Poverty Reduction Policies and Programs

The Best Place on Earth?:
Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on
Poverty Reduction Policies and Programs in British Columbia

British Columbia

By Scott Graham, Jill Atkey, Crystal Reeves, and Michael Goldberg
Social Planning and Research Council of BC

Social Development Report Series, 2009
Commissioned by the CANADIAN COUNCIL ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The enduring problem of poverty in British Columbia is understood and addressed differently by many actors, including individuals and organizations in civil society, public policy-makers, politicians, government agencies, businesses, unions, and media outlets. Various types of relationships exist among these actors, ranging from collaborative to adversarial, and together, the relationships constitute a set of forces that complicate any attempt to discuss the subject of poverty and poverty reduction policy and programs in British Columbia.

Further complicating matters is BC's provincial political scene. It is dominated by two parties – Liberals (formerly the Social Credit Party) and the New Democratic Party – which generally occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum. On several occasions over the past 35 years, these parties have switched roles in the provincial legislature, each time ushering in social policy reforms that are often antithetical to the previous social policy regime.

In addition to these political forces and actors, poverty and anti-poverty work in British Columbia is also influenced by a range of economic forces. These include the boom/bust cycles of BC's resource-dependent economy, the pine beetle infestation, the US-Canada Softwood Lumber Agreement, and other economic strains.

As such, the trajectory of poverty rates and poverty reduction policies and programs in BC continues to be shaped by a diverse set of institutional actors and political and economic forces. The goal of this report is to examine key aspects of poverty and low income in British Columbia and the policy and programs designed to reduce and mitigate the impact of poverty. It addresses four key questions: What are the present-day poverty rates in BC? What forces contribute to poverty in the province? What current and historical strategies have been employed by the BC government to address poverty? What role have anti-poverty, not-for-profit organizations played in the fight against poverty in BC?

Below, we analyze current poverty trends and factors that contribute to poverty in BC. The subsequent section reviews the salient historical and current-day welfare policies and programs implemented by the BC government, with a focus on reforms which impact poverty reduction. The emergent role of civil society actors in anti-poverty work in BC is also discussed, including case studies of not-for-profit

organizations that are working to reduce poverty and improve the living conditions and well-being of low-income citizens.

A PROFILE OF POVERTY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

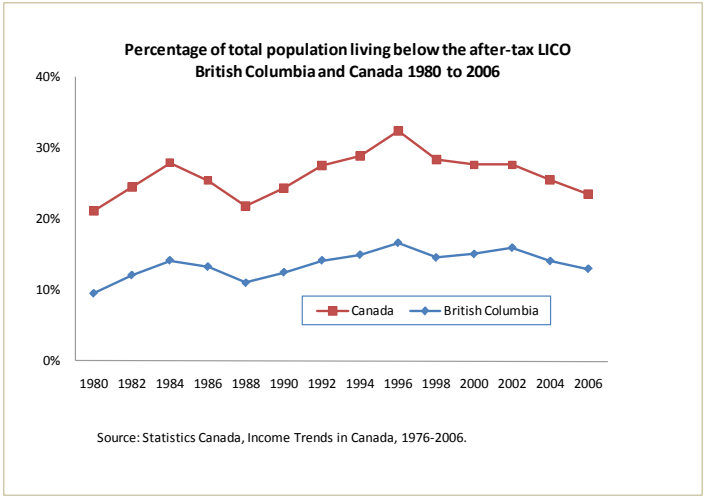
For decades, poverty has been a persistent problem for families and individuals in British Columbia. On the whole, government responses have been insufficient and ineffective, particularly since the early 1990s. British Columbia's resource-based economy with its boom/bust cycles is one key factor. For example, the pine beetle infestation led to exponentially increased productivity in the forestry sector, followed by major job losses in rural communities. And unlike other parts of the country, the economy in British Columbia experienced a fairly severe downturn in the early 2000s, linked to the Asian financial crisis and negative impacts of the softwood lumber dispute with the United States. These economic factors coincided with a Liberal government sweeping into power in the province with an agenda of tax cuts and spending reductions, and a reform program that undermined existing supports for British Columbians with low incomes. These factors are explored below in discussing poverty trends, poverty in urban and rural communities, and poverty among different population groups.

Overview

In Canada, the percentage of the population living in poverty was slightly lower in 2006 compared to 1980; in British Columbia, the trend has been in the opposite direction. As shown in Figure 1, poverty rates in Canada and British Columbia followed similar patterns until the late 1990s, with fluctuations attributable to the state of the economy. Since the mid-1990s, however, the national trend has been downward, decreasing from 15.7% in 1996 to 10.5% in 2006.[1]

British Columbia has not followed that same pattern. The poverty rate in BC grew in the early part of the decade, peaking at 16% in 2002, before beginning to decline. The peak in 2002 was likely due to the economic downturn in the province that resulted from the Asian financial crisis and the protracted softwood lumber dispute with the United States.

Figure 1



Urban and Rural Poverty

The overall rate of poverty can mask important differences in the experience of poverty. In British Columbia, for instance, there used to be significant differences in the rate of poverty between urban and rural areas. But the relationship between poverty and geography is changing.

Historically, poverty rates in BC's urban areas have been high compared to the national average, while poverty rates in the rural areas have been consistently below the national average. By 2000, however, the rural poverty rate in BC surpassed the Canadian average by almost a full percentage point – 14.5% compared to 13.6% (National Anti-Poverty Organization, 2003). At the same time, poverty was emerging as a significant problem in suburban communities around Vancouver. These trends reveal the significant challenges that BC faces today as communities of different sizes grapple with high levels of economic insecurity.

Rural Poverty

Generally speaking, the causes of rural poverty include a mixture of low income, lack of employment opportunities, the high costs of new housing construction, poor quality of housing (leading to higher heating costs), poor health and lack of healthcare within a reasonable traveling distance, and low levels of education.[2] Also, the comparatively high costs for transportation and other essential goods in rural areas are exacerbated when oil prices are high, as they were until recently. The new BC carbon tax, introduced in 2008, was also a significant concern for rural residents.

The types of employment in rural areas also shed some light on the incidence of poverty. A 2005 study by the Urban Futures Institute found that "the dominant engines of British Columbia's economy are its natural resources. While urban, and specifically metropolitan, economic activities are important contributors to the province's economic base, two-thirds of provincial export income is earned by the forestry, mining, fishing, energy and agricultural sectors, sectors which are predominantly non-metropolitan" (Baxter, Berlin and Ramlo, 2005, p.3). Thus, when there is a downturn in the resource sector, rural and northern communities face high levels of unemployment, a loss of local spending, out-migration, and increasing poverty.

In British Columbia, for example, many rural communities rely heavily on the forest industry for their well-being. A recent Senate report on rural poverty indicated that a number of international and domestic forces are converging to impact the forest industry, including intensification of global competition, shifting demands for wood products, protectionist pressures from the United States, and the high costs of energy. These forces are further exacerbated by the pine beetle epidemic, with long-term projections that 50% of British Columbia's mature pine will be dead by 2008 and 80% by 2013 (Standing Senate Committee on Forestry and Agriculture, 2008). As a result, rural communities in the province are experiencing job losses in the thousands and they are at very high risk of increasing rates of poverty.

(Sub) Urban Poverty

In addition to intensifying risks of poverty in rural areas of BC, many of the 22 municipalities in Metro Vancouver (formerly known as the Greater Vancouver Regional District) continue to record high levels of poverty. Figure 2 illustrates poverty rates in key Metro Vancouver municipalities from 1990 to 2005. Although the rates increased in all municipalities over the recessionary period from 1990 to 1995, the most dramatic increases were in the suburban municipalities. Richmond, Coquitlam, Burnaby and Surrey all began to exhibit poverty rates similar to the historic rates in the City of Vancouver during this period (Fawcett and Scott, 2007). By 2000, the poverty rates in these municipalities had decreased somewhat and edged down further by 2005. However, "the decreases were slight and left the cities with poverty rates well above pre-recessionary levels," despite strong economic growth in the province from 2002 to 2005 (*Ibid,* p.31).

Figure 2

Poverty Rates, key Metro Vancouver Municipalities, 1990 to 2005

	1990	1995	2000	2005
Vancouver	24.8%	31.0%	29.4%	26.6%
Coquitlam	14.0%	22.3%	21.4%	20.2%
Richmond	15.2%	26.0%	23.9%	26.1%
Surrey	15.7%	21.4%	18.3%	18.0%
Burnaby	18.5%	27.8%	26.4%	25.5%

Sources: for 1990 and 1995 data: Fawcett, Gail and Katherine Scott (2007). *A Lost Decade: Urban Poverty in Canada, 1990 to 2000* , Canadian Council on Social Development;
for 2000 data: Statistics Canada, Urban Poverty Data;
for 2005 data: Community Profiles, Census data.

Factors Related to Rural and Urban Poverty

The erosion of wage rates is one factor behind stubbornly high poverty rates in British Columbia. In 1997, the average hourly wage was $16.91 in BC, considerably higher than any other province in the country and higher than the national average of $15.59. By 2006, BC's average wage had increased to $19.91 per hour, but that was well below the rate in Alberta ($21.12) and Ontario ($20.65). Between 1997 and 2006, the average wage in BC increased by 17.7%, by far the lowest increase in the country and significantly below the 26.5% increase in the national average wage (Statistics Canada, 2006b). Considering the high cost of living in the province, relatively small increases in wage rates over time have had little impact on the ability of British Columbians to cover their costs. BC had the highest proportion of children living in poverty in 2006, despite having at least one family member with a full-time, full-year job. There were more than 245,000 employees in BC earning less then $10/hour in 2006, and another 185,000 employees who earned between $10.00 and $11.99/hour (First Call BC, 2007a).

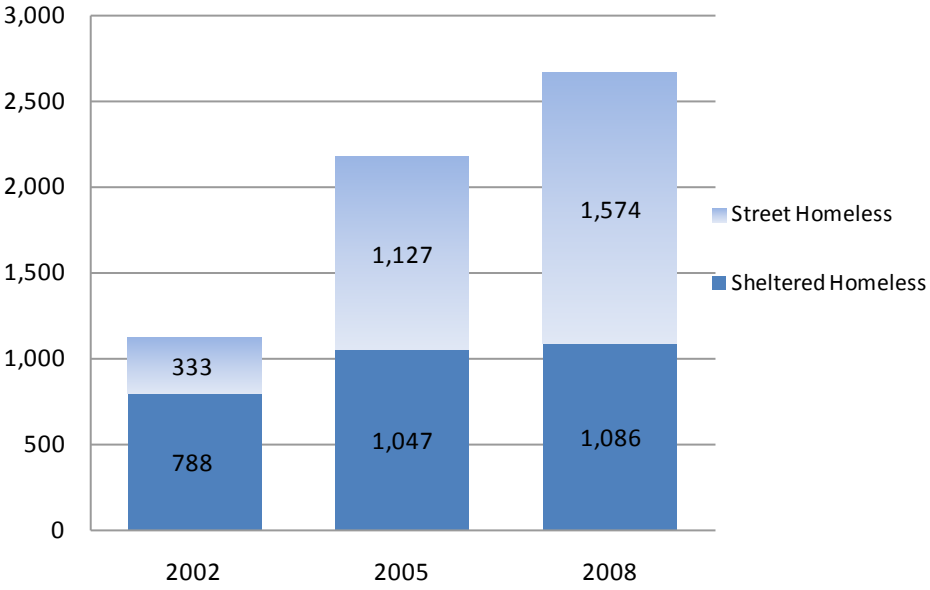
BC has also seen a drastic decline in welfare caseloads since the mid-1990s. Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance[3] data indicate a 70% decline (or 53,850 cases) in the employable income assistance

caseload since April 2002 (Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2007). This comes on the heels of a 47% reduction in caseloads over the previous six years. On the surface, one might think that a drop in welfare caseloads would be a good thing, and that people were better off leaving welfare for employment. And while securing employment has been credited by the province as a key factor in caseload reductions, such employment has not led to a reduction in poverty rates. Other research suggests that reforms made to BC's welfare system have contributed just as much to the caseload reductions, with fewer applicants receiving benefits due to changes in eligibility requirements and in the application procedures (Wallace, Klein and Reitsma-Street, 2006). (These changes are described in further detail later in this report.) According to the province's own records, the acceptance rate of those applying for welfare has dropped from 90% in June 2001, to 51% by September 2004 (Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2007).

Benefit levels for welfare in British Columbia are not tied to any measure of low-income and they are not indexed to inflation. With no rate increases between the early-1990s and 2007, families and individuals on income assistance have continued to lose purchasing power each year. Comparisons between living costs and income assistance in British Columbia over time reveal that recipients do not come close to meeting their basic monthly costs of living. For example, in 2007, a single adult on income assistance received enough to cover only 45% of their basic living expenses, and a single parent with a teenage child could meet only 62% of their basic costs (Atkey and Siggner, 2008). British Columbia is the only province in the country that does not allow employable income assistance recipients to supplement their income through limited paid employment. And without any means of increasing their incomes, individuals and families are forced to live in straightened circumstances and to go without some basic necessities. Low welfare rates and the increasingly punitive restrictions on welfare eligibility are significant contributing factors to poverty in British Columbia.

A key outcome of poverty is poor housing and homelessness, which have been identified as issues of growing concern in urban and rural communities across BC. Two recent studies have suggested that there are 10,000 to 15,000 homeless persons in BC (Patterson et al., 2008; Chudnovsky, 2008). Homeless counts in larger urban communities across the province support the fact that homelessness is increasing, even recognizing that all counts of homeless individuals are undercounts. For the purposes of this report, we look more closely at the homeless numbers for Metro Vancouver, because the region is the largest urban area in the province and its homeless counts have used consistent methodologies over time, making comparisons more reliable. In Metro Vancouver, a homeless count was conducted in 2002, 2005, and 2008. There were 2,647 homeless people identified in the 2008 count – a 136% increase from 2002. And as seen in Figure 3, the street homeless population – that is, those not sleeping in shelters or transition homes – increased by 373% over that same period (Social Planning and Research Council of BC et al., 2008).

Figure 3



Source: Metro Vancouver Homeless Counts (2002, 2005, 2008) available at: www.metrovancouver.org/planning/homelessness/Pages/Resources.aspx

Poverty among Population Groups

Several groups in the population are more vulnerable to poverty than others, as the following discussion highlights.

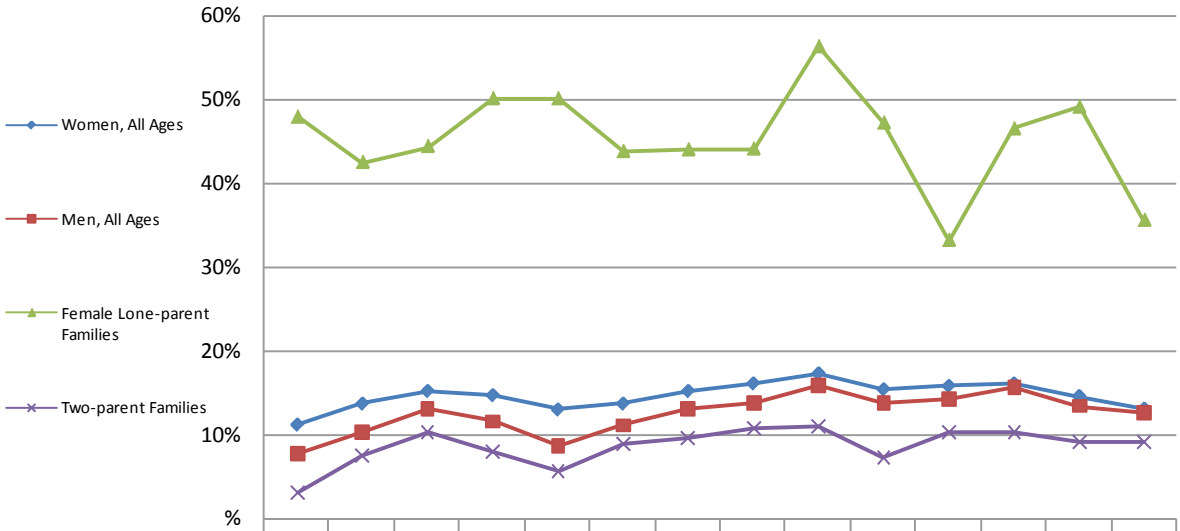
Poverty by Gender and Family Status

Poverty rates in BC for both women and men of all ages trended upwards through the 1980s and only began to decrease after 1996. That being said, however, the incidence of poverty for both men and women was higher in 2006 than in 1980, as shown in Figure 4. Overall, the gap in poverty rates between women and men has narrowed since the mid-1990s, nearly closing in 2002.

The story for female-led lone-parent families is not encouraging. Despite a slight downward trend since 1996, lone-parent mothers in BC continue to have some of the highest poverty rates of any population group in the province. As a comparison, the poverty rate was 35.7% among lone mothers in 2006 versus a rate of 9.3% for two-parent families, although it should be noted that even that figure represented a nearly three-fold increase from 1980. As shown in Figure 4, poverty in BC has historically been gendered, and it continues to be particularly acute for female-led lone-parent families.

Figure 4

Percentage of population living below after-tax LICO, by gender and family type, British Columbia, 1980 to 2006



	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
Women, All Ages	11.3	13.8	15.3	14.8	13.1	13.8	15.3	16.2	17.4	15.5	15.9	16.2	14.7	13.2
Men, All Ages	7.8	10.4	13.1	11.7	8.8	11.2	13.2	13.8	16.0	13.8	14.3	15.8	13.5	12.7
Female Lone-parent Families	48.0	42.6	44.5	50.2	50.2	43.9	44.1	44.2	56.4	47.3	33.3	46.6	49.2	35.7
Two-parent Families	3.2	7.6	10.3	8.0	5.8	9.0	9.7	10.8	11.1	7.3	10.3	10.3	9.2	9.3

Note: The drop in the poverty rate (to 33.3%) for lone mothers in 2000 may have been a statistical anomaly. The 2006 data for lone mothers (35.7%) received a "use with caution" rating from Statistics Canada. The 1998 through 2006 data for two-parent families received "use with caution" ratings from Statistics Canada.
Source: Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada 1976-2006*, Cat. 13F0022XIE.

A number of factors contribute to this gendered trend in poverty rates. While parents at all income levels struggle to find affordable, adequate and regulated child care, the struggle is even more pronounced for low-income parents, and for lone parents in particular (who are typically women). More than 75% of women with a child aged 3 or older and 64% of mothers with infants or toddlers participate in the labour force (Montani, 2008). Women's participation in the labour force is not expected to decline, yet the number of regulated child care spaces available continues to fail to meet the demands.

Provincial child care subsidy rates for low-income families are not tied to the actual costs of care, nor are they reviewed annually for adequacy. Despite increases to the subsidy rates in 2006, parents with low incomes are still required to pay child care fees. For example, the subsidy covered only 74% of the cost of care for a 3-year-old in licensed family care in the City of Vancouver in 2006 (Atkey and Siggner, 2008).

In addition to child care, other barriers to women's participation in the labour market include their disproportionate share of responsibility for caring labour and a greater likelihood of being having

precarious employment. Federal changes to Employment Insurance legislation in the late 1990s also disproportionately impacted women, resulting in only one-third of women in the labour force being eligible for unemployment benefits, compared with 44% of men (Jackson, 2003). This places lone-parent mothers in a particularly difficult position, but two-parent families are also increasingly strained as the costs of living continue to rise, particularly in BC's Lower Mainland. In many cases, two or more incomes are required to maintain a reasonable standard of living, but incomes among middle-income households have remained stagnant over the past two decades and those of low-income households have decreased (Statistics Canada, 2006c).

Poverty among Children, Seniors, and Unattached Individuals

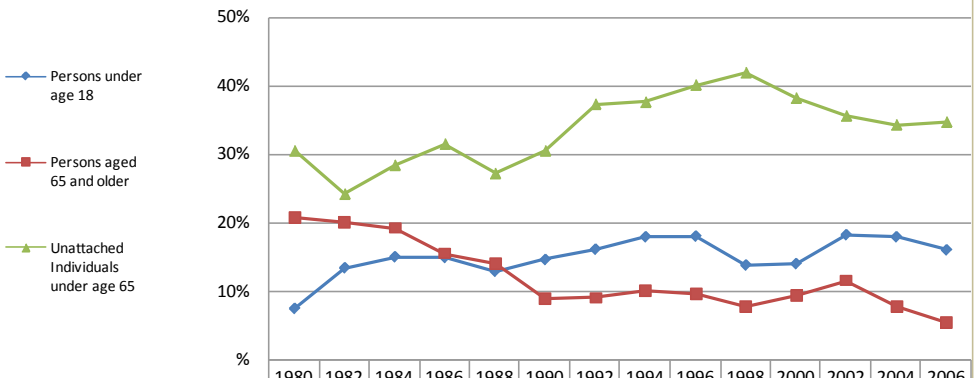
Child poverty rates in BC continue to defy national trends. The rates have increased fairly consistently since 1980, reaching a high of 18.3% in 2002 (see Figure 5). In 2006, British Columbia again had the highest incidence of child poverty of any province, at 16.1%. Yet despite having the highest proportion of poor children in families with at least one adult working full-time full-year, BC does less than most other provinces to reduce child poverty (First Call BC, 2007b). Thus, low wages in combination with government inaction are major contributors to BC's dubious distinction of having the highest child poverty rates in Canada for the past five years.

Poverty rates among unattached individuals under age 65 show a similar, albeit less dramatic, pattern. Nearly 35% of unattached individuals lived below the after-tax LICO in 2006, down from a high of 42% in 1998. The trend in poverty rates among unattached individuals from 1980 to 2006 more closely mirrors changes in the economy of BC.

The percentage of seniors living in poverty in BC has steadily declined since 1980, consistent with the national trend. The poverty rate for BC seniors aged 65 and older was 5.6% in 2006, down from a peak of 20.8% in 1980, although higher rates persist for unattached senior women.

Figure 5

Percentage of population living below after-tax LICO, by age group, British Columbia, 1980 to 2006



	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
Persons under age 18	7.6	13.5	15.1	15.0	13.0	14.7	16.2	18.0	18.1	13.9	14.1	18.3	18.0	16.1
Persons aged 65 and older	20.8	20.1	19.3	15.6	14.1	9.1	9.2	10.2	9.8	8.0	9.6	11.7	8.0	5.6
Unattached Individuals under age 65	30.6	24.3	28.5	31.6	27.3	30.6	37.4	37.7	40.2	42.0	38.3	35.7	34.4	34.8

Note: The data for 1998, 2000 and 2006 for persons aged 65 and older received a "use with caution" rating from Statistics Canada.
Source: Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada 1976-2006*, Cat. 13F0022XIE.

Poverty among Immigrants and Refugees

Immigrants accounted for 27.5% of the total population in BC in 2006 and 39.6% of the population of Metro Vancouver (Statistics Canada, Census 2006). Compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, immigrants are at greater risk of poverty, especially in their early years of settlement. In Metro Vancouver, the poverty rate among recent immigrants rose to 37.4% in 2000, up from 26.7% in 1990. There was only a slight increase in poverty rates among longer-term immigrants who had been in Canada more than five years (Andrew Heisz and Logan McLeod, as cited in Fawcett and Scott, 2007).

The median incomes of both longer-term and recent immigrants in Metro Vancouver are lower than the provincial and national averages. Longer-term immigrants have median incomes approximately 67% of those of Canadian-born residents in Metro Vancouver. Recent immigrants (those who came to Canada between 2000 and 2004), with or without degrees, earn less than half what their Canadian-born counterparts earn.[4] Furthermore, immigrant incomes in BC are gendered, with higher unemployment rates among long-term immigrant women than men; among recent immigrants, unemployment rates are virtually the same for both men and women (BC Statistics, 2006).

Approximately 15% of all Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) to Canada come to Metro Vancouver. The Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) administered by Citizenship and Immigration Canada includes a number of supports for agencies and individuals to assist with settlement. Monthly allowances are provided for basic food, shelter and other expenses such as bus passes and school fees, as well as special supports for certain items. GARs receive the support payments for one year, after which time they are expected to be self-sufficient. Total payments received over the year would allow a reference family of two adults and two children (aged seven and three) to meet approximately three-quarters of some measure of low-income – 74.6% of the after-tax LICO and 77.7% of the MBM.[5]

Metro Vancouver ranks near the bottom for GAR-receiving cities in Canada in terms of the adequacy of its support payments. In Metro Vancouver, only 66% of the average rent is covered by the RAP shelter payment, the lowest proportion of any GAR-receiving city in Canada (Siggner, Atkey and Goldberg, 2007).

Interviews conducted with 152 GARs who had come in BC in 2003 and 2005 revealed the following: 26% were relying on food banks while receiving assistance; 53% of those who had arrived in 2003 and 95% who had come in 2005 were unemployed; and 74% of all GAR families that had arrived in 2003 or 2004 continued to receive government assistance after their RAP benefits had ended (Friesen, 2007). GARs arriving in BC are at a more severe disadvantage than those in other parts of the country due to the policy of linking assistance payments to provincial welfare rates.

Poverty among Aboriginal People

Aboriginal people accounted for 4.8% of BC's total population in 2006, but they were disproportionately represented among those living in poverty. In 2005, 53.6% of unattached Aboriginals aged 15 and older were living in poverty in BC, compared to a rate of 36.7% among non-Aboriginal unattached individuals. The poverty rate for Aboriginal people living in economic family units was almost twice as high as that

for non-Aboriginal economic families: 25.3% for Aboriginal economic families in 2005 compared to a rate of 13.8% among non-Aboriginal families.

Factors influencing poverty among Aboriginal people include continuing effects of a history of colonialism and discrimination, lower incomes, fewer employment opportunities, lower educational attainment, and less access to social and health services. These factors are compounded by social and economic marginalization, making it much harder to address poverty among Aboriginal people on an individual and a communal level (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2008).

In sum, poverty in BC has been a persistent and pervasive problem for a number of decades. Population groups at increased risk of poverty include female-led lone-parent families, unattached women, Aboriginal people, and immigrants and refugees. A number of overarching factors unique to BC that contribute to high poverty rates include a resource-based economy, trade links to foreign markets, and increasing urbanization and immigration.

This discussion raises questions about the poverty reduction policies and programs in BC: What kinds of historical welfare policies and programs has the provincial government developed to address poverty? Is the government currently involved in the fight against poverty and if so, to what degree? What is the role today of civil society, especially not-for-profit organizations, in addressing poverty?

POVERTY REDUCTION POLICIES AND PROGRAMS: BC GOVERNMENT AND NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Ideologies (sets of strongly held beliefs), discourses (the talk and text that express sets of strongly held beliefs), and strategies (the specific programs and projects that put ideologies and their discourses into action) are useful concepts in making sense of the current and historical anti-poverty work in BC. Throughout this analysis of poverty reduction policy and programs, we will draw on these terms to help understand the unique characteristics of the BC experience.

In British Columbia, competing ideologies, discourses and strategies between the government and civil society, especially community-based organizations, continue to shape both the experience of poverty and society's response to it. Together, they make up a complex tapestry of poverty policies and programs targeting low income people against which current efforts to reduce poverty need to be understood.

In this section, we start with a review of the historical and current welfare policies and programs of the BC government. Within this overview, some of the strongly held beliefs that have shaped the BC provincial government's welfare policies and programs will be discussed, as well as some of the voices from civil society critical of those same reforms.

We also discuss the contemporary role of civil society in fighting poverty. This discussion is not historical in scope, nor does it present the ideological leanings of these groups. Instead, an analytical framework is

used to profile four different types of anti-poverty organizations in BC in a series of case studies completed for this report.

Overview of Policies and Programs of the BC Government

While a complete history of the poverty reduction policies and programs of the BC government is beyond the scope of this paper, it is instructive to note five historical developments in the welfare system that have, at least in part, focused on poverty reduction.

BC's First NDP Government: Dave Barrett and the Community Resource Boards (1972-1975)

Between 1941 and 1972, a succession of Conservative and Liberal-Conservative coalition governments and the Social Credit government of W.A.C. Bennett emphasized free enterprise and minimal government intervention in social policy. The election of BC's first NDP government in 1972 led to a marked advancement of the modern "welfare state" in the province. Dave Barrett became the first NDP Premier in British Columbia. Shortly after taking office, Barrett and the Minster responsible for social welfare enacted a number of legislative reforms and program changes which had an impact on those living on social assistance. A form of decentralized governance was developed, referred to as Community Resource Boards (CRB), which put control over human services into the hands of people in communities. CRBs were structured according to three ideals:

- Services should be decentralized so as to be accessible to citizens;
- Services should be brought together under a single administrative structure in order to eliminate fragmentation and duplication;
- Local residents should be afforded the opportunity to participate in the planning and managing of services so as to ensure responsiveness to local needs (Clague et al., 1984).

While the Community Resource Boards were not intended as a poverty reduction strategy *per se*, they eliminated the role of municipal governments in the delivery of income assistance and placed full financial responsibility for it in the hands of the provincial government. There were also a number of small but important initiatives that improved income assistance. For example, the government introduced a community volunteer program that provided $50 per month to recipients who volunteered in community-based organizations. But it was the emergence of CRBs that was seen by many anti-poverty advocates as a vehicle to gain public support for anti-poverty policies.

The *Community Resources Boards Act* (CRBA) provided the legislative framework for the CRBs and was unique in terms of the powers it delegated to regional boards and the constituent community resource boards (Province of British Columbia, 1974). Under the CRBA, local elections would determine who sat on the local CRB, which would then determine how provincial money was spent at the local level. Sixty boards had been established or were in process of formation by the end of 1975 (*Ibid.*). No previous social service legislation in BC had ever given so much authority to local bodies operating outside of

provincial or municipal government structures.[6] Moreover, never before in BC had social service issues been debated in the electoral marketplace (Clague et al., 1984).

For many non-metropolitan communities, the CRBs were a promising development, offering a locally controlled mechanism for designing, delivering, and evaluating human services for people in need. For other community groups, particularly some in greater Vancouver, the CRB experiment was often cast as an inadequate response to local poverty issues. The Greater Vancouver Federated Anti-Poverty Groups voted to reject the work undertaken within the CRBA because there was no provision for client representation on the Vancouver Regional Board or the constituent community resource boards (Hansen, 1975). Similarly, the BC Civil Liberties Association expressed concerns about the lack of an appeal mechanism in the CRB structure (Clague et al., 1984).

Since the NDP government under Barrett were in office for only a short period of time, there is no research to indicate what, if any, impact this approach to organizing social welfare had on poverty in the province. Nevertheless, the CRB experiment offers an important development in BC's effort to assist people in need and stands in stark contrast to reforms in the 1980s under the neo-conservative government of Bill Bennett.

NDP out, Social Credit in: Bennett, Vander Zalm, and the Solidarity Coalition (1975-1991)

In 1975, the Social Credit party was returned to power in BC under Bill Bennett. This resulted in the dissolution of most CRBs in the province and a plan to significantly reduce the size and strength of the welfare state that had been built over the previous 30 years.[7] Although Bennett engaged in some minor welfare reforms in the late 1970s,[8] more significant reforms were not introduced until the recession of the early 1980s, when unemployment rates swelled to over 14%, inflation rose to 12.5%, and interest rates were at 20% (Persky, 1989). This economic context set the stage for Bennett's three-pronged approach to reforming government for the "new economic reality": downsize, deregulate, and encourage privatization (Garr, 1985).

Bennett's approach for welfare reform in BC was largely inspired by American economist Milton Friedman and championed by Michael Walker of the Fraser Institute. The Institute argued that if governments were serious about cutting costs and invigorating free enterprise, they needed to break the grip of "special interest groups" that, in their view, preyed upon budgets, sapped the vital fluids of the marketplace, and created political turmoil with their lobbies and protests.[9] The most aggressive phase of Bennett's reforms were in the 1983 provincial budget, which included a range of assaults on BC's social infrastructure, such as a reduction of 22% in funding for human rights bodies. Additionally, the Ministry of Labour's employment-training program budget was cut by $10 million and special education programs received about 12% less than in the previous year (Garr, 1985).

Bennett's aggressive approach to government reforms outraged a diverse range of groups, and in the summer of 1983, a unique alignment of unions, faith-based groups, and non-governmental organizations came together. This network became known as the Solidarity Coalition, and it mounted a campaign against the reforms that led to the biggest extra-parliamentary opposition in Canadian history.

The social service cuts, the firing of public servants without cause, and legislation attacking unions and diminishing human rights unleashed a flood of opposition energy. On August 10, 1983, 40,000 people stood in solidarity at Empire Stadium in Vancouver against Bennett's reforms.

The Social Credit leadership in a post-Solidarity political climate was more tentative in its reforms, settling on initiatives that merely tinkered with welfare recipient categories, benefits and incentives, some of which resulted in positive changes for certain groups on social assistance. In November 1988, the Minister of Social Services and Housing, Claude Richmond, announced a new procedure for classifying recipients as employable or unemployable. This change led to a reduction in income assistance of $50 per month for approximately 7,000 single-parent families, which exacerbated their hardships (Goldberg, 1989). However, following a comprehensive review of the needs of single parents, the government eliminated the difference between employable and unemployable rates for single parents (Ministry of Social Services and Housing, 1988). This meant that the original rate was restored to the 7,000 recipient families and 13,000 other single parents received an additional $50 per month. Additionally, the Ministry announced that the number of years it would assist those eligible for educational upgrading or training would be increased from two years to three. The Ministry also announced that single parents who become employed and no longer required income assistance would be eligible for a series of other benefits, including a transportation allowance of up to $90/month, a day care surcharge allowance of up to $150/month, and continued medical and dental coverage (Goldberg, 1989).

Perhaps most importantly, the Social Credit government launched a court challenge to the federal government's decision to unilaterally cap *Canada Assistance Plan* (CAP) payments to the three wealthiest provinces at the time – Ontario, BC, and Alberta. Unfortunately, BC lost the challenge and was sideswiped by federal efforts to reign in social assistance reforms going on in Ontario at the time.[10]

Social Credit out, NDP in: Harcourt, Clark and BC Benefits (1991-1999)

Under the NDP governments of Michael Harcourt and Glen Clark, BC experienced another series of changes to the welfare system. There was optimism in 1993when the province established the Minister's Advisory Council on Income Assistance. The Council's primary mandate was to "advise and make recommendations to the Minister of Social Services on matters of income assistance reform…[and] address the long-term vision for income security programs in British Columbia" (Province of BC, 1995a, p.18). The Council included both individuals who had used the Ministry services as well as community-based social policy researchers. It received specialized information from Ministry staff and heard evidence from different sectors. The sense of optimism was quickly lost when Minister Joan Smallwood was replaced by a Minister who was less receptive to the Council's work. The Council completed its second report in April 1995 and was disbanded shortly thereafter.

Another significant development was the establishment of the Premier's Forum on New Opportunities for Working and Living in 1994 by Premier Harcourt. While the Advisory Council had focused on entitlements to income security, the Premier's Forum focused on replacing legislation for the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need* (*GAIN*) with legislation for *BC Benefits*, which aimed to reduce

caseload levels and make work more appealing than welfare (Province of British Columbia, 1999). When it was first introduced in January 1996, income assistance rates were reduced for single youth, couples up to age 24 without dependents, single employable adults, and employable couples aged 25 to 54 without dependents (Province of British Columbia, 1995b). Accompanying these rate reductions were education and training programs designed to encourage welfare recipients to enter to the labour market. Two of the major initiatives were: Youth Works, focusing on employable persons aged19 to 24 who received assistance only if they participated in job search and work preparation programs; and, the Welfare to Work initiative, focused on people over age 25 who received income assistance. Those eligible were given assistance to participate in job search, job preparation, work experience or training programs. Under BC Benefits, some people were exempt from training and job search requirements, such as single parents with at least one child under age 7, persons receiving disability benefits, people over age 60, and persons who had separated from an abusive spouse within the previous six months.

At the same time that BC Benefits was being implemented, the BC Family Bonus was introduced. It was a precursor to federal enhancements to the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the National Child Benefit Supplement, introduced in 1998. BC Benefits also continued to provide Medical Services Plan (MSP) premiums and Pharmacare, and introduced enhanced benefits for such things as orthodontics, braces, glasses, etc., along with healthy kids' benefits, which included, among other things, $700 per year for dental care (Goldberg, 1989). However, welfare rates for families with children were reduced by the value of the BC Family Bonus.

Not only were substantive changes made to the social welfare system under BC Benefits, it also set the stage for further reforms that were introduced by Gordon Campbell and the BC Liberal government in 2002. Underlying both schemes was the shared belief that an individual's choice was the determining factor behind a life of poverty in a wealthy industrialized nation such as Canada, rather than the inequitable systems that distributed society's wealth and resources.[11] This focus resulted in what Jean Swanson, an anti-poverty activist in BC, refers to as "poor-bashing" – blaming the poor for their poverty and stigmatizing particular populations and individuals by labelling them as "dependent," "lazy," "irresponsible," and "childlike" (Jean Swanson, as referenced in Raphael, 2007).

As is the case in other Canadian provinces, the public discourse of poor bashing in BC perpetuates the troubling belief that there is a distinction to be made between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. The "deserving" poor are characterized as those who live in poverty because of events beyond their control, such as accidents, chronic illness or disability, and thus deserve more generous support and assistance; the "undeserving" are those who live in poverty due to a combination of "sloth, moral turpitude and other personal failings" (Raphael, 2007, p.15), characterized by deviant behaviours and attitudes, being overly dependent on welfare, and lacking motivation to participate fully in the labour market.[12] This dominant discourse was influential in shaping the BC Benefits scheme under the Harcourt government and it continues to influence the current policies under Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell.

BC's First Liberal Government: Campbell's 2002 Reforms as an Accelerated Approach to Unravelling BC's Social Safety Net

When Gordon Campbell became premier in 2001, he quickly introduced changes to BC's welfare system, modeling it after reforms made to the social welfare system in the United States in the 1990s. Campbell adopted the punitive aspects of the US reforms, such as reduced welfare rates and time limits, but not the US incentives such as support for child care, transportation and training.[13]

The administration's conviction that poverty is, for the most part, an individual's choice continues to underlie their version of a poverty reduction strategy, which can be usefully classified as "Employability over Assistance."[14] BC is not unique in choosing this strategy. Employability over assistance was popularized in Britain by Tony Blair's Third Way policy discourse, and in intergovernmental organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank, which advocate for "welfare-to-work" – commonly referred to as workfare – effectively linking neo-liberalism with poverty policy. This type of poverty reduction strategy is based on the belief that poverty can be eliminated if the poor are given "incentives"[15] to work – the biggest incentives being the lowering of welfare rates to reduce "dependency," creating stricter eligibility rules for those deemed "employable," and offering training to participate in the labour market – and if those living in poverty simply adopt an attitude of industriousness and self-sufficiency.

In BC and elsewhere, this type of poverty reduction strategy continues to meet opposition. Critics claim that this discourse obscures the fact that poverty is not eliminated only through employment, and that a growing economy does not necessarily "lift all boats," as is suggested by most policy-makers who advocate this strategy. In fact, many of those who move from social assistance to employment are likely to become part of the working poor, rather than move out of poverty; in some cases, they may even be worse off because the only employment available is low-waged, seasonal, or temporary work, and there are few benefits available (Neysmith, Bezanson and O'Connell, 2005; Edin and Lein, 1997). This type of strategy also means that "people on welfare are used to undermine the wages and working conditions of people who already have jobs" (Jean Swanson, as quoted in Shragge, 1997, p.161). As discussed earlier, reductions in welfare caseloads do not necessarily reduce overall rates of poverty and they do not tell us very much about poverty.

Moreover, the strategy of employability over assistance masks the reality that there are employment barriers for many people caused by social exclusion, sexism, racism and classism, and that there are not enough jobs available at decent wages for all those living in poverty. The lack of sufficient jobs at decent wages is an outcome of structural inequalities, rather than due to the faults of the poor.[16] Finally, employability over assistance also devalues other kinds of work, such as the unpaid work of single mothers who care for children[17] and those who do volunteer work in their communities.

This strategy of employability over assistance in British Columbia (and elsewhere in Canada) has led to a focus away from the financial needs of recipients to the establishment of workfare programs which require those deemed employable to search out, prepare for, and secure employment (Klein and Pulkingham, 2008). While the first form of workfare in British Columbia was *BC Benefits*, legislated under

the Harcourt government after the *Canada Assistance Plan* was abolished,[18] the employability over assistance strategy has become much more pronounced under the current Liberal government.

Social assistance in the province is now called *BC Employment and Assistance* (*BCEA*). It is focused on minimizing the number of people receiving assistance and requiring those who are in need to prepare for and find employment or face penalties and be cut off from assistance.[19] These major reforms were introduced in January 2002, when the Campbell government tabled a plan to cut the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR) operating budget by $581 million (or 30%) over three years.[20] Income assistance rates for families with children were cut, child support exemptions were eliminated, as were earnings exemptions for recipients classified as "expected to work." This meant that some single parents who had previously benefited from earnings and child support exemptions could lose approximately $400 per month (Klein and Long, 2003).

Another prominent feature in Campbell's reform agenda was the reclassification of recipients. Lone parents deemed employable were expected to work when their youngest child reached age 3, rather than age 7, as had been the case under BC Benefits. People formerly classified to receive benefits under Disability Level One and Level Two were reclassified as "Persons with Persistent and Multiple Barriers to Employment (PPMB)" and "Persons with Disabilities (PWD)" respectively. This reclassification involved an onerous reapplication process, including filling out a 23-page form to re-establish eligibility as a PWD. Not surprisingly, this process created intense anxiety among many applicants. In February 2003, the BC Coroner's Office issued a report in the suicide of a Burnaby man by concluding that receipt of the PWD reassessment form had been a contributing factor in the man's death (Tielman, 2002).

The problems inherent to these changes were exacerbated by the introduction of new restrictions on accessing income assistance. The three-week waiting period forces new welfare applicants to attend pre-application orientation sessions, conduct a work search, and return in three weeks with evidence of their search; only when this evidence has been produced will their claim be reviewed. This three-week wait, combined with other rigid eligibility tests, discourages and denies assistance to people who need help – most of whom are eligible from day one (Wallace, Klein and Reitsma-Street, 2006).

Campbell also replaced the BC Benefits Appeals Tribunal and the Appeal Board with a single, regionally based entity, the *Employment and Assistance Appeals Tribunal*. This new body limits the number of review options for people with complaints, and it no longer allows people who receive welfare or disability benefits to be members of the tribunal, discriminating against them on the grounds that they receive income assistance (Klein and Long, 2003).

In tandem with changes in the appeals process, Premier Campbell also eliminated poverty law legal aid. These cuts have been particularly harmful to women, because more women than men rely on poverty law services (National Council of Welfare, 1995). Low-income people with law questions or complaints must now get legal advice from a province-wide toll-free telephone service, from pro bono legal clinics set up by not-for-profit societies, or from online resources provided by the Legal Services Society of BC (LSS). In response to these cuts, a poverty law advocacy program has been set up and funded by the Law

Foundation of BC to house poverty law advocates within not-for-profit agencies throughout BC to help individuals (mainly women) navigate the social welfare system and deal with poverty law issues.

Beyond 2002 Cuts: Campbell's Patchwork in the Making

Since the major cuts of 2002, the Campbell government has made minor changes to their approach to poverty reduction. The two-year time limit for employable recipients remains on the books, legislatively speaking, but official government records indicate that the policy is not being as frequently applied as was outlined in the original reform package. Additionally, a number of exceptions were added following intense scrutiny and community mobilization about the possible consequences of the time limits as originally planned (Wallace and Richards, 2008).

The re-categorization process for PPMB or PWD has resulted in individuals not being required to search for and retain employment in order to receive assistance. However, the categorization is not permanent and must be being reviewed every five or two years, respectively, which can be a lengthy process. And while the reclassification scheme has been positive for some, individuals who are re-classified still live with a "high level of deprivation and live thousands of dollars per year below the poverty line" (Klein and Pulkingham et al., p. 57).

In October 2006, the government announced its new "Housing Matters BC" strategy to focus on providing supportive housing to vulnerable populations. It also introduced a Rental Assistance Program for low-income working families, but the rental assistance was only available to families with employment income that had children under age 19; families on social assistance were not eligible, nor were single people, or couples without children. Moreover, in the second year of the program, the provincial government had to revise the income level because there were so few applicants who qualified.

As part of the strategy, the BC government also launched new Homeless Outreach Teams, hiring workers to help homeless individuals address their immediate physical and safety needs such as for food, warm clothing and housing.[21] Other housing developments were initiated under the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions. For example, when finished, the Phoenix Centre in Surrey will combine clinical addiction services with transitional housing, employment and education services. The Phoenix Drug and Alcohol Recovery and Education Society, a not-for-profit organization, will operate the centre under contract with the provincial government.[22]

In the 2007 budget, the BC government increased income assistance rates slightly. All income assistance clients were eligible to receive up to $50 more per month, based on the increase to the maximum shelter portion of the rates. Under the *Expected to Work* (ETW) program, single people and lone parents received an increased support payment of $50 per month. Couples, with or without children, received no increases to their support payments.[23] Although any support is welcome, anti-poverty advocates pointed out that the increases were not enough to offset inflation and the ever-increasing living costs, particularly the rising costs of shelter (Condon and Newton, 2007).

The government also allocated $500 million for housing initiatives. This included $27 million over three years to increase the number of shelter beds and provide related services; $38 million was designated for one-time housing projects and support to those who were homeless or at risk of homelessness; $250 million went into a Housing Endowment Fund to provide $10 million per year for new housing initiatives, including promises of 250 new supportive housing units and 200 units for Aboriginal people living off reserve. Much of the funding for these new housing units will come from $50 million provided by the federal government.

Additionally, earnings exemptions were increased to $500 per month for persons with a disability (PWD) or persons with persistent multiple barriers (PPMB) to employment. This change means that a single person with a PWD designation could keep a monthly net income of $1,400 (Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2008). It should be noted, however, that only a small portion of those classified as PWD have any earned income, and less than half of those can claim the maximum exemption (Cohen et al., 2008). BC continues to be the only province not to have an earnings exemption formula for those not classified as PWD or PPMB.

Amidst this patchwork of small changes to policies, there are ongoing efforts by health professionals and anti-poverty advocates to reframe poverty as a health issue to help make poverty reduction initiatives more palatable for BC policy-makers. A central thrust in these efforts is the argument that poverty constitutes a major social determinant of health that has been linked to such diseases as diabetes, cancer, and HIV/AIDS, and can lead to lower life expectancy due to illness, poor functional health of children and youth, and increased rates of suicide, among other health issues.[24]

Much of this research and the related policy arguments (many of which are cost-benefit arguments) are being generated by university institutions such as the Institute of Health Promotion Research at the University of British Columbia, where Dr. Jim Frankish leads a research team that is examining the relationships among health, homelessness and poverty.[25] Occasionally the Ministry of Health also produces research on the social determinants of health, such as a 2005 report by the Provincial Health Officer on the relationship between food security and the health of British Columbians, which identified poverty and income security as determinants of health (Ministry of Health, 2005). However, the bulk of the Ministry of Health's initiatives tend to be focused on individual behaviours, rather than poverty-related public policy.

And while many health researchers – in university and in government – as well as anti-poverty organizations in the not-for-profit sector [26] argue that poverty *is* a social determinant of health, the framework is not endorsed completely by the Campbell administration. A province-wide consultation launched in 2006 by the BC Ministry of Health, called *Conversation on Health*, found that many people discussed the social determinants of health – specifically poverty, child poverty, income security and homelessness – as directly impacting the health of British Columbians.[27] Despite such public input, however, Minister of Health George Abbott did not mention social determinants of health, and instead focused on health services, access to care, and disease prevention in his follow-up letter to the public.[28]

Overview of Current Anti-poverty Not-for-profit Organizations and their Programs

Despite small initiatives by the current BC government to address poverty, and efforts by others to reframe poverty as a health issue, there is no overall poverty reduction strategy for the province. As a result, the role of civil society actors has been and continues to be a central ingredient in poverty prevention and reduction initiatives in BC.

Civil society actors include community members, stakeholder groups, people living in poverty, anti-poverty advocates, and not-for-profit organizations that conduct research and provide supports and services to those living in poverty. And while each of these actors is important to the collective effort to understand and address the problem, we focus the discussion only on anti-poverty organizations in the not-for-profit sector.

Generally speaking, not-for-profit organizations are fighting poverty in the trenches and therefore offer a good example of how the problem is being tackled at the local level. In BC, the activities of anti-poverty not-for-profit organizations can be classified into four categories based on their primary activities, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These are:

(a) Provincial Knowledge Producers: These anti-poverty not-for-profits are provincially focused and engage in poverty research, policy options for prevention and reduction, and occasionally, strategic government lobbying;
(b) Community-based Integrators: These not-for-profits engage in community-based anti-poverty work by integrating several activities, including local poverty research, local anti-poverty policy development, as well as networking, community organizing and local action;
(c) Community-based Advocacy and Service Delivery Agencies: Not-for-profit organizations in this category are more narrowly focused on anti-poverty programs and service delivery, and on case advocacy for individuals and families (such as providing assistance in navigating government bureaucracy, finding housing, etc.);
(d) Provincial Networkers: These not-for-profit organizations are provincially focused and concerned primarily with networking and information sharing among other anti-poverty advocates, stakeholder groups, people living in poverty and researchers.

Since poverty prevention and reduction relates primarily to people and programs in communities, we will concentrate our discussion of the role of civil society actors on a sampling of organizations that engage in the last three activity sets described above, namely community-based integrators, community-based advocacy and service delivery agencies, and provincial networkers.

Among provincial knowledge producers, there are several good examples to highlight, including the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC Office (CCPA BC) and the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC), both of which regularly conduct research and develop policy options for preventing and reducing poverty at the provincial level. In addition, First Call BC partly falls into this category because of its production of annual report cards on poverty among children and families. However, First Call BC also exhibits characteristics of a provincial networker because of its regular e-newsletters and networking meetings with poverty stakeholder groups and organizations, and it is

therefore more of a hybrid anti-poverty organization than CCPA BC and SPARC BC. Nonetheless, each of these organizations are categorized as provincial knowledge producers because they are continuously engaged in some form of poverty research and policy development work at the provincial level, but are not generally engaged in service delivery or grassroots organizing for poverty prevention and reduction.[29] Although the work of the provincial knowledge producers interacts with grassroots anti-poverty work and other provincial networking initiatives in complex ways – and a review of some of these dynamics would be interesting – such an analysis is beyond the scope of this report.

Instead, we will focus on the activities of the three other types of anti-poverty organizations by presenting case studies of each type. Each case study was developed with information from the organizations' websites and through interviews with representatives of the participating organizations. In general, the case studies briefly describe the organization, some of its activities, successes, challenges and hopes for additional support.

Community-based Integrators: Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria

As noted above, Community-based Integrator refers to anti-poverty not-for-profits that are concurrently conducting research and advocacy on poverty and related issues, as well as developing partnerships and organizing grassroots initiatives to prevent and reduce poverty. Some examples in BC include the Carnegie Centre's Community Action Project in Vancouver's downtown eastside (DTES), Women's Centres in a many communities across the province, and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria (hereafter referred to as Council), which serves as the case example in this report.

Perhaps the Council's most notable anti-poverty accomplishment is what is known as the Quality of Life CHALLENGE (hereafter referred to as CHALLENGE). In an interview for this report, project leaders Sue Stovel, Zsuzsa Harsman, and Christina Peacock shared their experiences with the CHALLENGE. It offers a sophisticated example of anti-poverty activity that integrates research, advocacy for systemic policy change, and community development work.[30]

The Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria and the Quality of Life CHALLENGE

The Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria traces its roots back to the 1930s, and it was officially incorporated in 1966. The Council produced its first report on quality of life indictors in late-1999, which set out poverty-related statistics for the region. Following the report's release, the Council convened a gathering of about 100 people who wanted to develop a mechanism for taking local action. After some intense planning and development work, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE was launched in 2003. It was defined as diverse community partners working together to generate long-lasting solutions that prevent and reduce poverty in BC's Capital Region.

What makes the CHALLENGE unique is that it integrates a wide range of local activities, including the production of research on poverty in the Capital Region, community engagement activities leading to partnership development, and focused advocacy and action to reduce local poverty rates. It is centred on the idea that you need every sector to work together and all voices to inform local actions, in order to develop local capacity to understand and address the underlying causes of poverty.

The CHALLENGE aims to make a positive difference in three priority areas: sustainable incomes, housing, and community connections. And the evaluation results to-date are impressive: almost 900 low-wage workers have better workplace supports, and nearly 800 workers now earn $1 to $2.50 more per hour; more than 700 low-income households now have safe, affordable housing, and a Regional Housing Trust Fund has been established with nine of 13 local governments contributing almost $1.4 million. More than 2,255 individuals have been engaged in the CHALLENGE so far, and $1.8 million in cash and in-kind contributions has been invested since its inception in 2003. According to Stovel, Zsuzsa and Peacock, these achievements are the result of working in a collaborative and empowering way, having hope, and recognizing the differences and similarities in the Capital Region community.

When asked about the challenges they face in their work, Stovel, Zsuzsa and Peacock noted that it is sometimes difficult to make poverty "real" for people who have not lived on low income. To address this, the CHALLENGE involves low-income people in the decision-making processes. "The generous commitment of time and effort by people living on a low income makes a huge difference in helping others understand why it is important for everyone to care about reducing poverty. If they [people not on a low income] get to the heart of this and feel what it is like [living in poverty], then amazing collaborative efforts start to form and real action takes place."

When asked about additional supports they would like to see from governments and other groups, Stovel, Zsuzsa and Peacock stated: "We are very happy with the support we have received to date, especially from big media, local governments and federal agencies like Service Canada and HRSDC. However, the province has not been on board, and we would like them to explore how they can work with the CHALLENGE to be part of reducing poverty in BC's Capital Region."

Community-based Advocacy and Service Delivery Agencies: Newton Advocacy Group Society and Terrace Anti-Poverty Group Society

In addition to community-based integrators, there are many other organizations whose work focuses primarily on individual case advocacy and/or anti-poverty programs and service delivery.[31] And while some organizations may be more focused on advocacy than on service delivery, and vice versa, anti-poverty organizations working directly with people on low incomes generally offer some type of service and engage in some form of individualized advocacy.

Organizations more focused on advocacy – that is, on helping people navigate through government programs or with issues relating to housing, etc. – include the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS) based in Victoria, and Active Support Against Poverty Society based in Prince George. There are also not-for-profit organizations whose work is focused primarily on providing programs and services to people living in poverty in BC, such as operating social housing, managing food banks, providing support and referral services, or providing employment and educational opportunities.

Below, we highlight case examples of two agencies which, to varying degrees, offer individualized advocacy and service delivery: the Newton Advocacy Group Society, an urban organization based in Surrey, which includes Project Comeback;[32] and, the Terrace Anti-Poverty Group Society, an organization based in the northern part of the province.[33]

Newton Advocacy Group Society and Project Comeback

Newton Advocacy Group Society (NAGS) is a not-for-profit organization in Surrey that provides a number of programs to alleviate poverty, including poverty law assistance, housing and income support, a welfare advocacy program, as well as women's empowerment and pre-employment programs.

In 2005, NAGS held a forum on homeless in Surrey in collaboration with other local stakeholder groups. One theme that emerged during discussions was the surprisingly high number of people in Surrey who worked as day labourers, but they were homeless because they were unable to save enough money for a damage deposit and the first month's rent.

This galvanized NAGS to create Project Comeback, which takes a holistic approach to serving clients. Staff help clients find housing and provide financial assistance for damage deposits. Through partnerships with local businesses, they also help individuals acquire full-time sustainable employment to permanently break the cycle of homelessness. NAGS staff work with both employers and clients to help them manage the relationship and overcome barriers that clients may face in sustaining employment. They assist the clients with financial, life and social skills, help identify career objectives and skill areas, identify and address potential barriers to full-time work, facilitate work placements with suitable employers, and provide ongoing support after placement. According to Team Leader Marg Yeo, "under Project Comeback, all support is tailored to meet the client's needs. For example, a client may need a hard hat and steel-toed boots in order to work, or ongoing job maintenance support."

When asked about a particular success of Project Comeback, Yeo shared the following story: "We have one client who has been with us since the beginning. He battles depression, and when it hits, he is unable to work. When he does not show up for work, the employer gives us a call, and we are able to support him through the really tough spots. He still has the same job three years later, despite his struggles."

When asked how government could do more to support this work, Yeo replied: "We are grateful for the support we do have, most of which is from Service Canada (for staff salaries and office costs). This being said, we would like to be able to provide specialized employment skills training programs for our clients. We would love to see NAGS operating supportive transitional housing. I know that our clients would benefit tremendously from having safe, secure, clean living spaces where they are supported to learn necessary skills such as budgeting, paying bills, and communicating with their employer when they are unable to work."

Terrace Anti-Poverty Group Society

Terrace Anti-Poverty Group became a society and registered charity in 1983. Its overarching mission is to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all persons, regardless of income level, social status, or intellectual and physical ability.

Terrace Anti-Poverty currently operates the following programs: Welfare/Disability Tenancy Advocacy; Free Income Tax; Free Store (like a thrift store, but everything is free); two Community Gardens; Children's Christmas Tree Campaign; and the Food Share Program which is a partnership with other groups that allows the Society to have free food available daily. At the time of this interview, Terrace Anti-Poverty was in the process of starting a Dental Access Fund and developing partnerships to support the establishment of a wet housing facility in Terrace, similar to that of 1811 East Lake in Seattle.

When asked about challenges her organization faces, Executive Director Stacey Tyers explained: "We do not have enough funding to hire properly trained people, nor do we have the funding to adequately train new staff. Therefore it's kind of a stumble-along when new staff are hired."

When asked to describe a success, Tyers explains: "Our Christmas Campaign provides gifts to over 300 children each year. Our Community Gardens have over 50 gardeners and volunteers. I believe that all of our programs in some way or another assist people on a daily basis to ensure their voices are heard. I believe this is the greatest accomplishment an agency like ours can have – to make sure that those who feel they have no voice are heard."

When asked what governments and other groups can do to support the organization's work, Tyers stated: "I think it's really important that government properly funds [anti-poverty] agencies, and ensures the ability for proper training and compliance within these agencies. The reality is we are doing what the government should be doing, and we are doing it without adequate support. What we receive from BC Gaming [our primary funder] is less than the yearly salary of one executive within the provincial government."

Provincial Networkers: PovNet

A Provincial Networker is an anti-poverty organization whose primary function is to facilitate networking and information sharing activities among anti-poverty advocates, people living in poverty, researchers, and leaders of anti-poverty programs and services. Although many anti-poverty organizations also engage in such activities (such as First Call, and historically, ELP or End Legislated Poverty), there is really only one not-for-profit organization in BC that currently qualifies as a strong and consistent anti-poverty Provincial Networker – namely, PovNet.[34]

PovNet is in a class of its own and serves as one of BC's most innovative anti-poverty developments. PovNet's exemplary use of technology and its online anti-poverty course offerings have attracted attention across Canada and shaped it into a pan-Canadian networker of advocates. However, PovNet's base and primary focus is in BC.

PovNet and PovNet U

PovNet provides an online resource for advocates, people on welfare, and community groups and individuals. It provides up-to-date information about resources in British Columbia and Canada, with links to current anti-poverty issues, organizations and resources in Canada and internationally. It began in 1997, developed out of the work of the Federated Anti-Poverty Groups of BC.

There are three major parts of PovNet: an online information clearinghouse, which includes an RSS feed for breaking news; the "Find an Advocate" program, which includes lists of advocates across BC and around the country; and, PovNet U (http://povnetu.povnet.org), which is home to several online courses for anti-poverty advocates. The courses include content web pages with exercises and scenarios, and online discussion forums guided by a facilitator.

When asked about the successes of PovNet, Executive Director Penny Goldsmith remarked that "the advocates are the strength of this online community – they are the reason it works and their connections to each other is one of the greatest successes of PovNet." Goldsmith also noted that, "our preliminary efforts to develop an online community met with some resistance because computers and the internet were perceived as technical tools of the wealthy. Now that the site and the blogs are so busy with meaningful exchanges of ideas, the early technical and attitudinal barriers are clearly in the past. PovNet has overcome this challenge and is successful because it gives anti-poverty advocates access to a means of knowledge production and it provides a conduit through which we can all share information."

When asked what governments and other groups can do to support PovNet, Goldsmith stated: "Most anti-poverty organizations and people on low incomes agree that we need all levels of government to play a bigger supportive role in fighting poverty. PovNet's role in this fight against poverty is to connect people to each other and to relevant information. To do this effectively, we need financial and human resources, and governments are always welcome to learn how they can help."

In this presentation of case studies, it is possible to highlight some of the creative ways in which civil society organizations are addressing the problem of poverty in BC. And while these organizations differ in terms of the kinds of roles they play, they are united in a shared goal to eliminate poverty and in using multi-sided approaches to address the problem. Moreover, each of these organizations expressed interest in more government involvement in the fight against poverty, suggesting that more government support would help diminish the causes and effects of poverty in BC, and contribute to increased numbers of healthy British Columbians who are empowered to achieve their full potential.

CONCLUSION

Although there is much more to the story of poverty and anti-poverty initiatives in British Columbia, the preceding discussion outlines key parts of that story. A particularly troubling aspect in BC is the fact that several population groups are experiencing an increased risk of poverty, including lone-parent mothers, unattached women, Aboriginal people, immigrants, and refugees. Seniors are the one demographic group that in BC, and in Canada as a whole, actually does better than their counterparts in most other developed countries.

This review illuminates how poverty rates and poverty reduction initiatives in BC have been and continue to be influenced by a complex combination of current and historical forces, including: BC's polarized political environment; economic forces such as the 2000 economic downturn, the ongoing boom/bust cycles of resource-dependant economies, and changing international trade patterns; historical and current government policies; and, the creative but often under-resourced activities of anti-poverty not-for-profit organizations across the province.

So what can be expected in the next chapter of BC's story of poverty reduction initiatives? Given current poverty rates in BC and such factors as the diminishing strength of the forest industry, it is possible that we will see higher social assistance caseloads and greater levels of economic insecurity. And although most anti-poverty researchers and advocates hope that the provincial government will join forces with them to spearhead and support the development of a provincial poverty reduction strategy, it is unlikely that such an initiative will materialize at this juncture. It remains to be seen whether there will be any changes after the provincial election in 2009.

If the NDP defeat the Liberals in the upcoming provincial election (which, at the time of this report, is a distinct possibility), a coordinated poverty reduction strategy might develop. NDP leader, Carol James, provided insights into her party's priorities in a recent address to the annual conference of the Union of BC Municipalities. These include a repeal of the carbon tax, increased funding to end homelessness, and the establishment of affordable and accessible childcare, among other things (Palmer, 2008). At the same time, the NDP has not yet made a commitment to include the development of a poverty reduction strategy in its election platform.

Regardless of the outcome of the 2009 election, however, we can count on the continued energy and leadership from civil society in poverty prevention and reduction work. Too often, the important role of not-for-profits in fighting poverty is overshadowed by the troubling absence of provincial government action. But it is the leadership and drive of civil society – and especially the persistence, imagination and cooperation of people in those organizations – which empowers local stakeholders to fight poverty in their communities and propels the anti-poverty story forward, ideally to a point in time when poverty is history in British Columbia.

ENDNOTES

[1] Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-offs (LICOs) are the most commonly used measure of poverty in Canada. LICOs are calculated on a pre-tax and after-tax basis by examining what proportions of income households spend on food, clothing and shelter. Families are considered to be living in "straightened circumstances" if they are spending at least 54.3% of their pre-tax income on these items (or more than 63.6% of their after-tax income). These figures were calculated using the after-tax Low Income Cut-off.

[2] For a discussion of the causes and effects of rural poverty, see David Bruce, Submission to the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry (October 26, 2006). An electronic copy of that paper can be downloaded at www.mta.ca/rstp/db_senate_poverty.pdf.

[3] The name of the Ministry was changed in June 2008 to the Ministry of Housing and Social Development.

[4] Statistics Canada, 2006. Census Highlight Tables and authors' calculations.

[5] The Market Basket Measure (MBM) was created by Human Resources and Social Development Canada as an absolute measure of poverty to determine what it actually costs to live in a number of Canadian communities. The MBM calculates thresholds for 19 specific urban communities and for 29 community sizes in 10 provinces in order to provide an overview of the incidence and depth of low income in Canada. The items in the MBM have been selected to represent a standard of consumption.

[6] The Community Resource Boards were similar to the Community Local Service Centres (CLSCs) that operate in Quebec.

[7] Bennett believed that a strong welfare state weakened individual initiative and dampened the entrepreneurial spirit, declaring that "economic development is the only social policy" (Garr, 1985). See Allen Garr, *Tough Guy: Bill Bennett and the taking of British Columbia* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1985).

[8] Perhaps the most notable development in the welfare system was passage of the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need (GAIN) Act,* (Province of British Columbia, 1979). The GAIN income assistance rates were demonstrably inadequate, as SPARC's *Regaining Dignity* reports of the late 1980s suggested. See Bruce Levans and Jenny Cleathero, *Regaining Dignity Update: An examination of the cost of living in the lower mainland and the adequacy of income assistance (GAIN) rates* (Vancouver: Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 1987). See also Michael Goldberg, *Regaining Dignity: An Examination of Costs and the Adequacy of Income Assistance Rates (GAIN) in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 1989).

[9] The specifics of this type of approach to reform are spelled out in Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *The Tyranny of the Status Quo* (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[10] For further details on the *Canada Assistance Plan*, the elimination of *CAP*, and how it affected poverty policy across Canada, see: Coward (2000); National Council of Welfare (1991); and information at http://www.canadiansocialresearch.net/cap.htm. An electronic copy of the court challenge brought by BC can be found at http://scc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/1991/1991rcs2-525/1991rcs2-525.html

[11] Raphael refers to a belief in the determinative force of individual choice as the Moral Underclass Discourse (MUD), which focuses on the personal choices and behaviours of the poor as being central to poverty. Raphael contends that MUD is the dominant discourse shaping Canadian policy approaches to social assistance, minimum wages, etc. For more on MUD and two other popular discourses on poverty (the Redistributionist Discourse and the Social Integrationist Discourse), see Raphael (2007).

[12] Several authors have commented on how the ideology of the "undeserving" poor stigmatizes particular populations. For example, see Brodsky et al. for a discussion of how social assistance rules and policies treat lone-parent mothers based on myths, including the myth that a single mother's poverty is the result of bad personal choices. Also see Kelly (1996) for a discussion of how teen mothers are characterized as being the cause and consequence of poverty and welfare dependency in print media in British Columbia and Canada.

[13] The two pieces of US legislation that influenced BC reforms in 2002, at least in part, are the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* [1996] Pub.L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105, and the *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* program. For a critical discussion of these pieces of legislation, see Klein and Long (2003).

[14] Eric Shragge (1997) discusses the links between work-to-welfare programs (workfare) and the tradition of blaming the victims of poverty and categorizing the poor into deserving and undeserving groups, with the undeserving needing the "tough love" of workfare.
[15] Klein and Long (2003) discuss how policy-makers in BC and elsewhere use the language of "incentives" as a way of framing discussions about employability of the poor and the problems with this type of language.
[16] For example, a study that followed "expected to work" welfare recipients in BC from 2004 to 2006 found that participants had difficulty in finding work for the following reasons: too many health and social problems (58%); not having the training/skills needed for what's out there (45%); and employers won't hire me/employers discriminate against me (37%) (Klein and Pulkingham, 2008).
[17] See Korteweg (2003) for a discussion of the discourse on employability over assistance, its influence on welfare reform and policy, and its effects on single mothers following passing of the *Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* in the United States.
[18] As a condition for the transfer of federal dollars to support residents in need, CAP prohibited provinces from requiring those on welfare to seek employment in order to gain assistance.
[19] For discussion of penalties under BCEA and the effects of this policy on those living on welfare in BC, see Klein and Long (2003); Wallace, Klein and Reitsma-Street (2006); and Klein and Pulkingham (2008).
[20] The reduction was increased to $609 million in the 2003 Budget.
[21] Paulsen (2008) says that many Homeless Outreach workers report that most of the homeless people they contact were previously on welfare. The 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count found that 43% of homeless individuals enumerated during the count were on welfare or related training programs (Social Planning and Research Council of BC et al., 2008).
[22] For more information on the Housing Matters BC initiative, go to: www.bchousing.org/resrouces/About%20BC%20Housing/Housing_Matters_BC_FINAL.pdf
[23] For details on the rate increases, go to www.eia.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/2007/increase.htm. Rates for persons with a disability were increased prior to the 2007 budget.
[24] See the papers produced by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (2003) and the Office of Chief Medical Health Officer (2006).
[25] See research being conducted by the Institute of Health Promotion Research at the University of British Columbia at http://www.ihpr.ubc.ca/EN/jim_frankish/homelessness_&_poverty-related_research/.
[26] First Call BC, Campaign 2000 BC, and other anti-poverty advocacy organizations often utilize the social determinants of health framework, as do health focused not-for-profits groups such as the Public Health Association of BC.
[27] The summary of input on social determinants of health can be downloaded from: http://www.bcconversationonhealth.ca/EN/envisioning_a_healthy_british_columbia/social_determinants/.
[28] For the complete letter and related information, see: http://www.bcconversationonhealth.ca/#
[29] For more information on these organizations, see: Social Planning and Research Council of BC at www.sparc.bc.ca; First Call BC at http://www.firstcallbc.org; and the BC Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives at http://www.policyalternatives.ca/bc/.
[30] For complete details on the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, see: http://www.qolchallenge.ca/.
[31] It is important to note that many anti-poverty community-based advocacy and service delivery agencies express interest in having the capacity to conduct local poverty research, and to integrate it with their advocacy, community development and service delivery work. However, their ability to engage in such integrated work is limited by the nature of government funding. For a discussion of this issue, see Scott (2003).
[32] For complete details about Project Comeback, see: http://www.newtonadvocacygroup.ca.
[33] For complete details about Terrace Anti-Poverty Group Society, see: http://www3.telus.net/antipoverty.
[34] For more information about PovNet, see: www.povnet.org.

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