

# Invest in Families: Ending Child Poverty is Good for All



Thomas Baril

**In Canada, nearly 1 in 5 children live below the poverty line.** This leads to debilitating effects for their personal and physical and mental health, which can cause lasting damage. They are more vulnerable to issues affecting mental health, educational attainment, health and cognitive development, housing, relationships, employment, and food insecurity.

Since 2008, the Edmonton Social Planning Council, Public Interest Alberta, and the Alberta College of Social Workers have been releasing child poverty reports, which serve to inform the public on the effects of poverty, current efforts undertaken by governments to address it, and offer recommendations in which they can improve in these programs going forward.

This fACTsheet, which serves as a companion to the full report, will explore the most recent data and programs that help to reduce poverty and its effects.

## Where We Are At Now

Over the last 10 years, the proportion of those living in poverty has slowly declined among all family types.

While couple families have experienced greater drops in child poverty, poverty rates have seen an increase among children from lone-parent families. While 1 in 12 children from couple families experience poverty, 1 in 2 children in lone-parent families are in poverty. This means that the benefits of improved family transfer programs are not shared equally.

Due to higher incomes on average, Alberta has a slightly lower child poverty rate compared to the national average with 1 in 6 children experiencing poverty in the province.

## Indigenous Children

In Alberta, 6.5% of the general population are Indigenous – which includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples – while Indigenous children account for 11% of the entire child population. There continues to be a disparity among child poverty rates among Indigenous and non-Indigenous children as a result of decades of discrimination and intergenerational harm. On a national level, 47% of First Nations children live in poverty while the rate of poverty for non-racialized, non-recent immigrant, non-Indigenous children sits at 12%.

Due to these circumstances, they are more likely to be affected by trauma and mental health issues, low high school completion rates, poor health, unemployment, child welfare interventions, and homelessness.

Poverty rates for First Nations children, both on and off reserve, have been in decline since 2010. However, they continue to experience poverty at vastly different rates – 58% of Indigenous children living on reserve experience poverty compared to 26% of those who live off reserve.

## Affordable and Accessible Child Care

Access to high quality, universally accessible, and affordable childcare is a proven method for lowering child poverty. Studies show that children in universal, low-cost child care have better physical health, developmental, and psychological conditions by age 6 to 7. Better health means children can live fuller lives, miss fewer days of school, and contribute meaningfully to the physical and mental health of our society.

Child care for a family is one of the biggest household expenses, which can be as high as 67% of their monthly income. This makes it extremely difficult for a family to afford nutritious food, housing, education, and other essentials.

The effects of universally accessible and affordable child care are especially profound when it comes to families headed by single mothers, who are among those most affected by poverty. Collaboration between the federal and provincial governments is necessary to provide a solid foundation for improving availability and affordability of child care.

## Housing

Affordable housing is a necessity to prevent and combat child poverty in Alberta. The federal and provincial government, along with municipal governments throughout the province have created Housing Strategy plans to address homelessness and poverty.

The Canadian National Housing Strategy aims to decrease chronic homelessness by 50% within 10 years. As part of the National Housing Strategy, federal and provincial governments have agreed to develop a portable Canada Housing Benefit initially delivering an average of \$2,500 per year to qualifying households. This proposed national benefit has the potential to significantly expand the number of households receiving direct rent subsidies.

With the change in government on the provincial level, uncertainty persists on the province's commitment to their share of affordable housing initiatives. Funding to the Rental Assistance Program will be cut by 24% along with a 3.5% reduction in operating budgets for housing management bodies like Capital Region Housing. It is unclear how vulnerable populations relying on these programs will be affected, but it is expected that their risk of eviction will increase.

## Family Violence

Family violence within the home correlates with child poverty and homelessness. In 2017, nearly 60,000 children and youth in Canada were victims of police-reported family violence incidents. More than half of the children were female. A 6% increase of police-reported family violence and non-violence was observed from 2016 to 2017. The overall numbers of children who experience family violence is expected to be much greater due to under-reporting to police.

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters identified an increase in unemployment rates for women accessing shelter services. In addition, nearly half of women and children were turned away from an emergency shelter due to capacity shortages.

Family violence has significant effects on children such as increased impulsivity, behavioural issues, decreased emotional regulation, increased risk of crime, and increased risk of family violence throughout life.

## Access to Health Services

While the provincial government has introduced a series of new funding commitments in the areas of mental health and addictions, opioid response strategy, palliative care, and a new sexual assault hotline, there are also serious cuts to health services as a whole.

In the area of mental health and children, the number of hospitalizations of children related to mental health issues have been steadily increasing, which includes increased emergency room visits related to self-harm. Despite commitments to a mental health and addictions strategy, no concrete information on what the strategy will look like has been made available thus far. In turn, necessary mental health projects are being delayed, such as a proposed child and adolescent mental health centre at the Royal Alexandra Hospital.

Changes to the Alberta Seniors Drug Benefit program will end coverage for non-senior dependents, which include grandchildren being raised by their grandparents. There currently is no pharmaceutical coverage for children in Alberta. The only program that provides some coverage is the Alberta Child Health Benefit, which provides health coverage for children 18 and under in low-income families. The income thresholds for families to qualify are also very low, and those who do not qualify end up paying substantial sums of out of pocket for pharmaceuticals and other services.

A universal prescription drug coverage program would go a long way to addressing these deficiencies.