,350 (Minimum Adequate) for a single employable, \$13,660 and \$17,360 for a single parent with two children and \$15,890 and \$19,960 for two parents with two children.

The Frasier Institute's (FI) (*Poverty in Canada*, 2nd ed., Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1996) poverty lines cost out the physical minimum standard of

necessary items and associated costs, employing specific strategies for economization. For 1994, the FI poverty line for Alberta was \$6,577 for a single employable, for a single parent with two children and \$12,441 and \$15,386 for two parents with two children.

The newly developed Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (SPCW) acceptable living level standards (*Acceptable Living Level*, Winnipeg, 1997) were released in 1997. The purpose of the project was to involve those experiencing poverty in the development of a relevant and appropriate measure of necessary goods and services. For 1997, the SPCW poverty line for Winnipeg was \$26,946 for a single parent with two children. (The study only calculated for one sample family—for more information see the article on page on Winnipeg in this issue).

Common to all of these models are a great number of judgments. For example; is taxi fare a bare subsistence level requirement, a health and decency level requirement, or a luxury? Such a judgment really depends on who you ask and to a lesser extent on how you ask. In terms of cost: are explicit economizing strategies involved and what exactly are they? Should it be assumed that a parent living on a low income will obtain and clip coupons for groceries, buy in bulk quantities and shop at stores where the goods are on sale, even if the stores are many blocks apart? Is there a point at which the time effort and cost are outweighed by any savings made in the interest of economizing? Clearly there are many individual and interrelated judgments involved in this approach and at both major stages of the process. ■■

*Jason Brown, M. Ed., R.S.W. is completing a doctorate degree in the department of educational psychology at the University of Alberta (U of A). Jason works on contract at the ESPC. Isabel Marangoni is a recent graduate of*

# Promoting Awareness

Here is your invitation to join the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO). NAPO is a non-profit organization established in 1971 to represent the interests of low-income Canadians. It is based in Ottawa and it advocates at the national level and supports similar provincial/territorial and local groups.

## It's more than just a membership...

Help us to continue working with over 700 grassroots, anti-poverty organizations across Canada to eliminate poverty in Canada.

## Our goal...

We want to attract more groups and individuals to become active members of our organization for the following reasons:

- make more people aware and get them involved in poverty issues,
- you can speak out on current issues of concern to your group,
- access the support and collaborative efforts of an nationwide network of organizations who have concerns similar to yours,
- notification of nationwide anti-poverty and social justice activities/events.

## Here is what NAPO's doing...

NAPO continues to be active:

- promoting the "Zero Poverty" campaign,
- to ensure the new child benefit is fair for all families,
- to fight poor-bashing



## If you join...

In addition to helping our work, your membership entitles you to a subscription of NAPO News, you have access to NAPO's Resource Centre which has one of the most comprehensive collections of data on issues relating to poverty: and you have important influence as a voting member of NAPO. A regular membership will cost \$2 per year (that's \$2, not \$20), an associate membership is \$50 and group membership costs vary according to annual revenue of group.

## Who can join...

Regular membership-anyone living in poverty or who has lived in poverty. Associate membership-any person who would like to support NAPO's work. Group membership-any group or organization with an interest in issues that concern the poor.

To join or receive more information contact NAPO at 440-325 Dalhousie Street, Ottawa, ON, K1N 7G2. You can reach them via telephone at (613) 789-0096 or by fax at 789-0141. NAPO also has an e-mail address:



# for Winnipeg

By The Winnipeg Social Planning Council

At present, many argue being poor implies an inability to participate fully in society. While a morally powerful statement the words ring hollow without putting the phrase into context. From our perspective, this concern gains credibility if it means the poor are unable to participate with some sense of choice in society. Economic choices are the fuel which power free market economies. We believe an "acceptable living level" should foster the opportunity for consumption choices to be made above and beyond mere subsistence levels.

In developing our *Acceptable Living Levels* (A.L.L.) for Winnipeg we engaged ideas about poverty and living standards in our community. What was unique about this process was the use of an evidence-based research approach with those living and experiencing poverty identifying their perceptions of needs, priorities and requirements.

Winnipeg Harvest and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg brought together a group of low income persons to discuss their perspective on what would constitute an adequate, reasonable living level. This group of six women and one male included members of the working poor as well as persons on social assistance.

The group began by adopting a definition of food security which includes the international standards Canada has agreed to for availability, access and utilization of sufficient food to meet peoples dietary needs for a productive and healthy life.

We developed our A.L.L. for a hypothetical family consisting of a single mother (female) with two children, a girl under six years of age and a boy 15 years of age. The mother is a non-smoker and does

Using an "absolute" approach to poverty based upon a reasonable but not extravagant expectation of living costs the group determined that this hypothetical family would require a yearly income of \$26,946. Based upon the National Council of Welfare report *Poverty Profile 1995*, a family of three in a city the size of Winnipeg would require \$28,115 to be above the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut Off (L.I.C.O.). This places the A.L.L. at \$1,169 below the L.I.C.O. for 1997.

In our hypothetical example shelter (28.9 per cent), food (22.6 per cent) and clothing (8.3 per cent) accounted for 59.8 per cent of the overall family budget. The other major budget categories are: child care (13.1 per cent), transportation (6.8 per cent), health care (5.8 per cent), recreation (4.0 per cent), risk management (2.4 per cent), household operations (2.1 per cent), personal care (1.7 per cent), home furnishings (1.5 per cent), education (1.1 per cent), communication (1.1 per cent) and banking (0.4 per cent).

In order to achieve this A.L.L., our hypothetical mother would have to work 40 hours a week at a job which pays \$14 an hour in order to make a gross income of \$26,880. At a tax rate of 17 per cent, she would see \$4,581 taken from her cheque yearly. Additional deductions would likely amount to more than \$1,000. Child tax benefits and GST rebates would add to her income an estimated \$1,200.

## Methodology

Our group met on three different occasions during April, May and June of 1997. From the outset we recognized that, whichever definition one wishes to embrace, poverty exists in Winnipeg. We do not

of an A.L.L. in Winnipeg.

From their earliest inception, studies of poverty have been plagued with difficulties in definition. In particular—is the concept best defined by reference to some absolute or relative standard? By using an absolute approach in defining consumption but recognizing a desire to acknowledge a “relative element” the group came up with an acceptable living level which recognized a standard people ought to be able to obtain. That is, a reasonable level of consumption given the living standards demonstrated by the majority of the community.

One way to design an A.L.L. is to start from a notion of a minimum level of consumption and attempt to translate that consumption into an appropriate income level. Such a measure would take into account characteristics such as family size, age of children and gender of household head. We then attempted to determine specific budgets for specific types of families that can support a level of consumption regarded as modest but acceptable. The budget developed during our discussions used nutritional requirements to establish benchmarks for expenditures on food. A similar procedure was followed for shelter costs, household operating costs, home furnishings, etc.

A total budget was then estimated. While establishing an A.L.L. in this manner is considerably more complex due to the variety of circumstances affecting consumption, it is evident such standards fare better than simple fixed income cut off points. However, one of the most difficult problems in translating income levels into consumption levels has to do with establishing a realistic and reasonable cost for a given amount of consumption. To the extent that prices change rapidly, any income based measure of consumption will require constant updating and even occasional revisiting of what is included in the “market basket.”

circumstances unable to afford basic needs are poor. There is general agreement incomes should be sufficient to provide for subsistence (however defined). However, in affluent societies such as Canada the notion of “subsistence level budgets” is often unacceptable and other budgets have been drawn up to provide for modest but “adequate” levels of living.

Taking up this challenge gives rise to the difficulty of deciding what is too much and what is too little. There is no universal or accepted standard of uniform goods and services which can be decided upon or defined. Furthermore, we recognize that the relationship between income and consumption is not a perfect one.

A cursory review of the literature reveals “absolute” approaches remain the least ambiguous and most generally acceptable basis on which to establish an acceptable living level. Hence, as long as the assumptions on which our measures were developed are clearly stated we believe our method is a reasonable approach to measuring an acceptable living level in Winnipeg. We recognize there are slight variations in the costs associated with children of different gender, especially as children enter pre-teen and teenage years, however, for the sake of clarity no distinction has been made for gender among children.

We do not promote the A.L.L. as a “poverty line.” Rather we envision an acceptable living level as an income level based on needs which represents a benchmark all families and individuals should not involuntarily fall below.

Finally, we envision this document being used in a variety of ways including self advocacy on behalf of those seeking fair social assistance rates and fair working wages. ■■

*This article was excerpted from the Acceptable*

# That Leave Us Smiling



By Duff Conacher

The proposed Royal Bank-Bank of Montreal merger has sparked a lively debate. Even Finance Minister Paul Martin has rejected the banks' merger rationale, refuting their fear of foreign banks.

A February poll found a majority of Canadians (55 per cent) opposed the proposed merger, with only six per cent strongly in favour. And no wonder.

With \$452 billion in combined assets and 17 million customers, the new megabank would control almost half the total assets of Canada's big five banks, offering Canadians even less choice.

A study of thousands of U.S. bank mergers found that they led to higher fees, closed branches and less customer service.

Hostility to the merger touches on widespread discontent with banks. Surveys in the past two years by the National Quality Institute of over 8,000 Canadians regarding customer satisfaction with various industries found banks near the bottom of the heap.

Yet it is possible to require banks to be accountable to local communities and to serve all customers fairly. U.S. experience with the 20-year-old Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) proves it.

The CRA requires deposit-taking financial institutions to help meet local credit and deposit service needs in a manner "consistent with the safe and sound operation of the institutions."

Financial institutions' performance in meeting needs is revealed by requiring them to disclose detailed data about their loans, investments and services. After reviewing the data, the U.S. government grades each institution's performance. Those who fail can be

Here's an example of the CRA's benefits. The Bank of Montreal and Toronto-Dominion own U.S. banks that comply with U.S. laws. Before the Bank of Montreal could expand its subsidiary, Harris Bank of Chicago, in 1994, Harris Bank had to correct its poor lending and service record, revealed by disclosure of data under the CRA. To do so, it pledged \$327 million in credit and assistance for affordable housing, small business loans and other community needs in the Chicago area.

Thanks to the CRA, poor performance by financial institutions in servicing some U.S. communities has been revealed and the institutions have invested \$353 billion in response to public pressure and regulators—a terrific boost to the communities involved.

Canada could enact other laws based on positive U.S. models. For example, at least 400,000 Canadian adults have no bank account, in large part due to excessive bank identification requirements. An informal survey by the Canadian Community Reinvestment Coalition (CCRC) last fall revealed that five of the big six banks still require photo ID, maintenance of a minimum balance, or employment to open an account. In contrast, U.S. states such as New York require banks to offer basic banking services to everyone.

Many people feel bewildered by the hundreds of products and services offered by banks. They're upset about high service fees and credit card charges, but feel powerless.

A Financial Consumer Organization (FCO) could offer advice to consumers about financial products and could advocate for their interests. The FCO

The March 1998 issue of *First Reading* included an article by a previous client of Goodwill's Power of Work Program. The Power of Work Program is an employment training initiative funded by the provincial government. The article described an individual's negative experience not only with the social welfare system but with the Power of Work Program itself. This response provides readers with a broader view of one of Alberta's employment training initiatives and some insights, both general and specific, into Goodwill's role in the social welfare system of this province.

We contend that while employment training programs are far from perfect, they have helped and continue to help individuals improve their lives, not only financially but psychologically and emotionally.

Goodwill's Power of Work is one of the most long-term and comprehensive of such programs currently available. Clients that enter the program face a variety of barriers, ranging from lack of support, to poverty, to mental health issues. As such, the main thrust of Power of Work is to truly provide social assistance in the sense that clients are provided not only with monetary support, but with support in life management and employment related skills. Essentially, we assist participants as individuals first and foremost, with the clear logic that this approach ultimately enhances not only their overall quality of life but their employability.

Our committed staff, who average over 10 years of experience each, help clients match their services to their particular needs. Participants are able to choose from an array of services including: orientation and assessment, life skills, personal development, career planning and assessment, computer training, job search training, job placement, and on the job support.

services if they feel the need, or they may even return to the program if issues arise in their employment. Only after learning and feeling comfortable with their skills do participants actively engage in the job search component of job placement service.

Contrary to specific allegations presented in the past article, pressuring a participant into a job they do not desire is of no benefit to Goodwill. Not only do we desire long-term job maintenance for the benefit of all concerned, but contractually, Goodwill is given a fee for each client who maintains his or her employment for one and three months. Goodwill does not receive dollars up front for each participant with an unspecified portion returned to the government should the participant not find employment.

The contract that has been agreed upon between Goodwill and the provincial government is one that involves many stakeholders. Though we all have the same goal—lasting employment for participants—each stakeholder perceives the attainment of the goal in a different perspective. As a service provider, Goodwill attempts to maximize the combined efforts of all involved, the funder, the referral agents, the service provider and, most importantly, the participant, to ensure that the different perspectives work together towards a successful outcome.

Our efforts to bring all perspectives together is more often successful than not—as borne out by the large number of positive testimonials, letters and evaluative comments from participants.

The following is one example of those ongoing reflections of the Power of Work.

*My name is Sheila* and I am writing this letter to let you know how Power of Work has been for me. I have attended other programs and have never had any use for them until now. Power of Work is

Phone: (416) 231-2081  
Fax: (416) 231-2080

Canadian Community Reinvestment Coalition (CCRC)

*Banks—Continued from page 30*

institutions enclosed a flyer in their mailings to customers inviting them to join the FCO, for a small annual fee.

Again, the U.S. provides a model. In four U.S. states, utilities have been required to enclose a flyer in their customer mailings, resulting in effective citizen watchdog groups. Three to five percent of utility customers have joined these groups, meaning that a Canadian FCO would have between 600,000 and one million members, and an annual budget of over \$10 million—a strong base for countering the powerful bank lobby.

Canada is 20 years behind the U.S. in terms of bank accountability. Meanwhile, Canada's banks are heading for another year of record profits. It's about time, especially given the proposed Royal-Bank of Montreal merger, that the federal government took steps like those outlined above to catch up.

We all need to send a message to Finance Minister Paul Martin and our MPs in Ottawa, as the government considers the proposed megabank merger and changes to the federal Bank Act. (You can write your MP, postage-free, at House of Commons, Ottawa, Ont. K1A 0A6; the Internet address for finding MPs' email addresses is <http://www.parl.gc.ca/36/sm-e.htm>). The federal taskforce on financial services also needs to hear from more citizens calling for bank accountability reforms (email: [finservertaskforce@fin.gc.ca](mailto:finservertaskforce@fin.gc.ca)).

If enough Canadians speak out for bank accountability reforms, we can make a difference. ■

*Duff Conacher is Chairperson of the Canadian Community Reinvestment Coalition, a 74-group national coalition representing three million Canadians that advocates for bank accountability. The Council and the Alberta Federation of Labour are CCRC supporters. For more information contact the CCRC: fax (613) 241-4758, email: [cancrc@web.net](mailto:cancrc@web.net), Internet: <http://www.cancrc.org> or write P.O. Box 1040, Station B, Ottawa, Ont. K1P 5R1.*