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# The Influence of Policy on Childhood Poverty in Selected Provinces in Canada

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## Executive Summary

Canada was ranked as the 15th richest country in the world, however despite this ranking, the country has been highlighted by internal organisations such as UNICEF and OECD for its actions in addressing social issues within its nation, specifically childhood poverty. It is concerning that the decision undertaken by the House of Commons in 1989 to eradicate childhood poverty by the year 2000 still has not been met. In addition, various reports have stated that the childhood poverty rate within Canada has either slightly increased or remained stable and no study has reported a decrease in childhood poverty. One of the contributing factors to Canada's overall childhood poverty rate may be the division of power between the federal, provincial and territorial governments. With each jurisdiction addressing this social issue separately, some provinces may have more effective methods in addressing this situation. Another contributing factor may be the fact that Canada has not concretely defined what constitutes poverty within Canada nor has it presented a formal plan to address the issue.

The purpose of this paper is to examine possible explanations for the less than desirable childhood poverty rates within Canada. By focussing on the importance of policy creation in addressing poverty, this paper focuses on the policy environment of the three provinces: Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec, and examines how these three distinctively different provinces address the issue of childhood poverty within their province.

This paper concludes that the creation of a comprehensive policy inclusive of contributions from all stakeholders of poverty reduction constructed on both economic and social factors is the most effective manner in addressing the social issue of childhood poverty.

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## Introduction

The International Monetary Fund has currently ranked Canada as the 15th richest country in the world using the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) based on the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). This ranking is based on Canada being home to some of the world's most sought after natural resources including; natural gas, diamonds, coal and gold. The political stability of Canada and its welcoming immigration policies have also created a safe haven for immigrants. This is evident by the number of immigrants which have historically entered into Canada per annum, ranging from 250,000 in 1992 to 285,000 in 2014. Canada's 9th place ranking (UNDP, 2015) in the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) is a benefit for the majority of the 35,749, 600 who call Canada home.

Yet, despite the many accolades, Canada exhibits signs of failing to sufficiently provide for some of its most vulnerable. In a 2014 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Social Expenditure report Canada was ranked 28th out of 34 OECD countries for the total contribution of GDP spent on social expenditure (OECD, 2014). According to the OECD, social expenditure describes the amount a nation contributes to certain policy areas including but not limited to: the elderly, health, family, unemployment and early childhood education and care (ECEC). The nation's contribution to these social areas can highly influence the well-being of a nation. The low ranking of Canada's social expenditure is problematic primarily due to 2011 data produced by Statistics Canada which reported over 4 million Canadians were living as low-income citizens (Statistics Canada, 2013). This is despite the fact that Canada was ranked 15th as the world's wealthiest country (worldbank.org, 2014). What is also of great concern is that of the 4 million plus low-income citizens, 546,000 children under 18 years of age live in impoverished conditions. This concerning number is highlighted by a UNICEF report which ranked Canada 17th out of 29 wealthy countries for impoverished children (www.cwp-csp.ca, 2013). This is a significant number due to the vow made in the House of Commons in 1989 to eradicate childhood poverty within Canada by the year 2000.



A childhood poverty rate, like the overall poverty rate, is a matter which cannot be addressed comprehensively but must be approached on an individual factor basis. One of the issues which can be examined includes the area of government expenditure. As noted earlier, social expenditure describes how much the government contributes to certain social policies. However, despite the government's vow to eradicate childhood poverty, the OECD reported in 2009 that Canada spends roughly between 0.2% and 0.34% of its GDP on early childhood care. This is notwithstanding the fact that not only have a majority of OECD countries maintained historically high levels of social spending, but Canada's GDP spending on social programmes has actually decreased by 1.5-2.5% (OECD, 2014). Through the highlighting and comparisons of social expenditure by Canada and other OECD nations, the OECD report reflects that despite its wealth Canada is failing to support some of the Nation's most vulnerable. Canada's welfare state is missing the mark on providing a universal social well-being for most of its marginalised citizens. By focussing on the most vulnerable, the report will scrutinize the disconnect between the vow made to eradicate childhood poverty and the actions undertaken by governments to address this social ailment.

This report will demonstrate that poverty reduction and/or eradication extends far beyond making a decision to act but must incorporate a decisive plan of action and programming to proactively target poverty reduction. By highlighting the three provinces of British Columbia, Quebec and Alberta while analysing their social and economic policies, this report will satisfy three objectives. Firstly, it will examine the three provinces to decipher which policy approach may be the most beneficial to address childhood poverty; secondly as Alberta has recently elected a new government, it will suggest the best path the province can take in order to address childhood poverty within that province; and thirdly, as Canada is yet to meet its goal of childhood poverty eradication the report will delve into possible recommendations which may bring Canada one step closer to meeting its goal of childhood poverty eradication.

## Rational

**Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural, it is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.**

**Nelson Mandela (2005)**

By viewing poverty through the lens of Nelson Mandela, there is hope that poverty can be positively addressed and eliminated. Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan states that, *"Wherever we lift one soul from a life of poverty, we are defending human rights. And whenever we fail in this mission, we are failing human rights"* (2010). This acknowledges the importance of human contribution to poverty stating that humankind is capable of both creating and eradicating poverty. According to Annan, the importance of addressing poverty is necessary as he equates poverty to a human right violation. As poverty falls under the overarching umbrella of social-wellbeing, Canada must examine the role it plays in maintaining poverty as a result of the poor rating it received in the OECD's social expenditure report. Subsequently, it is of greater importance that Canada addresses its role in preserving the climate which perpetuates childhood poverty primarily due to the promise made by the government in 1989 to eradicate childhood poverty. By virtue of a child's vulnerability, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) outlined by the United Nations solidifies why childhood poverty must be addressed. The declaration states that by reason of a child's physical and mental immaturity, children need special safe guards and care, including and legislative protection before and after birth must be taken. As a signatory to this convention, it is the responsibility of the Canadian government to ensure the universal well-being of all its children.

However, as a result of the division of powers between the federal, provincial and territorial governments, childhood poverty reduction rests heavily in the hands of the provincial and territorial governments. Therefore, a crucial step in examining childhood poverty within Canada is to dissect the policies of provinces and territories to decipher what role they play in Canada's overall child poverty landscape. Using specific criteria, the provinces of British Columbia, Quebec and Alberta were selected to spotlight as we evaluate their roles in Canada's overall childhood poverty rate.

British Columbia (BC) has for seven consecutive years maintained the nation's worst childhood poverty rate. Therefore, the report will draw on areas where BC can improve and what human actions or lack of action have contributed to its tarnished childhood poverty rating. Quebec will be featured due to it maintaining the nation's lowest childhood poverty rate throughout the provinces (Campaign 2000, 2013). Quebec's universal childcare assistance will be addressed as many attribute this policy to the province's esteemed ranking.

Lastly, Alberta is currently the nation's richest province and has steadily maintained its ranking within the nation's top three provinces for lowest childhood poverty rate. Recent events however have placed Alberta in danger of losing its prestigious ranking of maintaining low childhood poverty rates. An economic downslide as well as a change in government stand as excellent reasons for Alberta to lose leverage and negatively affect Canada's overall rate. Therefore, an examination of what possible endeavours Alberta can undergo to continuously assist the less fortunate childhood population will be undertaken.

It is the intention of this paper to examine the policies of Canada and the three highlighted provinces in order to determine the impact of policies on childhood poverty.

## Synopsis of Childhood Poverty in Canada

In 1989 the House of Commons acknowledged a lapse in Canada's desired welfare state and concluded that the elimination of childhood poverty needed to be addressed. Reaching a unanimous decision, the House of Commons vowed to increase its efforts to eliminate childhood poverty by the year 2000. Despite its noble intentions, no clear cut national plan of action nor mechanism was ever erected by the government to address or monitor the progress of childhood poverty eradication (*Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada*, 2010). This led to many advocates within the anti-poverty sphere growing weary over the government's lack of action pertaining to childhood poverty eradication. In response, the non-partisan national movement Campaign 2000, emerged in 1991 to hold the government accountable to its 1989 promise (Campaign 2000).

Comprised of national and regional partners as well as various local organisations, Campaign 2000 consists of 120 cross national stakeholders who are committed to eradicating childhood poverty within Canada. In 2014, Campaign 2000 produced data which stated a staggering 1.3 million Canadian children are currently living in poverty; equating to nearly 1 in 5 impoverished children making Canada's child poverty rate roughly 19% (Campaign 200 Report 2014). This is a significant increase from 1989 when the Canadian child poverty rate was 15.8%. Even more disconcerting is that among the indigenous population, the child poverty rate is a dismal 40%.

According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, both Manitoba and Saskatchewan have the highest child poverty rate amongst First Nations. A staggering two out of three First Nation status children are said to be living in poverty ([www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca), 2013).

When studying childhood poverty, it is imperative to understand that childhood poverty does not exist in isolation, it is not an individual variable but a subsector of a much larger problem. This is evident in the fact that poverty is not distributed evenly across society but is disproportionately represented amongst racialized families, immigrant families, lone female households and families affected by disability (Federal Report 2010). This may suggest that childhood poverty is also most prevalent amongst the most vulnerable in Canadian society. Therefore, it can be concluded that if the goal of any group, organisation or government is to address the plight of childhood poverty, the primary factors which lead to adult poverty should also be addressed. This is because children are not impoverished in isolation but poverty stricken children come from poverty stricken homes. (*Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada*, 2010). What has been suggested by many anti-poverty advocates as well as government officials is that addressing poverty cannot be a solo effort but needs the dedication and cooperation of provinces, territories, Aboriginal governments, non-governmental organisations and even those living in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2014). It is also the belief of Campaign 2000 that the first step needed to address the issue of poverty is for all levels of government to consult with one another in order to develop a coordinated poverty eradication strategy (Campaign 2000, 2014).

## Defining Poverty in Canada

The plea from Campaign 2000 for a unified poverty reduction strategy is warranted as currently there is no comprehensive definition for what constitutes poverty in Canada. Without one agreed upon definition of poverty, Canada and its provinces, territories, municipalities and First Nation communities work in segregated arenas to combat a national problem. In general, poverty is defined in both absolute and relative terms; absolute poverty is viewed as the inability to obtain the basic necessities of life while relative poverty is defined as a relative social and economic disadvantage in comparison with others living in the same community (UNESCO.org). It is the custom in most developed nations such as Canada to use the latter expression of poverty (relative) to define and measure poverty levels in a society. As a modern welfare state, Canada's impoverished population can best be described using Peter Townsend's, a British Sociologist and social activist, definition of poverty. He measures poverty and inequality by stating that

**Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged, or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.**

*(Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada, 2010. p.9)*

As this definition appears to be the most fitting for the Canadian society, this report will look at poverty within in Canada using Peter Townsend's definition as the foundation for how we measure poverty.

## Measuring Poverty in Canada

Canada's lack of agreed upon definition for poverty also means that no national apparatus exists to measure poverty. As a result, varying data has been reported. Dependant on sources used for both referencing and measuring indicators of childhood poverty, childhood poverty between 1989 and 2006 either steadily remained around 12% (statistics

Canada) or increased from 15% (1989) to 19% (2006, Campaign 2000), but failed to decline despite the 1989 House of Commons unanimous decision to eradicate poverty by 2000. The discrepancy in numbers maybe a result of changes made that have effected data collection. As well, when different indicators are used by governmental and non-governmental sources when collecting and analysing data, this will yield different results.

In 2011, the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) was discontinued by Statistics Canada making it difficult for some anti-poverty groups to effectively collect data on Canada's poor. In the same year, the federal government also defunded the National Council of Welfare, a rich resource for national data on Welfare Income and Poverty Profiles. Some of the groups, such as Campaign 2000, instead utilised data from Statistics Canada's T1 Family File (T1FF) taxfiler which is based on income tax returns of Canadians as well as the Canada Child Tax Benefit data. While the Low Income Measure (LIM) is described by Statistics Canada as a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted household income (households which earn less than 50% of the median adjusted are said to be living in poverty), it does not give a clear overall picture of true poverty within Canada. This is because the median average is taken from data collected nationally; the data is then placed into a pool where data from all territories and provinces is aggregated to produce a median adjusted average. This can be problematic because individuals living in poverty in more expensive provinces like Ontario cannot be compared to impoverished individuals living in a less expensive province such as Manitoba. The adjusted median household marker used in the LIM may obscure the realities of Canada's poor due to the omission of cost of living and spending power when the average is being calculated. Anti-poverty advocates argue the importance of a defined national poverty strategy as well as for the addition of a national measuring mechanism so as to not minimise or maximise the realism of Canada's poor (Child Poverty Report Card BC, 2014). As a result of the provincial and territorial disparities which do exist, it is imperative that any national measuring mechanism that may be created must incorporate cross-national and multi-sector provincial and territorial stakeholders in order to develop a mechanism that will capture the true scope of Canada's impoverished population.

## The Federal Government's Role in Addressing Childhood Poverty

Despite the absence of an official poverty strategy, it is important to note that the federal government continuously attempts to aid in reducing poverty by cushioning the financial burden for parents. Established in 1918, the Canadian government introduced a temporary measure known as the children's tax exemption to aid parents as they raise their children (Battle, 2015). Although the measure was more geared towards parental recognition as opposed to poverty reduction, the federal government continued on the path of both recognising the financial responsibility parents bear as well as aiding those parents who could not financially meet the responsibility of child rearing.

Throughout the years, various child benefits have been introduced within Canada including the Universal Family Allowances (1945), the Child Tax Credit (1978) and the non-refundable Child Tax Credit (1988) (Battle, 2015). However in 1993 under the Liberals, Canada experienced a social policy reformation and all existing child benefits were reconstructed and amalgamated in to one benefit known as the Child Tax Benefit (CTB). In response to the federal government changes, provinces and territories reformed their child benefit policies allowing for all governments to work in tandem to tackle the issues of childhood poverty. The CTB was constructed as a progressive tax benefit where benefits decreased as family income increased. All families with similar incomes received the same amount of aid regardless of family type or where the family resided. This funding was administered by the government as a poverty reduction strategy and was designed to be non-stigmatizing. It was designed to assist families to offset the gap between insufficient income and family expenditure. However, the policy was not without flaws. During this time, provinces and territories were also dispersing child benefits to families that were on welfare. The result was that the working poor were disadvantaged as families on welfare received twice as much as families with at least one working parent. This created a 'welfare wall,' where it became more beneficial to remain on welfare than participate in the labour force (Battle, 2015). Acknowledging the discrepancies with the structure of the CTB, the federal government and provincial/territorial government worked collectively to once again reform Canada's child benefits and launched the National Child Benefit Initiative in 1998.

The National Child Benefit Initiative was an action plan that was fuelled by the new Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB). The CCTB, which maintained the same benefits of the CTB, offered an additional benefit known as the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS). While the CCTB was geared towards aiding the poor as well as most non-poor, the NCBS was targeted towards low income families (Battle, 2015). The NCBS was designed to allow for provincial and territorial governments to reduce the amount of welfare child benefits dollar for dollar in comparison to the federal government's contribution. The provinces and territories, were then given the option to reinvest the savings in to services which were geared towards low income families, such as early learning and child care services, supplementary health care or any other child program the province deemed necessary. All levels of government were pleased with this new method of child benefit reform. Battle (2015) stated that it was the federal government's plan that as their payments increased, the CCTB alone or in conjunction with the provincial/ territorial welfare plans would replace the provincial and territorial welfare child benefits which was estimated at \$2,500 (1998) per child ( or \$3,500 per child when converted to 2015 dollars). By following this initiative, Canada would have achieved an integrated child benefit system; this meant regardless of income source, all low income families would receive the same amount of federal benefits. The initiative addressed the 'welfare wall' phenomenon which was previously created as all low income families, working poor and welfare recipients, received the same amount of government funding.

Kevin Milligan and Mark Stabile (2009) predicted that this form of reform would positively affect welfare families as it allowed recipients to access welfare funding while participating in the labour force. In 2007, both Milligan and Stabile showed that this policy provided a strong incentive for all family types receiving welfare to enter the workforce while simultaneously receiving benefits. Ken Battle (2015) reported that empirical evidence from government agencies, think tanks and academic research showed that Canada's National Child Benefit Initiative produced positive results including a reduction of poverty, improved test scores by children and an overall well-being for families. Milligan and Stabile (2009) credit the fact that financial security diminishes household stress, provides financial support for essentials such as food and other necessities, which in turn positively affects the life of a



child. Both Milligan and Stabile (2006, 2009) and Battle (1997, 2015) highlight extensively throughout their work the positive benefits of Ottawa's National Child Benefit Initiative. Although during their time in Ottawa the Liberals under Jean Chretien and Paul Martin readjusted and declined social spending in an attempt to balance a budget, they steadily and substantially increased the Canada Child Tax Benefit between 1997 and 2006 in an attempt to positively affect Canadian families.

The federal government's spending on Canadian families continued into 2006 when the Conservatives took office. Restructuring some of the social spending policies which the Liberals introduced, they left the CCTB intact, which was shown to positively impact Canada's low income parents. By 2007, the federal spending on child benefits was \$13.1 billion. The Conservative government also reintroduced policies of the past including the Universal Child Care Benefit (former Family Allowance benefit) for children under the age of six years old as well as the non-refundable Child Tax Credit. However, unlike the policies under the Liberals, the Conservative policies were geared more towards parental recognition rather than poverty reduction. The Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) is a benefit which is subject to both federal and provincial/territorial income taxes. As a result, the \$100 a month payment per child under six, which is guaranteed regardless of family income, is dependent on existing taxes within the province of residence which reduces the final amount families receive. As well, the UCCB payment is structured in such a way that single parent homes are exempted from the UCCB taxation while two parent households remain taxable. This results in single parent homes, two-parent one income homes and two income homes receiving different amounts of benefits despite the fact that they may have similar incomes. This is unfortunate because two earner households receive the least amount of the three groups despite the fact that they may receive an equal or even lower amount of income than the other two groups.

Within Canada, child benefits are founded on the logic that income security programs should be geared towards providing financial assistance to all families regardless of tax bracket. This means that financial aid should take the form of both poverty reduction as well as parental recognition. However many anti-poverty advocates and low income families argue that any additional spending that is incurred by the federal government would be best

utilised in addressing the social issues which contribute to childhood poverty within Canada. One area where many advocates as well as parents would appreciate more governmental input is the area of early childhood education and care. Many factors including lack of available spaces and affordability of care highly influence the poverty levels of families. The 2010 Federal government report on poverty stated that lone parents are often the most affected by inadequate childcare options. Because parents are unable to work in the absence of proper childcare, lone parent employment prospects are drastically reduced increasing their vulnerability to earning instability (Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada, 2010). Perhaps the most efficient mean of addressing this issue is through a comprehensive national childcare program with established criteria and a set mandate which provinces / territories must follow in order to provide quality childcare for all. By investing in this sector, affordable and adequate childcare can allow more lone parents to enter in to the workforce increasing their income as well as bolstering the Canadian economy.

## Impact of Childcare on Childhood Poverty

As discussed earlier, one of the leading factors which often contribute to childhood poverty is the inability of low income parents' ability to afford childcare. This is compounded by inadequate and unaffordable childcare options. Parents who choose employment as their main source of financial support are often faced with the dilemma of working and finding acceptable childcare. Macdonald and Friendly (2014) reported that although Canadian parents are among the most likely to be employed, Canada spends less on childhood education and care than most other OECD countries (*The Parent Trap. Child Care Fees in Canada's Big Cities*, 2014). Ranked 35 out of 39 OECD countries for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) expenditures as share of GDP, the OECD reports that Canada spends somewhere between 0.2% and 0.34% of its GDP on early childhood education and care (Macdonald and Friendly, 2014). Research states that ECEC can greatly improve a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development, help create a foundation for long time learning, make children's learning outcomes more equitable, reduce poverty and improve social mobility

from generation to generation (*Education Indicators in Focus*, 2013). In this context, the OCED urges the Canadian government to play a more pronounced role in the early childhood education sector. Across most OECD countries, the majority of children enter educational institutions before the age of five. In Belgium, France and Iceland 95% of their young children are in some form of early educational program. However in recent decades, Canadian enrolment for children ages 4 to 5 was less than 60% ranking Canada 35 out of 38 OCED countries leaving Canada below the OECD average (*Education Indicators in Focus*, 2013). The significance of Canada's limited public spending on ECEC programs is that the lack of government contribution may lead to ECEC programs being restricted to affluent families as these families represent the demographic of those who can afford ECEC programs. If ECEC programs continue on their current path, what may occur is an increase in the gap between those who can easily afford adequate childcare and those who struggle with affordable childcare. A national comprehensive childcare program funded by the federal government may produce a beneficial outcome resulting in accessible and affordable childcare for all.

Due to Canada's constitutional separation of power between the provinces, territories and federal government, provincial and territorial jurisdiction is restricted to healthcare, education, welfare and direct taxation amongst other sectors while federal jurisdiction includes such areas as peace, order, and good governance. The segregated jurisdiction has created disparity between the provinces and has created an inequitable reality for the children of Canada. For example, in Toronto an infant space in day care can cost a parent close to \$1,676 a month while in Quebec as day care space for the same age group will cost a parent \$152 a month. Macdonald and Friendly (2014) report that more than three-quarters of Canadian mothers with children under six years of age and a greater number of fathers are part of the labour force. At some point after the birth of their children, parents must return back to the workforce. This leaves parents in need of childcare. Unfortunately, cost and availability of childcare is one of the most daunting realities facing parents who must re-enter the workforce. Subsequently, for many low income women, their participation in the work force is closely linked with accessibility to childcare. Evidence suggests where childcare is more accessible, women's labour

force participation and birth-rates often hold steady or increase (Macdonald and Friendly, 2014). Macdonald and Friendly reported that in Quebec where the province has placed a childcare cap of \$7.30 per day, women's participation in the workforce is 8% to 12% higher than in any other province. What this analysis shows is the importance of accessible childcare for working parents, especially females. Affordable and available childcare allows parents the opportunity to earn an income which decreases the stress of having to juggle finances to cover housing, food, utilities and other expenses. If the federal government increased its presence in the ECEC sector, perhaps the burden of choosing between childcare cost, food and rent for parents would be diminished. In addition, accessible childcare translates to increased labour force participation (Macdonald and Friendly, 2014), which may then contribute to a successful economy. In conclusion, the trickledown effect which comes from accessible childcare for all can positively impact parents who are able to work, children who positively benefit from early childhood education and care, employed childcare workers within childcare centres, as well the overall economy which receives a boost from more employed citizens.

### Synopsis of Poverty within British Columbia

As one of the top 5 richest provinces within Canada, British Columbia was reported to have the highest child poverty rate in a 2013 First Call report. First Call (2013), a BC based child and youth advocacy coalition, reported for the 7th consecutive year in a row that BC's rate of 18.6% surpassed the national rate of 13.3%. In 2011, using Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Offs (LICOs) before tax, the number of poor children in BC reached 153, 000 with 77,000 living in Metro Vancouver alone and the remaining 76,000 distributed in various areas of the province (First Call BC Report Card, 2013) .

- **BC had the worst poverty rate of any province for children living in a single mother household (49.8%); and the worst poverty rate of any province for children living in a dual parent household (14%)**
- **BC's poverty rate for children under 6 years of age is at 20.7 percent 8 percentage points higher than the national average**

*First Call BC Report Card, 2013*

The First Call report placed B.C fifth in the nation for child poverty rate, but also cautioned about the drop in rankings. The change in data collection nationwide during 2010 and 2011 saw the cancellation of the long form census (First Call BC Report Card, 2014).

B.C is unique in the fact that it is the only province resolute against establishing a comprehensive provincial strategy to combat poverty within in its province. This is despite the fact that 1 in 5 children live in poverty in BC. The pressure from numerous poverty advocacy groups is considerable (First Call BC Report, 2013). In 2011 in an attempt to enact a provincially backed poverty reduction plan, the BC New Democratic Party introduced into the BC Legislature a bill which, if passed, would have allowed BC to join the majority of provinces and territories in implementing a comprehensive political strategy to address poverty reduction (First Call BC Report, 2014). The bill, *Poverty Reduction Act, 2011*, was designed to lessen the inequality gap between the citizens of BC. Noting that many poor within the province were working poor, the act was designed to develop a strategy to target factors which led to impoverishment.

The 2011 Poverty Reduction Act would have endeavoured to address the social and economic factors which contributed to poverty. The act suggested that a lead minister in conjunction with a designated cabinet committee co-chaired by the minister and Premier be established. By doing this, certain issues such 4 (b) *the diverse needs of the residents of British Columbia* as well as 4 (c) *factors that lead to sustain poverty*, would be addressed (Simpson, 2011). The act however did not request financial contribution from the provincial government but simply sought an increased dialogue and collaboration from the federal government on the issue of poverty reduction. However, the Liberal MLAs were not in agreement with the NDP party at that time and the bill was never passed. In contrast, the BC's Liberals believed that the promotion of capitalist values and free markets would transform the poverty epidemic within BC as opposed to addressing both the social and financial factors (First Call, 2013).

The Minister of Children and Family Development, Stephanie Cadieux, has eluded to and stated numerous times that “[the provincial government] will continue to target economic growth as the best method to reduce poverty, simply because it works” (First Call, 2013). In

2012, Cadieux also openly stated that a one size strategy cannot fit all and that a single provincial wide strategy will not be the most successful solution within B.C. As a result, Cadieux then proposed a regional poverty reduction plan which targeted 10-15 low income families in seven different communities (First Call, 2013). The non-partisan program aligned itself with various non-profit organisations and implemented various programs including a School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program, funding for socio-economically vulnerable students through CommunityLINK and the Vulnerable Student Supplement program (Reduction Project Progress Report, 2014).

## The Regional Poverty Reduction Plan

Commencing in 2012, the Union of BC Municipalities partnered up with the provincial government to collaborate on a Regional Poverty Reduction Pilot Project. The project was designed as a test to aid 100 impoverished families with a plan to extend to 40 other communities. However, three years later the Union chose to terminate the partnership stating the pilot project was complete and that there was no longer a role for the Union to play in regards to this project (MacLeod, 2015). Al Richmond, the president of the Union of BC municipalities (UBCM) instead urged the provincial government to create a single provincial strategy stating that “... a provincial poverty plan [...] has the greatest potential to affect change on poverty reduction in B.C (MacLeod, 2015). The pilot project yielded a mixture of results. Although UBCM noted that there were some success stories during the trial, the problem areas which were evident were too problematic to make the overall project a success. One of the setbacks was the fact that many of the low income families were being referred to programs which were saturated with clients. As well, within the rural and small communities, many of the programs were non-existent.

Another issue which arose was that during the trial period, a municipal election occurred causing many family consultants who were assigned to the project to either resign or be replaced (MacLeod, 2015). Doug Donaldson, an NDP critic of this project, also noted that the pilot was geared towards only 100 families however there were roughly 93,000 children alone who needed assistance. Despite the project being founded on good intentions, Donaldson argued that the project was severely under-resourced (MacLeod, 2105).

In response to the UBCM decision to withdraw, Cadieux noted that poverty reduction is not solely the responsibility of the government but it must be tackled in collaboration with numerous departments. However, despite the government's willingness to work with interested parties it remained reluctant to establish a provincial wide poverty reduction strategy because according to Cadieux, there is no nationwide evidence which supports the idea that a provincial poverty strategy helps (MacLeod, 2015). In her response to the completion of the project, Cadieux also stated that the provincial government remains committed to helping individual find jobs because "the way you target poverty reduction is an economy that is growing" (MacLeod, 2015).

While job creation is always a desirable outcome for economies, what Cadieux is failing to acknowledge is that job creation cannot properly address poverty. This is because poverty is created through political, social and economic spheres, therefore utilising the economic sector to address a multifaceted issues will not suffice. Within Alberta for example, it is evident that one issue which contributes to childhood poverty is the inequality between the sexes manifested in different ways. For example, working lone-mothers make-up a large portion of the low-income population within that province yet this group remains impoverished regardless of their employment status, the high levels of domestic violence which contribute to poverty levels despite many of the victims being employed, and a majority of working parents who simply cannot afford childcare fees. As well, mental illness, inadequate health coverage, illness and inability to access resources can all contribute to impoverishment within a society. Therefore, although Cadieux's solution of job creation should always be welcomed, Richmond's urge for a provincial strategy on poverty may prove to be the most effective measure BC can take. As is the case with Canada, a comprehensive strategy which encompasses input from relevant agencies including poverty advocates, healthcare workers, social workers, government officials, educational workers and impoverished citizens may aid in addressing BC's consistently high childhood poverty rate.

## British Columbia's Financial Contribution to Poverty

The lack of government interjection combined with a concerning poverty epidemic may contribute to the plethora of non-profit, community based, non-partisan poverty advocacy groups which exist in BC today. One of the advocacy groups known as The Single Mothers' Alliance BC (SMA) is a grassroots not for profit organisation which was incorporated in 2014. Its purpose is to build capacity amongst single mothers with a hope to address and reverse the causes of what leads to one out of every two BC single mothers to raise their families in poverty. According to the SMA, "The reality for single mothers and their children in BC is dire. One out of every two of us raises our families in poverty. BC's child poverty rate is sky-high. We must stand up for them, and defend their rights. Our children are poor because we are poor. Women's poverty in this province, particularly related to lone-mothering, is abysmal, and we must address it directly, in solidarity with one another, with hope, vision and creativity" ([singlemothersbc.org](http://singlemothersbc.org)).

In B.C. the factors which cause single mothers to be amongst the leading demographic of impoverished citizens are not drastically different than those from other provinces. In the 2011 census, 81% of single parent family homes in BC were female ran (First Call, 2014) and according to the Single Mothers Alliance, BC has the second highest single mother's poverty rate in the nation. Most of the 81% referenced unaffordable childcare and poorly paying jobs as major factors in their poverty (First Call 2014). Canadian studies have shown that women are still currently receiving a lower hourly wage than their male counterparts. In addition, lone mothers receive even lower wages in comparison to childless women (First Call, 2014). The 2014 Child Poverty Report Card states that within BC, a single parent raising one child, working full time, full year and receiving minimum wage receives \$8,000 below the poverty line. In 2012 when the minimum wage was raised to \$10.25 from \$9.50, the 2014 Poverty Report stated that a single parent with one child working full time for the full year would have earned \$18,655 which is more than \$8,000 below the Low Income Measure before tax, while a two-parent two child family with the same criteria would have earned \$37, 310 a total of \$990 below the poverty line. Before the 2012 increase in minimum wage, the two parent family would have been \$3,720 below the minimum wage



providing evidence that increased minimum wages may aid in improving the lives of those struggling to support a family (First Call, 2014). In addition to BC's experience with a minimum wage increase, Stephen Devereux (2005) also provides empirical evidence which supports minimum wage as a tool which can be used to reduce poverty. Saget (2001) presents the findings that a minimum wage increase of just 1% percent in both Thailand and the Philippines reduced poverty by 46%, while another study comprised of 22 countries showed that poverty levels were positively affected due to a change in minimum wage legislation (Devereux, 2005). Therefore one can speculate that the minimum wage hike which occurred Sept 15, 2015 may result in improvements for families in need. The \$10.45 / hour wage (a 0.20 increase) will assist the lives of families and aid in addressing the impoverished population within B.C. However, it is important to understand that although a rise in minimum wage can positively affect incomes the benefits can be minimal. Firstly, the minimum wage increase must be a substantial amount able to offset the gap between a household's input and output. Secondly, minimum wage should correspond with the purchasing power of the given society. This means that as living expenses increase, minimum wage should also increase.

Despite the 0.20 raise experienced September 2015, B.C's minimum wage hike ranks B.C 12th out of 13 provinces and territories for minimum wage rates in Canada. As a result of BC's depressed minimum wage, poverty advocates urge the implementation of a living wage to minimise stress felt by low-income families. Living wages in BC are calculated based on what is needed for a family of four to not only survive, but also thrive (First Call, 2014). In BC living wages are calculated for a two-parent two child family where both parents are working full time. For example, in 2014 Metro Vancouver's living wage was estimated at \$20.10 /hour, while in Port Alberni the living wage was \$17.22 (First Call, 2014). The City of Vancouver sees the importance of a living wage, and passed a motion July 2015 making the City of Vancouver a Living Wage Employer. This means that the City of Vancouver will join an elite group of certified employers providing a living wage of \$20.68 to their employees (Ogle, 2015). This is one step closer to aiding low-wage families in raising children.

Opponents to the implementation of a living wage from the Fraser Institute's Charles Lammam and Hugh MacIntyre, argue against the implementation of a living wage stating

that a living wage, much like a minimum wage, can result in the cutting back of jobs, hours and on the job training resulting in the lesser skilled workers being sacrificed by business owners (Lammam, MacIntyre, 2015). Lammam and MacIntyre go on to say that only one city in Canada (New Westminster, BC) currently implements a living wage, therefore very little empirical evidence is available to assess the impact of this policy. Albeit however, the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement has done extensive work on this topic and is a good source for information regarding living wage. For empirical support on this topic, both Lammam and MacIntyre depend on American experiences to caution Canada against using this route stating that living wage laws have reduced employment opportunities for low-wage workers and has failed to help the most impoverished families.

The BC government has made positive steps towards reducing the poverty levels amongst children. As of September 1, 2015, the provincial government abolished the controversial 'clawback clause' which allowed the provincial government to "clawback" or deduct dollar for dollar the amount a single mother received in child support payments from either income or disability assistance (Kines, 2015). Jennifer Brice, a recipient of both child support payments and the regulated provincial assistant payments, stated in an interview that her monthly payments for her and her three year old son would have increased from \$1,850 to \$2,555 a month had the clawback clause not existed (MacLeod, 2014). This equates to an additional \$705/month or \$8460/ year for this family of two. Many advocacy groups as well as the opposition government saw the discrepancies in this policy stating that the base of the clawback policy was founded on the premise that the primary parent was being financially penalised for two parents taking financial responsibility of their child. The argument against the clause was so strong that the BC government was taken to court to defend themselves against discriminatory and unfair practices. With the abolishment of the clause, it is estimated that an additional \$32 million will be injected in to BC's economy over a three year period as single parents benefit from funds which were at one point withheld from them (Kines, 2015). The abolishment of the clawback clause should roughly benefit 3,200 families and 5,400 low-income children (Kines, 2015).

## Health Policies and BC's Low-Income

In 2015, The Conference Board of Canada ranked BC as the healthiest province in Canada and third healthiest place in the world preceded by Switzerland (1st) and Sweden (2nd) with Canada ranking 10th. Using indicators including; life expectancy, premature mortality and infant mortality, BC credits the high priority the government places on health in conjunction with the overall healthy lifestyle BC residents practice in general for this prestigious ranking. Dr. Bill Cavers, president of Doctors of BC also praises BC's distinct approach to healthcare which differs from other provinces due to the partnership forged between the BC government and BC physicians. Introduced in May 2011, Healthy Families BC is the provincially supported health promotion plan. Its purpose is to encourage all BC residents to make healthier choices.

The Healthy Families BC's initiative acknowledges the fact that evidence shows susceptibility to illness in early life is correlated with poorer health concerns later in life as well as reduced life expectancy. The social and economic conditions surrounding early life are also known to play a part in increasing the risk of sicknesses later in life. This is why the Healthy Families program places emphasis on early life health especially to those socially and economically marginalised. The Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) is a program run through the BC Health Connection Project which was established to aid young and first-time mothers and their child. The maternal and child-care program is designed to allow low-income mothers to receive a total of 64 home visits from public health nurses over a period of time from conception until the child reaches two years of age. The visits/program allows the mother to receive valuable information and medical attention including preparation for childbirth, pre-natal care, exercising tips and nutrition. Due to this initiative being relatively new very little information has been produced on its success but BC is hoping that the successful results yielded from American studies with similar program will translate to BC.

Despite BC leading the nation with healthy residents, disparities connected to certain factors such as geographical locations and socio-economic status throughout BC has been noted. Using obesity as an example, BC has the lowest national percentage at 15%, ranging from 7.4% to 19%. However within BC the areas which tend to maintain

lower obesity rates not only lead healthier lifestyles but are also reported to be amongst the highest of the socio-economic ranking. This implies that there is an interesting correlation between wealth and health within this province.

The policy structure within BC excellently juxtaposes each other. Where we see BC falling short in creating a provincial poverty strategy we also see the highest national rates of childhood poverty being produced year after year. As well, the refusal of the government to collaborate with stakeholders to create a comprehensive provincial policy yet placing preference on fragmented regional pockets for poverty reduction also fails as we see poverty advocacy groups urging for a collective provincial strategy. However, where BC has created a provincial framework inclusive of government input as well as health professional recommendations, we witness an environment which produces the healthiest people in Canada and third in the world. This may suggest that policies which are inclusive of all sectors working in tandem as well as policies which encompass the entire population may be more successful than fragmented policies which target certain pockets.

## Synopsis of Poverty Within Quebec

The picture of poverty is not as easily painted within Quebec as is the case in Alberta and British Columbia. Obtaining numbers and percentages on Quebec's low income population was a difficult task as information is not easily accessible. This was one of the major shortfalls of this study. That being said, the Institut de la statistique du Quebec reported in 2011, that 365,520 single parent households existed within Quebec. Of that number, 277,930 homes were female ran (<http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca>, 2015) while Statistics Canada (2015) also reported in 2013 that 27.4 % of the population under the age of 18 resided in a lone parent low income household. It must be noted however, that the Statistics Canada website also advised that this number must be used with caution as data may be unreliable. Despite the difficulty in obtaining numerical representation of poverty within Quebec, an abundance of information on Quebec's poverty action plan is available.

## Overview of Quebec's Provincial Action Plan

In December 2002, Quebec became the first province in Canada to create a law in an attempt to address poverty reduction. Adopting Bill 112, *Act to combat poverty and social exclusion*, Quebec outlined an official plan known as the Provincial Action Plan (PAP) which commenced in April 2004 (Torjman, 2010). This act focussed on four separate objectives all founded on the mandate “To progressively make Quebec, by 2013, one of the industrialized nations having the least number of persons living in poverty” (Quebec Poverty Profile, 2012). Quebec however has not yet fulfilled this goal and the plan has received mixed reactions. Wajzman (2009) reported that anti-poverty protestors in Quebec opposed the government’s plans stating that the government refused to include suggestions or real life experiences from front line workers as well as low-income citizens in the construction process of the plan. They argued that the plans were based on bureaucratic positions and views and was an ‘empty plan.’ Despite opposition against the plan, Quebec has found success by positively affecting the number of impoverished children living within the province. In 2009 five years after the introduction of the PAP, Quebec’s childhood poverty rate was tied with Saskatchewan at 13.3 % placing Quebec fourth in the nation (Campaign 2000, 2011). Campaign 2000 in 2014 placed Quebec second in the nation out of territories and provinces preceded by Yukon.

Regardless of there being no consensus on the success of the plan, the Quebec government extended the reduction plan for an additional five years running from 2010-2015. The extended plan known as the “Government Action Plan for Inclusion and Solidarity” maintains and builds on many of the initial initiatives of its predecessor with a goal to improve on where the initial plan fell short. With contribution from over 2,500 stakeholders from various sectors, the new plan established an interdepartmental committee which allowed for collaboration between the 17 ministers involved in this scheme (Quebec Poverty Profile, 2012). As a result of the second phase of this plan has recently finished, it would be difficult to determine if the extended plan has succeeded, therefore the majority of information pertaining to Quebec’s child poverty situation will be gathered from its initial plan.

## Difficulties of Quebec's First Provincial Action Plan

Quebec has received both national and international accolades for creating a comprehensive definition of poverty which was inclusive of the impact of social exclusion’s contribution on poverty as well as being the first to create a provincial poverty strategy. Yet despite this positive step in poverty reduction, many poverty advocates have questioned the success of the government’s initial plan. In May of 2012, *Quebec Poverty Progress Profile* revealed that many researchers and community groups criticized the government’s actions stating that the initiatives are based on vulnerable financial contributions which are dependent on possible budgetary changes. This critique can be interpreted in two ways. One may understand this critique by arguing that the financial contribution of the government in addressing poverty is a contradiction to the government’s definition of poverty. This is because, if Quebec has partly defined poverty as being inclusive of social exclusion, then the financial contribution may not properly target the factors which lead to the social exclusion aspect of poverty. Secondly, as the financial contributions are dependent on budgetary changes, the impoverished citizens will continuously remain in a vulnerable state as budgets and economies are fragile and rapidly changing entities. Therefore, the critiques brought forth by the poverty advocates hold merit. In addition, Quebec’s Provincial Poverty Profile continues on to say that some scholars have viewed the government’s adjustments as being “structuring rather than programmatic” while the Le Collectif has argued that an insufficient amount of attention was placed on income support benefits specifically for childless individuals. However one of the areas where Le Collectif praises the Quebec government is their focus on the childhood benefits.

## Quebec's Provincial Action Plan Positively affects Childhood Poverty

The OECD (2014) notes that local groups such as Le Collectif and various scholars have all commended the Quebec government for the focus it has placed on both early childhood and adolescent programming. The Parent Trap Report (2014) highlights Quebec's efforts by stating that Quebec's public spending on child care positively skews Canada's figures accounting for 60% of Canada's nation-wide spending in 2012. As well, a Statistics Canada survey carried out in 2013 found that nearly half of Albertan women aged 25 to 44 cited caring for children as their main reason for working part-time in comparison to one in five (19.8%) Quebec women within the same demographic who fault child care as their main reason for working part-time. What has allowed the women of Quebec to participate in gainful employment is the capping of childcare fees at \$7.30 per day for childcare which the government implemented. Within Canada, the Quebec cities of Gatineau, Laval, Montreal, Longueuil, and Quebec City have all been cited by The Parent Trap Report as having the lowest monthly day care fees within the nation. Although no direct link has been made, Statistics Canada (2015) reported in 2014 that Quebec had the highest population of dual-earners at 73% while simultaneously having the smallest population of stay at home parenting at 13%. The accessibility to affordable childcare may greatly contribute to this.

The Quebec government, in response to childhood poverty, has not only focussed its attention on childcare fees but has also implemented numerous programs centred on the success of its youth. Of the four objectives in their PAP, objective two: *Preventing Poverty and Social Exclusion*, was specifically aimed at the development of adolescents and promotion of child welfare. Some of its key points include but are not limited to:

- Strengthen family supports through a Child Assistance program (universal tax credits and supplementary credits for low-income families)
- Better access to early intervention and early childhood education
- Develop and pilot initiatives to address school outcomes for low-income children and youth (Provincial Poverty Profile, 2012)

The Quebec government allotted \$2.5 billion to be divided among the four different objectives over a five year period. Of the allotted amount, objective two designated \$1.1 billion towards the creation of the Child Assistance Program (Poverty Profile, 2012). Aiding 870,000 families with children under the age of 18 in 2008 alone, the program runs in conjunction with the federal Canada Child Tax Benefit and pays an annual \$2,176 for the first born, \$1,088 for the second and third, and \$1,631 for all subsequent children in two parent households (Poverty Profile, 2012). Lone-parent households however receive an additional \$762 per annum. Once a two parent family has reached a net income of \$44,788 and a single parent household has reached an annual income of \$32,856, benefits are reduced (Poverty Profile, 2012).

In 2004, Quebec experienced additional restructuring of policies pertaining to childhood poverty reduction. In collaboration with the *Foundation Lucie et André Chagnon*, the government agreed to a five year partnership which invested \$10 million to promote the development of vulnerable children by securing a minimum of five per cent of spaces in day care centres for low-income children (Poverty Profile, 2012). In order to assist the lower income population, the spaces were reserved specifically for children who were considered vulnerable registered with local community service centres. In addition to the investments made in 2004, Quebec's 2008-2009 budget allotted \$400 million over a 10 year period to the creation of support projects which were aimed at low-income children under the age of five (Poverty Profile, 2012). As one of the most vulnerable groups, the government also made services available through the *Programme de soutien aux jeunes parents* (Support to Young Parents) for teenage families by promoting healthy families through

- Intensive prenatal care and postnatal home visits by a specialised support worker, nurse, social worker or other case worker of some sort
- Assistance for participants in setting and achieving life goals as young parents
- Linking families to community resources to help with social and professional integration, amongst other initiatives to aid young families (Poverty Reduction in Quebec, 2010)



In addition to the above mentioned program, Quebec also promoted a healthy lifestyle among low-income citizens, including children, by granting free medication to all who were eligible (Poverty Profile, 2012). In 2005-2006 Quebec implemented two new programs aimed at aiding aboriginal and young immigrant families who were struggling financially.

In regards to rearing children within its province, it appears as if Quebec has adopted an agenda of both parental recognition and poverty reduction. The universal childcare system which enables a unified childcare fee for all parents recognises the hardships of raising children, working and meeting financial commitments, while its maximum payment is low enough allowing for lower income families to easily access childcare. What this system does is allow parents, usually mothers, to enter in to the labour force generating income for their families. This is especially important for single parents. In addition, the Quebec government's financial contribution in conjunction with specific programs target at marginalised groups (Support to Young Parents and free medication for low-income) illustrates the government's focus on poverty reduction. One can conclude that when studying poverty reduction among children, Quebec appears to be a trailblazer. As the province to define poverty and to create a comprehensive poverty reduction act, it has succeeded in achieving the lowest childhood poverty rate amongst the provinces. This was attained despite the fact the Quebec's economy is not within the top three of the nation leading one to reason that the key to poverty reduction may not be through financial means. Quebec's social policies concerning child rearing serves as an excellent starting point for what should be considered when creating policies addressing childhood poverty reduction.

## Synopsis of Poverty Within Alberta

As a result of Alberta's oil rich and natural resource laden landscape, it was ranked in 2015 as Canada's richest province. The Financial Post reported in 2014 that Alberta's national reputation of prosperity contributed to a total gain of 81,800 jobs while the rest of Canada experienced a total of 9,200 jobs lost in various sectors. However, despite the wealth accumulated in Alberta, the Alberta Poverty Progress Profile (2015) stated that the majority of

financial gains experienced were recorded in the top 1% of income earners. The wealthiest 1% in Alberta during 2014 earned 18% more than the average income earner in the province, resulting in the widest income gap nationwide. The Progress Profile continues on to say that since 1982, the top 10% earners in Alberta have doubled their income while the remaining 90% have seen a modest increase in income of a mere \$3,200. Furthermore, the remaining 90% is further divided up producing even more discrepancies in this group among gender, nationalities, race and highest academic level completed.

In 2012, the former Premier Alison Redford vowed to address the social issues which affected certain pockets of the 90% who did not flourish from Alberta's economic boom. Vowing to eradicate childhood poverty within 5 years and overall poverty within 10 years, the Conservative government developed a plan known as the Social Policy Framework (SPF) (Alberta Poverty Progress Profile, 2015). The framework spearheaded by the government, was constructed and developed based on the input of 31,000 plus Albertans who contributed what they believed their Alberta should become. Their vision was based on the idea (among others) that all Albertans should be granted the opportunity to reach their full potential and to benefit from the highest possible quality of life (Poverty Cost 2.5: Investing in Albertans, 2015). The SPF gained a great deal of momentum within Alberta at its time of introduction due to Alberta's national record for income inequality as well as the estimated 7-9.5% of the population which lived in poverty (Alberta Poverty Progress Profile, 2015). It was the sentiment of the Albertan government and of Albertans that in a province with such economic prosperity, poverty could not be tolerated. In non-typical Conservative fashion, Alison Redford focused on the impact that social issues had on the well-being of individuals and on the province as a whole and believed that a social reformation was needed to in order for Alberta to flourish.

In 2013, the Conservative government released Alberta's Social Policy Framework which set out three main priorities, a Children's Charter, a 10-year homelessness plan and the Poverty Reduction Strategy. In addition, they also committed to developing a provincial poverty reduction plan with a release date of June 2014. However,

September 15, 2014 saw the swearing in of Premier Jim Prentice who replaced former Premier Redford. With a change in controls, Alberta also saw a change in mandate. The momentum which existed during the Conservative campaign run surrounding poverty reduction slowly lost steam and although Prentice did attempt to address the poverty reduction strategy, some poverty advocates argued that his language and actions regarding the provincial strategy were vague, open to interpretation and gave the impression that Prentice did not feel bound by his predecessor's vision (No Change, 2014). Although the release date was further postponed until the spring of 2015, (No Change, 2015) in January 2016, Alberta is still without a comprehensive provincial poverty reduction strategy plan.

### Childhood Poverty in Alberta

As is the case throughout Canada, depending on indicators used, such as the measuring mechanism utilised and definition of poverty, it is difficult to get a true picture of the exact numbers of impoverished Albertan children. Varying reports released that in 2010 and 2013 Alberta had a total of 91,000 children living in poverty while No Change (2014) reported that in 2012 a total of 143, 200 Albertan children were impoverished. Despite the discrepancies in numbers, since 1989 Alberta's poverty rate has fluctuated around the 0.2% mark and has been ranked third in the nation for lowest childhood poverty rate (No Change, 2014). Although a third place national ranking may make the situation appear less dire, Alberta's third place ranking is quite concerning mainly due to its economic success and its increase in number of children living in poverty. In addition, Alberta's percentage of children living in poverty over extended periods of time adds to the need to address childhood poverty within Alberta. Two separate reports, including Together We Raise Tomorrow, Alberta's Poverty Reduction Strategy, stated that chronic poverty within Alberta for children (Albertans under the age of 18 years) has worsened over time. Albertan children and their families experience a greater depth of poverty and longer durations of poverty than any other Canadian province.

### Poverty Amongst Albertan Family Types

When broken down by family types, lone parent households generally lead in poverty rates. In 2012, 77, 570 (54.2%) Albertan children under the age of 18 were reared in lone parent (predominantly female headed) households while 65,640 (45.8%) resided in low-income dual parent homes (No Change, 2014). The report also revealed that at least one full-time working parent was present within the home, a phenomenon often witnessed in most low-income households. In 2013 Statistics Canada reported that Alberta recorded the highest percentage of working poor families since 1990. During 2011, 59.2% of all Albertan children were said to be residing in a poverty stricken home where one or both parents worked full-time full year. Post 2011 however information is unavailable due to the termination of Statistics Canada tracking this data.

Albertan lone parent families reported in 2012 that 75.5% of their total income came from regular employment while 14.6% was attributed to government transfers or benefits including but not limited to GST tax credits, social assistance, or child tax benefits. The remaining 9.9% was a result of income from child support payments, investment income, private pensions or other sources (No Change, 2014). Dual parent homes reported that 81.1% of their income came from full-time regular employment, 5.4% from government transfers or benefits and 13.5% from other sources of income. During the same year, contributions from the federal government through federal child tax benefits totalled \$444.5 million towards Alberta's lone parent families. This is in comparison to Albertan lone parent families who received \$247.4 million from social assistance such as Alberta Works and AISH (No Change, 2014). What this vast difference in funding amount shows is that federal child tax benefit is utilised more in Alberta by lone-parent families to address child poverty reduction than funding from direct assistance. Lone-parent families are most often spearheaded by the female parent. From 2001-2011, despite the amount of lone-parent households increasing to 144, 510, the percentage of lone-parent households fluctuated slightly but remained relatively constant around the 14.5% mark ([www.finance.alberta.ca/aboutalberta/census/](http://www.finance.alberta.ca/aboutalberta/census/)). During this same time, the amount of male headed lone-parent households also increased rising from 20.2% in 2001 to 23.3% in 2011 ([www.finance.alberta.ca/aboutalberta/census/](http://www.finance.alberta.ca/aboutalberta/census/)).

Without differentiating between genders, the No Change report stated that in Alberta in 2012, lone-parent families' median after-tax income was \$11,750 and in order for lone-families to be lifted out of poverty their annual income after tax would have to be increased to \$23,753, an increase of \$12,003 for a one parent one child household. However, it is important to note that although these numbers refer to lone-parent families on the whole; this particular group can be further fragmented in to smaller sub-categories. Female lone-parent households dominate the category for lone-parent households. With women across the country making less than their male counterparts and female lone-parents comprising the greatest gender gap within Alberta (Poverty Cost 2.5: Investing in Albertans, 2015), lone-parent female headed households are more at risk for living in poverty. Within Alberta, women generally make \$.68 on the dollar compared to men doing similar work, while men make 10.5% more than the provincial hourly wage (Alberta Poverty Progress Profile, 2015). Recent immigrants earn less than both men and women increasing the likelihood of lone-parent female headed immigrant households to be low-income (No Change, 2014). Within Alberta, 70% of all part-time positions are held by females while 66% of all minimum wage workers are also females (Poverty Costs 2.5: Investing in Albertans, 2015).

## The Feminization of Poverty

Because children are dependent on adult guidance, children are poor because their parents are poor. In 2011 when it was reported that 144,510 lone parent households existed within Alberta, it is safe to assume that the majority of those homes were female ran. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that Together We Raise Tomorrow reported in 2006, 7.8% of all Albertans resided in female lone-parent households in comparison to 1.9% in male lone-parent households and currently 82% of lone-parent homes are female ran. Because of this, one must understand that childhood poverty is a direct result of adult poverty which is often gender biased. In general, Aboriginal women, visible minority women, women with disabilities and single mothers are more likely than any other group to experience poverty (No Change, 2014). It can be concluded that childhood poverty is positively correlated to female poverty. One contributor which can often affect the poverty level of both females and children is the vulnerability of a female's personal safety. Without a detailed explanation, both No Change (2014) and Poverty Costs 2.5 (2015)

attribute domestic violence as a contributing factor to female and childhood poverty within Alberta. No Change (2014) reported that both Edmonton and Calgary surpass the provincial average of police reported incidences of intimate partner violence, sexual assaults and criminal harassments. The report goes on to say that women who make the choice to leave an abusive environment with their child or children are five times more likely to live in poverty. Often women who remain in abusive relationships do so as a means of avoiding homelessness as well as a life of poverty (No Change 2014). In 2013, Alberta shelters catered to the needs of 926 women and 1,102 children in just one day; 39 of the women catered to were known to be pregnant while 90 women and 63 children were turned away from care.

Another factor which adds to the poverty rate amongst children is the segregation of females from certain jobs. Due to the nature of Alberta's economy, the labour force is dominated by a sector in which females have minimum access. Most trades' jobs are executed by males leaving females under-represented in both trades and apprenticeships positions. What is unfortunate about this fact is that both these areas are comprised of high paying jobs. In Edmonton, women are outnumbered in trade jobs and apprenticeships at a rate of 3 to 1 while in Calgary the rate is 2 to 1 (No Change, 2014). Where women do dominate however are in retail, hospitality and childcare positions which generally pay minimum wage. Until recently, Alberta's minimum wage was among, if not, the lowest in the nation. This was until October 1, 2015, when Alberta increased its minimum wage to \$10.20 and \$11.20 (a result of Alberta's two-tiered minimum wage system) making Alberta's minimum wage the third highest in the nation (Alberta Poverty Progress Profile, 2015). Although an increase in minimum wage is always welcomed, No Change (2014) states that the increase may not be enough to reduce poverty. Females, many with family responsibilities, make up 68.8% of minimum wage workers. The two-tiered system within Alberta may still negatively affect females as women are disproportionately represented in the food and beverage sector which has a \$10.20 hourly minimum wage. However there is hope that the 2016 elimination of the two-tiered minimum wage accompanied by the projected 2018 provincial \$15 per hour increase in minimum wage will aid in combating both childhood and adult impoverishment (Alberta Poverty Progress Profile, 2015).

The feminine side of poverty strongly illustrates not only the multifaceted nature of impoverishment, but it also suggests that poverty is gender biased. Evidence shows that single mothers within Canada are disproportionately represented within the low income population. Numerous factors contribute to this phenomenon including inequitable pay amongst the sexes, mothers who flee abusive relationships with children and little resources (including food, clothing and money), lack of opportunity to obtain higher paying jobs and inaccessible childcare. Therefore, a strong conclusion can be drawn that when addressing poverty within Alberta, policies should incorporate multi-dimensional solutions with an emphasis placed on gender relations. Representing a substantial amount of the labour force, women within Alberta comprise 70% of all part-time positions and 66% of all minimum wage positions resulting in women straddling the lower end of the economic hierarchy (Alberta Poverty Progress Profile, 2015). A 2015 publication by the Canada Centre for Policy Alternatives ranked Calgary and Edmonton 23 and 24 respectively out of 25 Canadian cities for best and worst Canadian cities to live in as a female. Using the five indicators of economic security, leadership, health, personal security, and education, the study suggests that Alberta may be failing its female population. Perhaps, if Alberta in their policy formation focussed on gender relations and the situation of females within their province, they may reduce the amount of children living in low-income homes. Kofi Annan (2003) once said that “when women thrive, all of society benefits, and succeeding generations are given a better start in life.”

### Childcare Within Alberta

One of the areas which negatively impacts mothers, specifically single mothers, is the area of childcare. Steep day care fees coupled with limited spaces adds to the strain of raising children within Alberta. Although an increased minimum wage may allude to more money being placed in the hands of working parents, Curtis Stewart, owner of 18 day cares throughout the Edmonton area, states that a rise in minimum wage will negatively affect the parents of children at his day care (CBC News, 2015). In order for Stewart to continue dispensing fair wages to his employees, he will have to compensate by raising his fees to correspond with the rising minimum wage. Starting Oct 1, 2015, he will

increase his fees by an additional \$80 / month. Stewart, who is aware that, “It’s such a fine line between what parents can afford and what the staff can make,” sympathises with the parents who are currently struggling to meet the present childcare fees. CBC News also reported in the same article that Suzanne Maclean, director of another Edmonton based day care, is also aware of the struggle parents experience with the current situation of childcare, she however refuses to raise her fees stating that “People who are trying to better their lives, who are trying to get educations, who are trying to better their families, are unable to do that if they have to pay large fees for child care ... so, in all essence, we need to make sure that fees are affordable for families.”

In spite of the day care representatives responding differently to the rise in minimum wage, both recognise the current burden faced by Albertan families having to paying current childcare fees. Living in Alberta (2012), reported that the average provincial rate for day care ranges between \$950-1200/month with a median of over \$1000 /month for very young children (Poverty Cost 2.5, 2015). To offset the cost for parents, the provincial government offers a subsidy programme for low-income families who meet certain requirements.

Operated under the Ministry of Human Services, eligible recipients can receive financial aid for any of the following centres:

- Licensed day care centres
- Licensed group family child care
- Approved family day homes
- Licensed out-of-school care centres
- Licensed pre-schools and
- Approved early childhood development programs (Alberta Human Services, 2015)

However in Alberta before subsidies can be dispersed to families in need, a space must be secured before the application can be processed. This policy can be detrimental to families in need. In 2014, Suzanne MacLean reported that her day care had a 300 family plus waiting list which equates to a two-three year wait (Mertz, 2014). While a 2014 study done by Public Interest Alberta (PIA) revealed that 63% of the childcare facilities surveyed (accredited, non-accredited, for profit, non-profit, public) carried a waiting list. For low-income families where working is a



necessity and childcare is a must, when the call is received that a spot has become available, this is an opportunity that cannot be missed. Unfortunately, some day cares require a refundable or non-refundable deposit which often equates to the rate of one unsubsidized month of care (Alberta Human Services, 2011). Supplying this deposit for many low-income families can be a challenge especially when the vacant spot is needed immediately. However, the Alberta government through the Learner Income Support Benefit program will cover the cost of required fees or deposits if the parent is unable to afford it. Once certain criteria has been filled: 1) that the day care centre requires a deposit/fee from all parents substantiated through a letter and 2) all other resources have been exhausted, the applicant submits an application and awaits approval from the Learner Benefit Coordinator (Alberta Human Services, 2011).

Alberta's subsidy rates like most other provinces are dependent on age of child, and type of care facility. Ranging from \$310 to \$630, families are eligible to receive a subsidy once they fulfil a demonstrated need for care, including employment, schooling, actively searching for work or special needs (Alberta Human Services, 2015). As well, a province wide income test must also be administered before a subsidy is granted. Despite the government contribution however, many subsidy recipients feel that the family portion is still a major expense. In the PIA report, 74% of the families surveyed reported that they pay an additional \$200 plus per month for child for care while 82% of survey respondents complained that the government subsidies were insufficient. Poverty Costs 2.5: Investing in Albertans also reported in 2015 that in some of Alberta's major cities, child care costs can exceed \$400 over the maximum subsidy.

Together We Raise Tomorrow reported that low-income households are five times more prevalent among lone parent families than they are in dual parent households. As a result, it is essential that lone parents enter in to the workforce as early as they can soon after the birth of their child in order to generate income. This is especially important for young women because evidence shows an overwhelming presence of females in minimum wage positions which often do not offer maternity leave or benefits. However, PIA reports that one third of the childcare centres in their study did not provide care for infants (1-18 months). Adding to this situation is the fact that spaces within this age bracket, are the most costly of

all categories of childcare. This reality is detrimental for single mothers and can seriously hinder their and their families' ability to emerge out of poverty. The combination of all these factors may contribute to nearly half of Albertan women ages 25-44 citing child care as their primary reason for obtaining part-time work (No Change, 2014).

## Alberta's Financial Plan of Action

Although an admirable and lofty ambition, the goal of former Premier Alison Redford to eliminate childhood poverty in Alberta within a five year timeframe has not been achieved. Albeit that Redford's premature departure as leader may have greatly contributed to incompleteness of her vision, it does not mean all is lost in Alberta. The New Democratic Party under the leadership of Rachel Notley is on track with committing to Alberta's Social Policy Framework and has implemented a new child benefit for low-income Albertans. Commencing in August of 2016, families with a maximum income of \$41,220 will be able to benefit from \$195 million of annual benefits (Alberta Human Services, 2015). According to the Alberta Human Services New Alberta Child Benefit website, the new Alberta Child Benefit (ACB) is targeted to aid 235,000 children from 130,000 Albertan families giving an additional \$1,100 annually for the first child and up to \$550 for the next three subsequent children. All Albertan families that have a maximum net income of \$25,500 will be eligible to receive the maximum allotted in benefits. As the benefit package is progressive, benefits will eventually decrease as income rises and will finally phase out once income has reached \$41,220. Being dispersed in four annual payments, the ACB will work in conjunction with other provincial programmes including the existing Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit programme which will be enhanced starting July 2016. The revamping of the new Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit, will not only allow for more working families to receive credit but will also increase the amount of benefits families receive (Finance Alberta, 2015).

2015 can be coined a year of change for Alberta. After 44 years of Conservative rule within Alberta, the NDP was voted into power May 5 2015, ending a historic 44 years of Conservative rule. Accompanying this is the fact that world oil prices drastically dropped severely damaging Alberta's economy resulting in over 35,000 oil sector alone

job losses (Toneguzzi, 2015). Although it is too soon to know if Alberta will maintain its “richest province” title, there is hope that the impoverished population within Alberta will not be negatively impacted by the economic downturn. Perhaps this economic recession will influence policy reform to sway towards addressing an inequitable gender environment. It is important that the current economic situation of Alberta does not halt the progress being made within Alberta regarding its impoverished population. Poverty Costs 2.5: Investing in Alberta, writes that poverty reduction within Alberta has garnered the most interest recently than it has in the past thirty years. According to the report, Alberta’s government is listening and committed to the elimination of childhood poverty and reduction of overall poverty. Perhaps the timing of Alberta’s recession will push for more action on this social issue as more Albertans are losing their jobs and the economy cannot afford to the cost of poverty. In Alberta alone, poverty cost the province \$7.1-9.5 billion per year (Poverty Costs 2.5, 2015) which is substantial amount even for the richest provinces.

## Conclusion

Although numerous facts can be drawn from this policy scan, the most important conclusion is rooted in the idea that an official comprehensive plan or policy is the most effective mechanism in addressing childhood poverty within Canada. Using the examples of both British Columbia and Quebec, the benefits of a comprehensive plan are visible when examining the Health policies of BC and the childhood poverty rate of Quebec. BC’s health policy is constructed as a provincial plan which draws on the support of both the provincial government and the private sector. They work in conjunction with each other to address the issue of healthy living within its province. The relationship has been successful as BC was ranked by the Conference Board of Canada as the healthiest place in Canada to live and the third healthiest in the world. Quebec’s poverty plan is enshrined as a provincial policy and has given way to the lowest childhood poverty rate in the nation amongst the provinces. In contrast, the exclusion of a policy can produce less than desirable results as is evident with Canada and once again BC. International organisations such as UNICEF and national organisations

such as Campaign 2000 have criticised Canada on its lack of action in addressing the issue of childhood poverty while numerous provincial anti-poverty groups critique BC on its apprehension to create a poverty reduction policy. Without a comprehensive policy in place, Canada was ranked 17th out of 29 wealthy nations for impoverished children by UNICEF. BC for seven consecutive years has held the top spot for impoverished children nationally. The benefits of a defined plan or policy have seemed to produce success within Canada and among its provinces.

So why is it important for a comprehensive poverty policy to be established? If a comprehensive policy regarding national poverty is created, then the likelihood of a Canadian definition of poverty being created will increase. Without a clear and defined meaning of what poverty is in Canada, a national policy may be ineffective as the policy will be the mechanism used to address the issue. The absence of a poverty definition within Canada has led to discrepancies in data across the nation as institutions and organisations utilize different tools to define and measure poverty, skewed realities of the poor exist because different ideas are being used to describe what it means to be poor and those who advocate for the poor may be fighting for different objectives. Therefore, a definition of what poverty is may aid those who attempt to address this issue. As well, a national policy can aid in establishing a plan for the federal government to follow in an attempt to fulfil the 1989’s House of Commons decision to eradicate childhood poverty nationwide.

Most importantly, because of the divisions of power within Canada between federal, provincial and territorial governments, a national poverty policy can be the benchmark for provinces and territories to follow in order to address childhood poverty within their jurisdictions. A comprehensive provincial policy based on the input and cooperation of stakeholders including government officials, poverty advocates, education and healthcare workers as well as impoverished citizens will be the most effective means of addressing poverty provincial wide. This is because each province is unique with different circumstances and factors contributing to poverty. In Alberta it is gender inequality which is the leading factor

attributing to impoverishment amongst children while in BC the major contributors stem from high childcare fees and low salaries. It is vital that provinces create think tanks or communities of practice so as to truly create a comprehensive political policy encompassing all aspects of the community.

It is also important that the policy created incorporates a social aspect as this policy scan has shown that poverty is multifaceted and not solely economically created. The three provinces highlighted in this examination best project why poverty cannot be addressed solely using economic means. Alberta with the strongest economy in Canada ranks lower than Quebec in regards to childhood poverty. Quebec whose economy is weaker than both Alberta and BC surpasses both provinces regarding childhood poverty and BC's government believes that strong economies and job creation is the key to 'fixing' its poverty (both adult and childhood) situation has scored the lowest in the country regarding childhood poverty.

Of the three provinces highlighted in this policy scan, Alberta is the one province which should pay special attention to what has been produced by this paper. Currently with no comprehensive poverty policy in place, it has committed to creating one. It is important that the Albertan government does not get distracted from its goal of creating a provincial poverty policy especially in its current economic situation. What this paper has shown is that depending solely on financial contributions is risky as economies are vulnerable and unpredictable. In the past, Alberta may or may not have felt secure in its ability to address poverty due to its strong economic performance. Alberta cannot take that stance today. External factors have affected Alberta's economy drastically which makes now the best time for a poverty reduction plan to be created. Alberta should use this opportunity to create a plan and safeguard its citizens, primarily its most vulnerable demographic, namely its children, against the effects of poverty.

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