

Downtown Eastside Women's Centre



BC Poverty Reduction Strategy

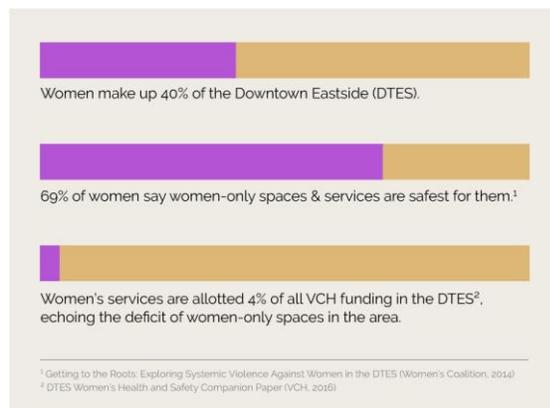
Small Group Discussions through the Power of Women Project at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre

Introduction:

We held two sessions through the Power of Women Project with the support of Chinese Seniors Outreach Worker at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre. One was conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese on Friday March 16th at noon, and another was conducted in English on Friday March 16th at 5 pm.

The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (<http://www.dewc.ca>) is located in the heart of the Downtown Eastside. The Downtown Eastside as a neighbourhood is characterized a neighbourhood with disproportionate levels of poverty and extreme marginalization.

Despite the constant and epidemic violence facing, safe spaces and services welcoming to women remain few and far between. Co-ed spaces often perpetuate and normalize mistreatment, of women. Indigenous women, who comprise 70% of the women accessing the Downtown Eastside Women's Center, continue to face staggering levels of violence, overdoses, and child apprehension, compounded by the colonial legacy of familial and cultural rupture, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and systemic racism.



There are 250+ service providers in the Downtown Eastside, of which only 7 are women's organizations and 3 are women-only spaces.

The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre has been named by more than half of women in the Downtown Eastside as the place they feel safest.

About the Participants:

The participants are all members of the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre.

The total number of participants: 86

Number of participants who live in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood (including Chinatown): 69

Number of participants who access services in the Downtown Eastside: 86

Women who identify as Indigenous: 37

Women for whom a language other than English is their first or preferred language: 28.
Preferred languages include Mandarin, Cantonese, Cree, Dene, Spanish

Women who are under 20 years of age: 2

Women who are between 20-45 years of age: 11

Women who are between 45+ years of age: 73

Main source of income:

Income assistance: 11

Disability assistance: 17

Full time work: 4

Part-time, seasonal or casual work: 15

Pension: 39

Women are, on average, supporting 2-3 other people on their income.

The main issues identified by women are

- 1) Incomes (**welfare, pension, wages**) are too low for rising cost of living
- 2) Not being able to afford rent in safe **housing** / living in substandard conditions
- 3) Not able to afford medication and **health care** needs not covered under MSP
- 4) Limited access to good **food** and not eating well

The overall impact discussed was high anxiety, **stress** and declining mental and physical health due to living in poverty.

What are the issues facing you and women living in poverty right now?

General impact and well-being

- Having a low-income takes away my freedom. I don't have choices about what to buy and how to spend money. I rely on places that serve food and places to give me clothes and whatever housing building I am put in. My living conditions are controlled for me.
- Living in poverty doesn't only hurt me; it hurts my family and my kids and grandkids. We all suffer in this poverty life.
- I had to let go of many of belongings and things passed to me from my family because when I was homeless I could only have a small storage and what I could fit in my bag. I miss my stuff, I will never see have some of those photos again.
- The toll on my wellbeing and mental and physical health is the main issue. I live with anxiety, stress and feel unstable and vulnerable all the time. I feel like the ground is going to cave all the time.
- Being poor means having to go see so many workers and find different programs everyday to stay alive and tell your story over even if you don't want too. Being poor is a lot of work.
- Cost of living has gone up. My bills, food, bus, recreation, I can't make ends meet.
- There is violence everywhere –domestic violence, violence in shelters, violence in SRO's, violence on street. Everywhere I am surrounded by violence.
- I face more violence from others in poverty. More muggings and violence against seniors and disabled people.
- I feel stressed out all the time and my health is suffering. (**'Stress' was listed 49 times**)
- Lack of family and community relations. Feel more and more isolated.
- The government systems supposed to help us like welfare and disability and hospitals are all against us.
- After paying rent I have no money to eat, for transportation or any social life.
- Native people being poor on our own land is genocide. It's apartheid. Poverty is because they took our land and stole our babies. They will keep us in poverty until we get our land back.

- I constantly deal with poor housing, lack of food, family stress. My health and anxiety is severely affected in turn affecting my ability to access food, resources, or help.
- Family stress is my main issue living in poverty. I stress about affording things which stresses my family and I get short-tempered and skip meals which also comes out on my family.
- I feel shame being in poverty and accessing services. I feel quite isolated at this time.

Discrimination in Access and Criminalization

- Systemic racism with landlords means fewer housing opportunities
- Hard to find housing. They discriminate because I am Native and live in the Downtown Eastside. As soon as they see my face, they won't rent to me so I have to live in the hood.
- Whenever I see a healthcare provider or landlord or employer they automatically discriminate because I live in the Downtown Eastside.
- I don't have a Canadian birth certificate or Canadian ID, which is a huge obstacle for accessing any social services. I can't get BC housing or welfare or anything.
- The poor are being criminalized. I see street sweeps by the police everyday and people are between jail and the street.
- Canada is a racist country.
- Two of the seniors worked in their home countries and are receiving some pension. Through BC Housing they had to report the total amount of money they've received since they immigrated to Canada and are having money reduced from their OAS payments every month. They are already taxed in their home countries for this income and they feel that Canada taxing them again is unfair, and they barely have any money to survive on after paying rent.

Housing

- I am homeless. This is my main issue right now.
- I can't afford my rent (**'Can't pay rent' was listed 64 times**)
- Lack of affordable subsidized housing with own kitchen and bathroom
- SRO hotels are not homes. We need our own space and bathroom and kitchen

- My home has mice and my stove doesn't work, the landlord doesn't do anything about it and I can't move because it's the only place I can afford.
- I can't find decent housing. Landlords take advantage of desperation for cheap housing and if we complain they evict us.
- Long waitlist for BC Housing.
- Housing in SRO's is bad condition, not repaired and bad infestations.
- In the winter I don't use my heat because I can't afford such big BC Hydro bills.
- My phone was cut off because I had to put the money into my rent which went up.
- I was homeless 19 times and my health condition got worse but being on the street I couldn't find a doctor but then I couldn't get my medication which my mental health worse and made it harder for me to get off the street. It was a shitty cycle.
- Building managers are not patient or understanding
- My slumlord is my biggest issue. They take our money and give us shitholes.
- In public subsidized housing, our freedoms are taken away. There are so many rules and regulations. In the private market, at least no one controls our home as much, but I can't afford the private market. It sucks either way I have been in both.
- Being homeless I am supposed to be finding housing, but there is no housing and I spend most of my day trying to figure out where I will eat, where I will clean myself, where I can clean my clothes, how to store my stuff, where to get seasonal wear, try not to have my bedding stolen. I am surviving hour to hour.
- Supportive housing like Atira is not supportive. There are huge challenges and so many rules that are otherwise illegal (like no guests) and they have no employment standards.

Children and Families

- I can't afford regular childcare for my kids.
- I can't take care of my family on such low wages

- The Ministry (MCFD) is always harassing and taking away babies because we are poor but then pay foster families to take care of our babies. This is worse than residential schools. They should give us the money instead of paying white families mortgages
- I don't have enough money to pay for my kids school supplies and programs.
- There is no childcare so single mothers or couples can go to work or back to school.
- I have so much stress for working multiple jobs and I don't even see my kids.

Food Insecurity

- It is impossible to eat well on poverty wages. I almost never eat fruits and vegetables or protein. I feel so lucky whenever I get an apple or orange.
- The downtown eastside is a food desert. There is food everywhere but it isn't healthy food and some places serve expired food.
- I go binning because I live in poverty but more and more places lock their bins and waste all that food just so poor people don't go binning.
- Food is out of reach on small income. Can't go to the grocery store or restaurant, I rely on food services and food bank.
- We have a right to water – clean toilets, sinks, laundry, drinking water, showers. These are all taken away when I am poor.
- I do not eat well and can't afford food (**'not enough food' or 'no good food' listed 56 times**)
- I often skip meals
- On welfare cheque day, all the stores down here put their prices up a few bucks.
- I don't eat enough food and have poor healthcare
- 75% of my diet is starches like pasta, bread, rice and potatoes. I rarely eat greens and have an extreme lack of protein in my diet.
- There are not enough sales on welfare cheque week.

Health care (Mental health, physical health, substance use)

- As a pensioner there have been many cutbacks in medications, in support workers. I can't get coverage for the special bed I need.
- I can't get the home support I need.
- My vitamin supplements aren't covered.
- Poverty leads to increased drug use for me. I feel more depressed and anxious and self-medicate. All around me, people are overdosing from drugs that are used as a coping mechanism.
- Healthcare coverage including pharmacare
- Not enough family doctors especially doctors who don't discriminate
- Can't find doctors who don't speak languages other than English
- Not enough mental health support
- I don't have enough money to eat proper food as a diabetic and I can't afford to pay for supplements and prescriptions not covered by MSP. As a result, my weight is always fluctuating.
- My mental health is getting worse.
- Not enough senior care like home support or hospice
- I stop myself from buying the medicine I need because I have a limited budget
- I wish I could get into detox the days I decide to go in. It's already hard to get clean and when we decide to, there is nothing there for us. There has to be something right away.
- There has been a more than 60 percent cut in nursing support and specialized transport.
- Not all my meds not covered for my heart failure, arthritis, and cancer.
- My vitamins, iron and ensure aren't covered.
- Canned food at the food bank is often expired

Income (social assistance, pensions, wages)

- I can't afford anything on such little money. I see that with everyone, social assistance to pensioners to working poor.
- I can't afford anything my income is too low (**'Low income' listed 77 times**)
- Disability assistance is not enough as cost of living goes up.
- As a newcomer, I can't live on \$375 and try to find a job and try to go to school and do all the things they tell me I have to do.
- I live with my partner and when I started living with him, they cut-off my welfare.
- People on welfare can't own a home so we never feel secure.
- Social assistance needs to be raised when housing prices are going up and housing prices can't go up when social assistance goes up.
- I am immigrant and if I want to sponsor my family, I can't go on social assistance and they can't go on social assistance. This isn't right.
- I couldn't get on welfare until I got an advocate. We shouldn't need advocates to get on social assistance.
- I can't even talk to a welfare worker; I get put on hold for more than 30 minutes.
- I had to loan money from a money lender and they take so much money off, it's a rip off. Poor people should have access to interest-free and service-free loans.
- I make minimum wage and have to commute sometimes one and a half hours each way and then I have to work two jobs to pay my debt.
- The Ministry is so bad; they treat people with no respect like animals. They need to be educated about human rights.
- It's too hard to get on welfare and disability. There are too many rules. It shouldn't be this hard to get on welfare.
- It took me almost two years to get on disability. I had to prove I had all these problems with my doctor but some of the test I couldn't pay for because I was still on welfare and didn't have disability money yet.
- Whenever our welfare cheque goes up then BC Housing rent goes up too

- My job is in Richmond and it takes me one hour every day to get there. But my income is so low that it's better for me to take fewer shifts and get free food at the women's center some days. Even though I want to work and don't want to sit idle, I can't afford to work every day otherwise it's more expensive for me to buy my groceries and get my food.

Transportation

- Handy Dart services have been cut so I can't access some of my services anymore that I used to attend and one of my food programs that provided nutritious food.
- Cost of transportation is too high. Translink bus fares are too expensive and always going up.
- I find work far away but can't afford the transit pass for three zones
- Stigmatized and judged especially at St Paul's Hospital
- I don't have enough money for transport
- I can't always go where I want to go. I save up enough for appointments but no travel for leisure activity.

Employment and Education

- Lack of job readiness programs
- No one will hire me when they see my address
- I have been looking for work for over one year
- Employers tell me I need better English skills, how do I pay for that while on welfare
- I can't find a job with everything on computers. I got help doing a resume but if I can't use computers so well no one will hire me.
- I went through the free job programs but employers find out you are in that program they don't take you because they think you aren't serious about working.
- I want to access education but can't afford it.
- As a newcomer I can't get proper training and language training to secure a job

What are possible solutions to reduce or eliminate poverty for you and other women?

The three main solutions identified:

Need more affordable housing geared to income in every neighbourhood

More and Extended Health Coverage

Higher Incomes and Reduced Cost of Living through Free Public Services

1) Need more affordable housing geared to income in every neighbourhood.

- a. Affordable housing means no more than 20-30 percent of income
- b. Safe and clean housing
- c. Enforced standards of living.
- d. Rent should be controlled so its not always going up or being evicted by landlords who want to raise the rent
- e. Supportive housing and BC housing and Native housing should be covered by the law so that rents don't go up when social assistance goes up and so they don't have arbitrary rules like no guests.

2) More and Extended health coverage.

- a. Need more doctors and nurses
- b. Need culturally-relevant and multilingual health care
- c. Extended coverage to include supplements, prescriptions, dental and eye
- d. Wrap-around health care supports including mental health and detox on demand
- e. Alternative health professionals (homeopathic, holistic dentistry, alternative health procedures like Chinese and Japanese acupuncture), nutritionist, vitamins, Chinese herbal medicine, and functional medicine specialities should be covered.

3) Higher Incomes and Reduced Cost of Living through Free Public Services.

- a. Wages should be livable
- b. Welfare and pension and disability assistance should go up to match inflation and cost of living.
- c. There should be less barriers and requirements to getting on disability and welfare.
- d. Reduce cost of living by having free childcare, free transit and free tuition for families in poverty.
- e. Tax the rich and developers and investors to pay for universal services for all of us including them

What solutions would address these issues in reducing and eliminating poverty?

(General brainstorm)

Colonization

There was a lot of discussion about poverty for Indigenous people stemming from ongoing colonization and theft of land.

Possible solutions listed were:

- Return the land to us.
- Indigenous management of Turtle Island
- We need housing on reserve
- Give our land back
- Decolonize Canada
- No apartheid Canada
- All systems like healthcare and social workers and legal system need to be educated on colonization including residential schools and 60s scoop
- All government bodies should have cultural sensitivity training

Housing

- We need affordable housing
- Rent control
- We need housing everywhere not just in the Downtown Eastside. We should have the options to live in other neighbourhoods.
- Invest in Tiny House Warriors to build house for low-income families on their traditional lands.
- Better access to housing
- Illegal suites and unsanitary housing should have standards maintained
- Housing now
- I need safe housing that isn't a shithole
- We deserve homes, instead of paying rent.
- More laws against slumlords
- There should be housing for families and children in the Downtown Eastside
- More affordable housing
- Affordable housing
- Safe housing
- No more slumlords
- We need more housing
- Rent freeze
- Proper housing

- Rent freeze
- Legislation against landlords who discriminate against tenants
- More affordable housing, not SRO's
- Sanctions against slumlords
- Landlords in DTES should provide food to tenants
- More housing with less rules
- Limitation on rent increases
- Change legislation that gives sweetheart deals to developers
- Get rid of slumlords
- Affordable, safe, clean housing for all

Income:

- Increase pensions due to increased cost of living
- Increase welfare rates due to increased cost of living
- Job wage increase due to increased cost of living
- Raise welfare rates
- Liveable income
- More taxes on developers and investors
- Incomes should match up to a decent standard of living
- Shelter portion of assistance should be increased to match rising rents
- Pension OAS should be increased to match cost of living
- Pension should be higher
- Need more money on welfare
- Disability assistance rates should be higher
- We need a living wage not just minimum wage
- Higher minimum wage
- Less wait times at the Ministry
- Less rules to get on assistance
- Need better services at the Ministry
- Bring back individual workers instead of call-center
- Get rid of the unrealistic hoops of applying for welfare
- Simplify the process to apply for social assistance
- Minimum income of \$1900 per month for everyone

Health:

- Better access to healthcare
- We need more healing center and healing spaces
- Extended health coverage to include pharma care, dental, eye, supplements and non-Western medicines like Chinese herbal medicine
- More detoxes and rehab

- We need better health care
- Need more doctors
- Subsidy on prescriptions
- More health professionals on the streets like nurses and counsellors
- Detox on demand
- More prescription drugs need to be covered
- We need art therapy and art classes
- Suicide and trauma prevention and more support workers
- More follow-up after 6 week treatment for addiction
- Teach meditation and stress reduction techniques to all (without religious dogma)
- Bring back nursing services for the elderly
- Bring back Handyart and transportation services
- More detox and mental health support
- Rehab facilities
- Rapid healthcare response teams not long waits
- Free access to counseling
- Truly free health care including dental, vision, whatever is needed

Public Services:

- Free childcare for families
- Free tuition
- Lower cost of living by making childcare and transportation free
- Access to education for people living in poverty that aren't loans, it should be free.
- Free education for children aging out of foster care.
- Free education
- Lower cost of childcare for families
- More support for single mothers and their families instead of foster families
- Better access to legal advocates.
- Need more advocates and lawyers covered by legal aid
- More affordable phone companies.
- People coming as newcomers and refugees should have access to better supports for training, health and housing.
- Urban natives have a hard time to access supports; address racism.
- Make it easy to get ID for non-citizens and those not born in Canada
- Free tuition
- More educational assistance and bring back adult learning centers
- Free ESL for refugees and newcomers
- There should be rent control and food prices should be regulated
- Working poor should have rent, childcare and transportation subsidized
- Training programs for newcomers and refugees
- Put more money into our healthcare instead of Site C Dam
- Widow pension shouldn't have so many restrictions

- We need subsidized childcare
- More programs to support women to be empowered when they leave violence
- Those living below the poverty line should get a free bus pass
- DTES residents should get a local discount card for 20% for all the fancy new stores going up
- We need freedom of mobility and bus passes
- Basic income
- No cut off date for children aging out of care
- More community gardens so we can grow our own food
- More social programs and food programs and support groups to make friends and community
- Pay utilities for low-income earners
- More access to free water sources 24-7
- Tax the rich, not low income and small business
- Free bus pass for all people earning less than \$36,000 per year
- More legal advocates and legal access programs
- Subsidize a seniors supermarket so it's cheaper and more options to buy own groceries
- All government services should provide translation and linguistic services

Employment:

- Remove age restrictions on job programs and trainings.
- More job opportunities
- We need an income-transition plan for those moving from welfare to work
- Job creation that is stable
- More training for high-paying jobs not just casual labour programs
- Fair access to all for job training and education programs

Awareness:

- There should be better education about what's it's like to live in poverty; people think we are lazy and getting a free ride.
- Treat all unconditionally with kindness
- There must be constant outreach and awareness about the mental, emotional and upsets of poverty and the loss of lives and how it all compiles up. We are devastatingly alone and vulnerable to being lost to our loved ones. People need to be more open and understanding of what its like to be poor.

Any questions, contact Harsha Walia, Project Coordinator at the Downtown Eastside Women's Center. Email project@dewc.ca or call 604-681-8480 x 234