

ALBERTA FACTS

Number 6

Published by the Edmonton Social Planning Council

May 1989

Children in Poverty: On the Outside Looking In

We live in a country where everyone's needs are met, at least those of children — right? **Wrong!** In Canada, one child in six lives in poverty. One child in six does not have basic needs met. In Alberta, one child in six means that 93,600 children live in poverty.



*One Child in Six
Lives in Poverty*

What does being poor mean to these children?

What being poor means to Jenny

The average girl living with her mom stands a 50-50 chance of being poor. Jenny's mom doesn't make much money: she earns minimum wage. She can't always afford nutritious meals, so Jenny gets sick a lot.

Jenny and her mom move around often, and Jenny feels she's always changing schools. She finds it hard to have to make new friends all the time.

Jenny has one pair of jeans, and she doesn't have a bike or get birthday presents or have neat snacks to take to school. Sometimes Jenny finds it embarrassing.

But what Jenny finds hardest about being poor is that *she feels different* from all the other children.

What is a poor family?

According to Statistics Canada, a family is considered "a low income family" if they spend more than an average of about 60 per cent of their income on food, clothing and shelter (depending on where they live and the size of family). According to The National Council of Welfare, these families "live in poverty."

For example, in an Albertan city, the poverty line for a family of four is \$23,521 (before deductions); for a family of three, the poverty line is \$20,411 (before deductions).

Poverty Line in Alberta

<i>Family size</i>	<i>Income before deductions</i>
Family of four	\$23,521
Family of three	\$20,411

SOURCE: 1988 Poverty Lines,
National Council of Welfare

Families of Poor Children

Female-headed single parent families	1 in 2
Families with parents under 25 years old	1 in 4
Families with three or more children	1 in 3

SOURCE: Poverty Profile 1988,
National Council of Welfare

Poor families mean poor children

Poor children are most likely to live in families:

- headed by female single parents
- headed by a parent under 25 years old
- with three or more children
- of Native people

Most low-income families are the "working poor." Although these parents have jobs, they and their families just manage to get by.

For example, a single parent with one child who earns minimum wage has an income more than \$6,000 below the poverty line. *This means this parent would have to work 68 hours per week to support a child at the poverty line.*

The Working Poor

Minimum wage = \$4.50 per hour

x 40 hours per week = \$180 per week

x 50 weeks = \$9,000 (gross) per year

\$15,258 (poverty line, 2 person family)

-9,000 (income at minimum wage)

\$6,258 BELOW the poverty line

Poor children often are sick children

Babies from poor families die at almost twice the rate that babies from wealthy families do. For babies from Indian families the picture is much worse. They die at a rate almost 4 1/2 times greater than other Alberta babies.

And, poor children suffer more from cancer, respiratory diseases, congenital anomalies and pneumonia than other children.

These higher disease and death rates are closely tied to nutrition, health care, and housing conditions.

Are housing costs really accommodating?

The average cost of a two-bedroom apartment in Edmonton was \$482 in October, 1988. After paying rent, the single parent with two children, earning minimum wage, has \$238 left. With this money, she must pay utilities, household, laundry, child care, prescriptions, and travel expenses PLUS buy food and clothing for her children.

This family qualifies for a social allowance subsidy of about \$500 per month. Often people are unaware of this subsidy. Others, who may be aware of the subsidy, wish to avoid the social allowance system because of the stigma attached.

Does money affect education?

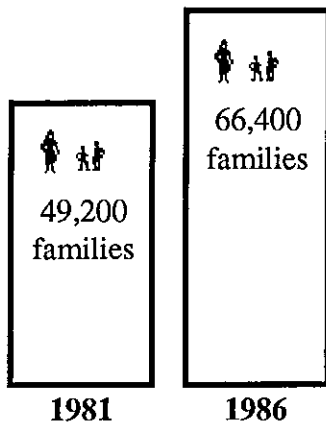
Children from wealthy families are far more likely to finish high school and continue their education than children from poor families. Children from poor families skip school twice as much as children from other families.

Studies point out that family income affects how well children do in school and how much they join school activities.

While no figures exist for all Native people, only 20% of Indian students finish high school—compared to a national average of 70%.

What does this mean for children? People with less education have a greater chance of being out of work and therefore a greater chance of being poor. In other words, poor children are more likely to become poor adults.

Alberta's Poor Families Increase



SOURCE: Poverty Profile 1988,
National Council of Welfare

Are families a priority for the Alberta Government?

The typical cost of feeding and clothing two boys, aged 10 and 11, was about \$310 a month in December, 1988, according to Alberta Consumer and Corporate Affairs.

Social allowance provides about \$225 for food and clothing for these two children. Foster care provides about \$415. Why do parents living on social allowance and caring for their own children receive less than the estimated cost for food and clothing? (And nothing for toys, books, or Christmas and birthday presents.)

Why is there such a gap between what natural parents receive for their children and what foster parents receive for other people's children?

The Alberta Government says it believes in families and wants to help them. How are they supporting poor families?

When a school lunch program was suggested in the Legislature in April, 1988, the then Social Services Minister Connie Osterman said, "It is our belief that the dollars supplied for food allowance are sufficient and that if families have a problem managing within that amount, they should seek the counselling that's available to them."

Average Family Incomes

\$49,797

Married

\$37,869

Male Single Parent

\$23,108

Female Single Parent

SOURCE: Statistics Canada, Income Distributions by Size in Canada #13-207, 1987

The future: more than a family affair

The number of single parent families grew by almost 50 per cent in the 10 years from 1971 to 1981. Single parent families represented 13 per cent of all families by 1986. The number of two-parent families also increased, but only by 22 per cent.

If these trends continue, it is likely that more and more children will grow up poor.

What responsibility do we share for all Alberta's children?

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the future consequences of providing less than minimum care for Alberta's children?
2. The Alberta Government says it wants to help families. How do you think it can best do this?
3. Who will advocate for Alberta's poor children?
4. How would we all benefit if fewer children grew up poor?

"It is our belief that the dollars supplied for food allowance are sufficient and that if families have a problem managing within that amount, they should seek the counselling that's available to them."

— Hon. Connie Osterman

What can you do?

- Support raising social allowance benefits to ensure that children can be adequately fed and clothed.
 - Support equalizing wages between men and women so single mothers can support their children.
 - Write letters to your Member of Parliament (MP) and your Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) to encourage the above changes.
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Recommended Reading

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Clarke, Michelle. *Wasting our Future: The Effects of Poverty on Child Development*. Ottawa: The Canadian Council on Children and Youth, 1988.

Deroo, Remy. *Witness of Justice*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979.

The Child Poverty Action Group. *A Fair Chance for all Children: the Declaration on Child Poverty*. Toronto, 1986.

Waxman, Chaim I., *The Stigma of Poverty*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1983.

Children in Poverty: On the Outside Looking In is one of a series of fact sheets on social issues produced by the Edmonton Social Planning Council. This edition was produced with financial support from the Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation. Copies are available in bulk for classes and study groups.

The Edmonton Social Planning Council is an independent, non-profit social action agency which seeks social justice through policy analysis, applied research, community development, and training and consultation.

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