

BC Poverty Reduction Strategy: Small Group Discussion Report

Introduction

Date: March 28, 2018

Community: Downtown Eastside Strathcona

Number of Participants: 12

Number of Organizations: One (Ray-Cam Community Centre)

About the Participants

- All participants in this group were women, all of whom are mothers, who live in the subsidized housing. All women are low-income and living in poverty. We had one senior, also a mother and grandmother, participant in the group as well. All participants were speaking from personal, lived experience. Approximately 50% of participants were Indigenous, and the group also had several women who are immigrants to Canada from China.

About the Findings

1. What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?

Work and Education:

- Tying to finish school (high school diploma), as a single mother: even when one can access free upgrading courses, childcare is expensive and there are long waitlists for affordable childcare spaces. Many mothers have not pursued further education as they cannot find childcare for when they are in school
- Without a high school diploma and or any post-secondary training, it is very challenging to get a job that pays a living wage
- The only jobs women living in poverty can access, for the most part, are minimum wage, no benefits
- When working a minimum wage job, it is not worth it go off welfare because you will actually make less if you work full time. Furthermore, if you are working full time, then you will have to find someone to take care of your children. This is another added cost and another reason it makes no sense to go off of welfare and start working a low paying job.
- Many women expressed the desire to finish their high school and continue onto post-secondary, but do not have the funds to do it
- The cost of education is the main barrier to pursuing post-secondary - no one can pay for the cost of tuition
- Women also expressed that, due to existing credit card debt etc., they do not even qualify for student loans
- Those women that do qualify for student loans then have their welfare payments stopped - it is not enough to make ends meet

- Those women that are working are working multiple, part time, minimum wage jobs to make ends meet, and it is still not enough
- Applying for grants/assistance through workplace BC takes a very long time, it is hard to make any progress and women expressed the feeling of “losing momentum”
- Many participants expressed a desire to be able to access education beyond traditional teacher/lecture style. There are many different learning styles and our system does not reflect this

Housing/Transportation/Food Costs

- Many mothers talked about the experience of living in “the ghetto,” of the Downtown Eastside/Strathcona area
- Subsidized housing is old, dirty, run down - bed bugs and drug/sex work paraphernalia (needs, condoms etc.), is a constant threat in their living environments
- Housing is often cramped: it can take many months/years to be upgraded to a larger unit if you have more children/need more space
- Housing rules and regulations are very strict - there is a feeling of a lack of freedom/self-determination over housing, as there are constant “slaps on the wrists,” for certain behavior (i.e. having a partner stay over for more than 14 nights a year who is not on the lease)
- Transportation costs are very high - most women cannot afford bus passes for themselves or their children and do not have access to a vehicle
- This severely limits what women and their families can do and where they can go
- Cost of food and basic household items seems to be continually rising - most women can barely make it to the end of the month to feed their children on the income assistance they receive
- Most of the women rely on food banks/food programs to feed their family in between cheque days
- Food banks are not always easy to access and, when they do access them, it is a humiliating experience (many women talked about having to line up outside food banks and felt ashamed to have to wait out in the open like that)
- There are a limited number of food banks in Vancouver and, often, you have to travel far to access them
- The generally constant rising cost of living in Vancouver is a challenge, women have nowhere near enough money to make ends meet

Welfare/Child Subsidy/Child Tax/Cost of Childcare

- Having welfare, child tax, and child subsidy is not enough to stay out of poverty - the constant rising cost of living does not correlate with how much money is received
- Accessing child subsidy is confusing and challenging - most women required one to one assistance with a support worker to access and qualify for child subsidy
- Childcare is expensive and there are long waitlists for programs
- If you do not qualify for subsidy, there is absolutely no way they could pay for childcare

- Any income assistance is only enough to meet basic needs (rent, food ect), there is zero wiggle room for clothing, diapers etc.

Mental Health/ Stigma of Poverty/Racism

- Many participants have, or are, struggling with mental health challenges
- Managing finances and trying to make ends meet is that much harder when dealing with mental health
- Mental health is still highly stigmatized and many mothers feel actively judged and uncomfortable when in public - participants expressed feelings of judgement and disapproval of parenting styles from outsiders
- Participants also expressed a feeling of “destined to fail” - they are judged for being in poverty/on welfare, but everything is set up to ensure they cannot get out of poverty
- Many participants grew up in poverty/on welfare, an expressed it is very challenging to get out of poverty - they feel trapped
- Many participants, who identify as Aboriginal, face constant racism and stigma - mothers spoke of feeling judged in public when their child is having a tantrum/misbehaving, far more than white mothers. They are seen as “bad parents”

2. What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?

- Free post-secondary education and or easy access to education grants
- When accessing student loans, do not cut off welfare
- Having access to a Food Bank/food programs in every neighbourhood
- Adaptable learning environments/styles for participants with mental health barriers
- Have community support workers/one to one workers from a young age so children have the support they need to succeed/stay in school
- Have one to one workers to access services and systems that are supposed to be helpful (Work BC, Child subsidy, Student Loans)
- Have practicums/work experience built right into high school/elementary school so children/young adults graduate with actual job skills
- Free, universal childcare
- Universal minimum income for every citizen
- Subsidized/controlled grocery/food costs
- Rent control and cap on rent increases
- Having more integrated welfare/child tax/child subsidy systems
- Access to mental health services and a recognition of intergenerational trauma and its present day impact on indigenous parents’ mental health

3. Possible Solutions

a) Most Important Solutions (as identified by participants)

- Free post-secondary education and or easy access to grants/loans
- Increase minimum wage so it is the actual minimum wage you need to survive
- Having easy access to food bank/low cost food/price control for food
- Cap on rent increases to reflect income

- Free, universal childcare and or easy access to child subsidy
- Easy access to mental health services
- Free transit/affordable for families/youth
- Increase welfare rates to reflect rising cost of living

b) Top three solutions based on individual priority setting

1. Free/Affordable post-secondary education
2. Free/affordable childcare
3. Free/affordable transit and increased welfare to match the increased cost of living