



**Submission to the Review of the
British Columbia Poverty Reduction Strategy**

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First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society

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About First Call

First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society is a registered non-profit society based in British Columbia. First Call's advocacy is informed by the cross-sectoral expertise and province-wide reach of our diverse network of affiliates who have united their voices to put children and youth first in British Columbia through public education, community mobilization, and public policy advocacy.

Network affiliates work together to make sure all BC's children and youth benefit from the 4 Keys to Success for Children and Youth:

1. A strong commitment to early childhood development
2. Support in transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood
3. Increased economic equality
4. Safe and caring communities

First Call publishes the annual BC Child Poverty Report Card in cooperation with Campaign 2000, the national campaign to end child and family poverty and SPARC BC. We include a summary of some of the evidence in the 2022 Report Card here:

- In 2020, the year this report covers, there were 116,500 (13.3%) children and youth living in poor households, with many living in deep poverty.
- The poverty rate for BC children in lone-parent families was 38.3%. 59% of BC's poor children in 2020 lived in lone-parent families. 80% of BC lone parents were women in 2020.
- Many BC families had annual incomes that were \$11,000 to \$12,000 below the Census Family Low Income Measure After Tax (CFLIM-AT) poverty line.
- The child poverty rate on 59 BC First Nations reserves in 2020 was 29.2% with a higher rate on rural reserves (33.9%) than on urban reserves (25.2%).
- Many of the regional districts with the highest child poverty rates were located in coastal areas, particularly along the north and central coast areas.
- Approximately 85% of the poor children in B.C. live in the province's 25 urban areas. However, children living outside urban areas have a 17.2% poverty rate, higher than the provincial child poverty rate of 13.3%.
- Thanks to government income transfers, 153,630 BC children were kept out of poverty in 2020.
- 94% of BC families with children received some sort of government pandemic benefit in 2020.
- The majority of poor children in BC live with parents in paid work, either full or part time. Low wages and precarious work are important causes of family poverty.
- Even with the temporary pandemic supplements in federal and provincial benefits in 2020, income assistance rates remained below the poverty line, with severe consequences for the health of parents and children depending on this income. A couple with two children on temporary assistance in 2020 had a total income that was just 77% of the poverty line, leaving a poverty gap of \$11,208.
- The income of B.C.'s richest 10% of families with children took home 24.5% of the income pie in 2020, compared to the 1.6% shared by the poorest 10% of families.

The 2022 BC Child Poverty Report Card, maps and other materials are posted here: <http://www.firstcallbc.org>

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Accountability

First Call is focused on the rights and well-being of B.C.'s children and youth. We look to our government to live up to our commitment as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to uphold their rights to special protections, education, health, child care and family supports, and to have their best interests taken into account in all matters affecting them. Article 27 of the Convention requires us to “recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.” It also requires us to “take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and (...) in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.” Continuing high child and family poverty levels in B.C. violate these rights.

Given the higher poverty rates for Indigenous children and families, keeping the commitments government has made to act on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has important implications for the provincial poverty reduction strategy.

Recognizing that children of recent immigrants and refugees, Indigenous children, children of female lone-parent families, children in many racialized families, children affected by disabilities, and youth aging out foster care are at greater risk of living in poverty, as required in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Act, B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy must include special efforts targeted to achieve major reductions in poverty levels for these populations.

Recommendation 2: Focus on Building a Healthy, Resilient and Inclusive Society

There is ample evidence that socioeconomic position is one of the most important social determinants of health. Children who are raised in poverty face risks to their health over their life course.ⁱ In contrast, healthy, well-supported children and youth are more likely to become the engaged and contributing citizens that are essential for creating a healthy, sustainable society.

International studies have shown that high rates of economic inequality negatively impact both the rich and the poor on a range of health and wellness measures.ⁱⁱ B.C. studies also show the impacts of poverty on people's vulnerability to chronic disease and the effects on their life span.ⁱⁱⁱ

Allowing income and wealth inequality to continue to grow in B.C. brings with it increased health and social costs related to higher rates of many chronic diseases, obesity, mental illness, suicide, violence and addictions. Beyond these negative health effects and the widespread suffering that accompanies them, growing socioeconomic inequality erodes social cohesion, empathy and compassion, which leads to increased social isolation, stigmatization and marginalization of the poor, distrust, crime, stress and despair.

Inequality reduces social mobility,^{iv} undermining the promise of a fair society and increasing social alienation for those left behind. The vulnerability of children is underscored by the research on the impact of economic inequality on children's well-being which demonstrates a direct correlation between a large gap between the rich and the poor in wealthy societies and reduced child well-being.^v

BC's poverty reduction strategy must be intentionally focused on creating a healthy and resilient society, founded on respect for human rights, fairness, the importance of building social cohesion and reducing inequity, including inequities of age, sex, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability, as well as poverty.

Recommendation 3: Establish a Quality, Affordable, Accessible Child Care System

A key measure to reduce child and family poverty, particularly for lone-parent families, is to address the child care crisis.

B.C. and the federal government have made historic investments and policy changes in beginning to build the BC child care system families need. However, we are still in the early stages of creating the truly public system envisioned by the \$10aDay Child Care Plan. Families with young children continue to face a child care crisis — a crisis in affordability and access to quality, regulated care. Child care providers face a crisis in recruiting qualified early childhood educators because relying primarily on parent fees has meant wages have stayed low. This crisis is affecting parents' ability to return to work after the birth of a child and their decisions to even have children.

The fiscal costs of this crisis for families, for businesses and for the province are an unnecessary drag on the provincial economy, and the implementation of a universal, regulated, quality child care system is a well-researched remedy to this crisis.

The provincial poverty reduction strategy must include continuing to prioritize new early learning and child care investments to establish universal access to a system of high-quality, affordable, inclusive and publicly accountable system of child care for B.C. children and families that is fee-free for low-income families, as envisioned by the \$10aDay Child Care Plan. To build this system, government must urgently focus on ensuring early childhood educators are paid compensation that reflects their education and the importance of the work they do and supporting an Indigenous-led process to implement the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.

Recommendation 4: Continue to Raise the Minimum Wage

The statistics on the depth of poverty show poor children in BC, including those living with parents working full-time or part-time, are being raised on median annual incomes between \$11,000 to \$12,000 below the poverty line.

Even with the increase in the provincial minimum wage to \$16.75 later this year, the annual income for a single parent with one child working full-time, full-year would be \$12,445 below the 2020 before-tax poverty line for this family size.

Stagnating wages and precarious work leaves families face soaring costs for essential living expenses such as housing, food, child care and transportation, and a social safety net that has failed to respond to this growing unfairness and inequality.

To address the depth of poverty for working poor families with children, B.C. must establish a permanent Fair Wages Commission to examine issues related to low wages and precarity in BC to advise government on strategies that bring workers above the poverty line. All workers in BC should be covered by the hourly minimum wage.

Recommendation 5: Continue to Raise Income and Disability Assistance Rates

In 2020, there were significant temporary pandemic supplements in federal and provincial contributions to welfare incomes. However, income assistance rates remained below the poverty line, with severe consequences for the health of parents and children depending on this income.

A couple with two children on temporary assistance in 2020 had a total annual income that was just 77% of the poverty line, leaving a poverty gap of \$11,208. A single parent with one child had a total income that was also 77% of the poverty line for this family type, leaving a poverty gap of \$7,858 per year.

The pandemic supplementary benefits have now ended.

We recommend the provincial poverty reduction strategy aim to significantly raise income and disability assistance rates to bring total welfare incomes up to the CFLIM after-tax poverty thresholds and index them to inflation.

Recommendation 6: Index the BC Family Benefit

Direct income transfers to lower-income families with children is a proven poverty reduction mechanism. In 2020, without the Canada Child Benefit, the B.C. child poverty rate would have been 20%, instead of 13%. The contribution of the BC Family Benefit to child health and well-being is powerful and needed. Similarly, without the additional pandemic benefits for families in 2020, the B.C. child poverty rate would have been 20%, instead of 13%.

We recommend indexing the BC Family Benefit to inflation to ensure the value of the benefit does not erode over time.

Recommendation 7: Reduce the Number of Children Coming not Government Care Due to Poverty

Poverty, often defined as ‘neglect,’ is the major factor behind many child apprehensions by B.C.’s child protection system. The high percentage of Indigenous children and youth taken into government care illustrates the disproportionate effect of this factor.

Families raising children with support needs and medically complex conditions often are struggling with poverty due to the impacts of caring for their children on their ability to work. Government support programs for these families are insufficient and have unnecessary eligibility barriers. As a consequence some families make the difficult decision to put their children into voluntary care.

Grandparents and other kinship caregivers also struggle with low incomes, often due to government policies that unfairly ignore their circumstances or divert the child benefit payments to the province instead of making sure the child receives the benefit directly.

B.C.’s poverty reduction strategy must aim to reduce the incidence and depth of child and family poverty in order to reduce the number of children who come into government care.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Ministry of Health must be given sufficient resources to support more services to keep children at home with their families when it can be made safe to do so, and to strengthen the system of guardianship workers, foster parents and other caregivers when it is not.

Increase program funding and support for families raising children with disabilities and complex medical needs to ensure they have timely, universal access everywhere in BC to a core suite of early intervention therapies; timely assessments; family respite; inclusive child care; health, medical and in-home supports.

The transition of child welfare authority to Indigenous authorities must include adequate funding to establish high-quality services.

BC must also commit to funding that ensures no child in care will grow up in poverty.

Recommendation 8: Work with Youth to Establish Comprehensive Supports for Youth Aging out of Care

B.C. has made good progress on increasing supports for youth transitioning out of care, including extending the age of eligibility for supports, post-secondary tuition waivers and supports, rental housing subsidies and other policy enhancements. However, but there is much more to do to make sure the needs of youth who require more social, mental health, and life skills supports in their transition to adulthood are recognized and met.

Ending the high proportion of youth from care who experience homelessness is an urgent concern.

We recommend automatically enrolling all young people transitioning out of care in an income support program that meets their basic living costs and ensures they have safe, secure and affordable housing.

Recommendation 9: Support Immigrants and Refugees

Many immigrant adults are under-employed in jobs that are lower in skill than the job they held prior to immigrating to Canada. And for many families the impacts of poverty are compounded by the housing affordability crisis and the difficulty accessing child care.

Refugees who have experienced trauma can be highly vulnerable and have even greater difficulties leaving the cycle of poverty.

We recommend intensifying efforts to help immigrants and refugees adjust to life in Canada by enhancing employment assistance, removing long-standing barriers to foreign-trained professionals accessing jobs in their field, making more language training with child care available, and improving employment standards and human rights protections and enforcement.

Recommendation 10: Support the Right to Housing

Housing has become unaffordable for too many families in B.C., including rental accommodation.

The poverty reduction strategy must support the right to housing for children, youth and families by:

- **Scaling up funding to build thousands of new social and affordable rental housing units and maintain existing affordable housing stock to reduce the number of families in core housing need and to eliminate homelessness.**
- **Protect renters from rent-related or renovation evictions.**
- **Enhancing and expanding rental subsidies and other income supports to families living in or near poverty to reduce housing insecurity.**
- **Providing additional funds to social service agencies and non-profit housing societies to provide housing and other supports to populations at higher risk of homelessness such as youth without family support and women with addictions who have young children.**
- **Fully fund and expand access to shelters and support for women fleeing violent relationships with their children.**

Recommendation 11: Ensure Access to Public Transportation

It is well-established that access to public transportation improves the quality of life for individuals and the health of communities.

Transportation costs create barriers for those living in poverty to access education, health care, child care, employment opportunities and a myriad of services that would assist them. Children and youth in poor families should not have to miss school because they can't afford transit fares.

In both urban and rural communities access to safe public transportation is critical to social mobility.

We recommend B.C. provide free public transit for minors ages 13-18 and free or reduced-fee transit access for low income households.

Recommendation 12: Fund Public Education to Meet the Needs of Students

Public schools have the mandate and responsibility to reduce the inequities and barriers to full participation and necessary supports faced by students living in poverty.

We recommend the province ensure K–12 public education funding is sufficient to mitigate inequities between high- and low-income neighbourhoods, school districts and families and to ensure appropriate inclusion of students with diverse learning needs. This includes enhancing funding to school districts for special education assistants, arts programming, libraries, student support services, and deferred maintenance, among other areas that still require urgent attention in future provincial budgets.

We recommend the province contribute funding to establish a universal, cost-shared, healthy school food program for all K–12 students that is respectful of local contexts, connected to community and curriculum, health-promoting and sustainable.

Recommendation 13: Ensure Access to Post-Secondary Education

Low- and middle-income young people in BC know they need a post-secondary education as a path to a job or career that will, hopefully, pay a living wage and allow them to support a current or future family. But many are asking themselves if their post-secondary journey will actually be a path into poverty.

Students are faced with unaffordable tuition fees and crushing levels of student debt, often at the same time as they are starting, or wanting to start, families. Students who must borrow to attend post-secondary school are paying a premium for their education, compared to those who do not have to borrow.

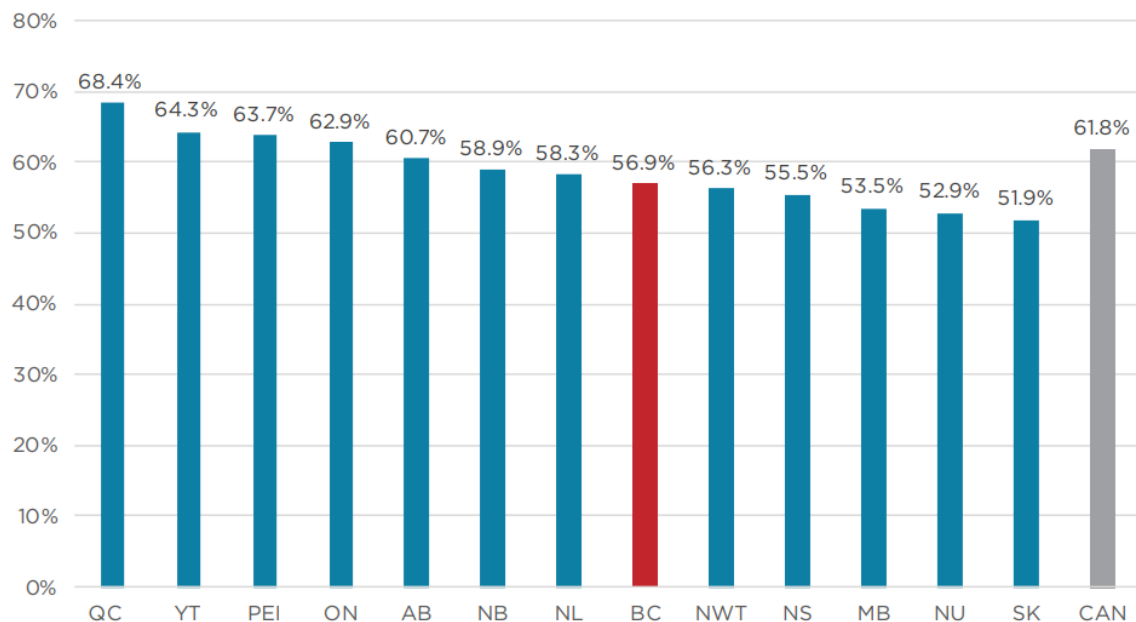
In the short term, we recommend that B.C. reduce post-secondary tuition fees.

In the long term, we recommend both the federal and provincial governments should make post-secondary education free for Canadian residents.

Recommendation 14: Implement Fair Tax Policies

We recommend that B.C. investigate what other provinces are doing to reduce their child poverty rates through government transfers. Here is a graph showing how B.C. ranks in comparison with other provinces and territories.

Rate of Child Poverty Reduction by Government Transfer Payments, by Province/Territory, 2020



Source: Statistics Canada custom tabulation, data from T1 Family Files 2020

We also recommend that, within to the maximum extent it can, within its jurisdiction, B.C. address growing income inequality and generate revenue for poverty reduction programs by eliminating or reducing highly regressive and expensive tax loopholes, closing tax havens, taxing extreme wealth and implementing an excess profit tax focused on corporate pandemic windfalls.

End Notes

ⁱ World Health Organization, Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Closing the Gap in a Generation, Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008.

ⁱⁱ The Equality Trust, The Spirit Level <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/about-inequality/spirit-level>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Health Officers Council of BC, 2008 and 2013, <https://healthofficerscouncil.net/positions-and-advocacy/poverty-and-health-inequities/>

^{iv} <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/a-tale-of-two-canadas-where-you-grow-up-affects-your-adult-income/article35444594/>

^v Equality Trust, <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/child-well-being>