

ALBERTA FACTS

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Poverty in our Province: Myths and Realities

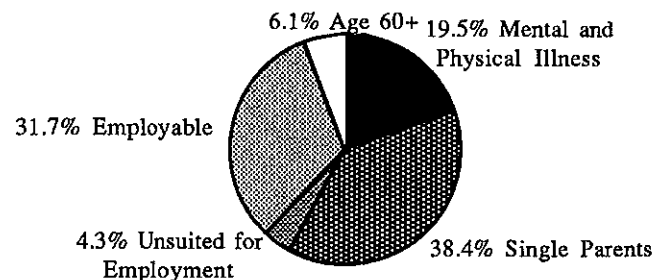
None of us likes to admit personal prejudice towards particular groups of people. To be called sexist or racist is an insult, but prejudice towards the poor is also a source of discrimination in our province and it poses a serious social problem. Prejudice is often related to a lack of information or understanding. This fact sheet looks at some of the myths about Albertans who live in poverty. Eliminating misconceptions is the first step to changing negative attitudes towards people who are poor. In Alberta, 6% of the total population presently rely on social assistance. For children, the proportion is 10%. All of these people are 'poor' in terms of their pocketbook. Prejudice towards these Albertans must be addressed. We need to know the facts.

Marina had to keep her three children home from school today. The only thing she had to send with them for lunch was cold macaroni. Instead of embarrassing the kids in front of their peers, she will try to do schoolwork with them at home.

Marina is stressed out. Her children risk falling behind the rest of the class and being accused of 'faking' their sickness, since the same thing happened at the end of last month. What else can she do to hide her poverty?

MYTH
REALITY

Percentage Breakdown of People
on Social Assistance



The common myths

MYTH: "People on welfare are too lazy to work."

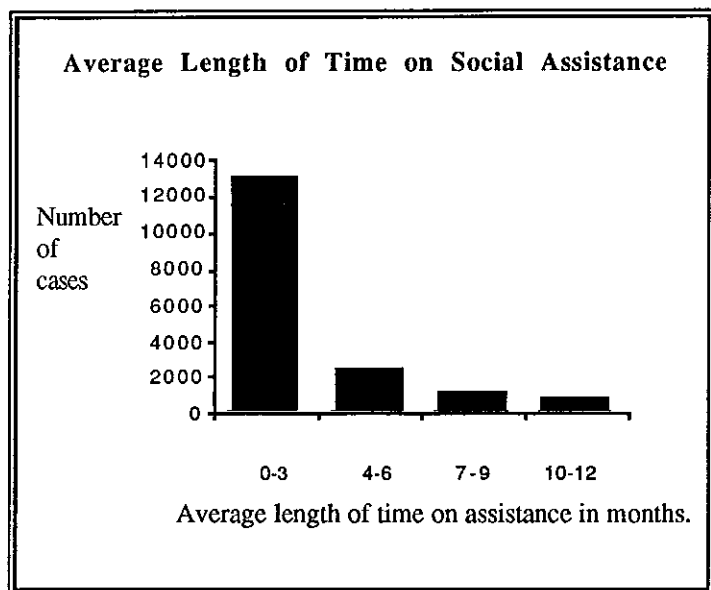
REALITY: Of the 147,002 people receiving social assistance in Alberta, almost half are children. Approximately 70% of all recipients are single parents, elderly, have a physical or mental illness, or are unsuited for employment for other reasons. Of the people who can work, one-quarter are employed.

MYTH: "Many people who receive welfare are cheating the system."

REALITY: It has been estimated that only 4% of all social assistance cases involve fraud. In comparison, the amount of tax fraud in Alberta has been estimated to be approximately 11%.

MYTH: "Once people go on welfare, they stay there."

REALITY: A common belief is that once someone goes on welfare, they make it their "career." Of those considered employable, the vast majority are on assistance for less than 3 months. The following graph depicts the length of time employable people are on social assistance.



MYTH: "If people would just get a job, they wouldn't be poor and they wouldn't need welfare."

REALITY: Today, about 14% of social assistance cases are families headed by a person who is employed, at or near the minimum wage. Many people are working; they just don't make enough. Working 40 hours a week at the minimum wage of \$4.50/hour yields a gross annual income of \$9,360.

MYTH: "People on welfare have it too good."

REALITY: By law, social assistance payments cover only people's most basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing and medical supplies. For example, a single parent with two children, receiving the maximum shelter and food benefits, is provided \$13,032 in benefits for the year. Federal, non-cash and supplementary benefits are provided in addition to the cash standard benefits income.

MYTH: "Poverty is the result of individual failure; people on social assistance don't try hard enough to find work."

REALITY: As of February 1991, the unemployment rate in Alberta was 8.2%. This number does not count people who would like to work full-time but can only find a part-time job. Even if Albertans do find work, the majority of jobs that are available are those in the service sector, which often pay near the minimum wage. People working full-time at the minimum wage rate still need income security.

MYTH: "Single mothers should not be such a burden to the system."

REALITY: Alberta has the highest divorce rate in Canada and, as a result, single parent families make up the largest percentage of people on assistance. Women who are single parents often live in poverty because they are usually granted custody of their children. Many of these parents have to turn to the government for help when spouses fail to pay adequate child support. As well, in Alberta many women working full-time earn, on average, only two-thirds of what men earn.

MYTH: "Government social spending is a waste of money."

REALITY: At any time, there are people in society who cannot work due to disability, or because there simply aren't any jobs which use the skills

Fran and her two kids live in subsidized housing.

Although the rent is much more reasonable than a regular apartment, she and her children pay other hidden costs.

At school the kids are teased about living in 'houses built for poor people.' Within the housing units themselves, Fran is aware of the lower status she has as a 'welfare mom'. It seems that working families are better than families which receive social assistance. Even though Fran works part-time while the kids are at school, she wonders if she'll ever be able to escape the costs of being poor.

they have. Every industrialized country provides a welfare and unemployment system to support those who don't have an employment income. The social costs of not providing these social programs would be unacceptable. Thousands of Albertans, including children, would be made homeless, some would be forced to beg (or do worse) to support their families, while costs in health care and policing would increase.

The social assistance program allows families some financial stability during periods of great stress. It allows people the breathing space to get back on their feet, to learn new skills, and to once again become economically productive during periods of transition. Canada does not operate a "cadillac" welfare system. While government social expenditures are slightly above those of the United States (where many social services are instead paid for by private insurance), they are much lower than in most European countries.

The true measure of poverty

Physical survival is just one challenge of living in poverty. What must also be considered is what it costs a family to be full participating members of a community.

As Peter Townsend, a British expert on poverty-related issues puts it:

"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong."

Social assistance is not a privilege, but a legal right. Poverty in Alberta is too widespread to be explained as personal failure; poverty is a social problem. No one deserves to be poor.

Poverty in Alberta

In 1987, 89,500 families living in Alberta were poor.

In 1987, 105,741 unattached individuals living in Alberta were poor.



In 1988, 17% of all children under 16 were poor.



In 1988, 62% of children in female lone parent families were poor.



In 1988, 16% of people over age 65 were poor.

Defined by Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut-offs.

Poverty and the Law

The Social Development Act is the law in Alberta which governs income security policy and practice. It says that every Albertan whose basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, heat among other necessities) are not being met is entitled to government support. A new act which better suits the new welfare reforms and direction of policy is presently being prepared by the Department of Family and Social Services for release in 1992.

The federal legislation governing income security is the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which pays half of the social assistance, costs incurred by the province.

Questions for discussion:

1. It has been said that we depend on poverty too much in our society for it to disappear. A certain level of poverty and unemployment are considered to be quite acceptable and even necessary if the rest of us are to enjoy the standard of living which we do. Do you agree or disagree?
 2. Should the purpose of government assistance be to give people enough resources to live on or to help them get out of poverty, so they are, in the long term, less reliant on government support?
 3. How can we address negative attitudes towards the poor in Alberta? Some people say that welfare support should not single out people who are poor because this reinforces the problem. One suggestion is that a refundable tax credit be available to all Canadians. Those that don't need it would have most of it taxed back, but there would be no discrimination as to who receives it and who doesn't. What kind of welfare system would provide for basic needs without labelling people 'poor'?
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What can you do?

1. Learn more about the issue of poverty and the reality of poverty for people in your community. What are the causes of poverty? What are the symptoms? Challenge your own myths about the poor.
 2. Get involved in activities to alleviate poverty in your community: collective kitchens, school snack programs, enriched pre-school education opportunities (ie. Head Start).
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Recommended reading:

One Step at a Time: Supports for Independence Department of Alberta Family and Social Services. (Edmonton 1990).

Ross, D. and Shillington, R., The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty, 1989. (Ottawa/Montreal, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1989).

Transitions. The Social Assistance Review Committee report prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1988).

Riches, G., "Poverty and Unemployment: Assumptions, Responsibilities and Choices". Paper presented to the Family Service Association of Edmonton Annual General Meeting, May, 1987.

Not Enough: The Meaning and Measure of Poverty in Canada. Canadian Council on Social Development, (Ottawa/Montreal: CCSD, 1984).

1989 Poverty Lines, (Ottawa: National Council of Welfare, April, 1989).

Straight Talk-Questions and Answers about Supports for Independence. Alberta Family and Social Services, 1990.

Welfare Incomes 1989. (Ottawa: National Council of Welfare, 1990-91).

Children in Poverty: Toward a Better Future, Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991.

For more information about the Council, its regular publications **First Reading** and **Alberta Facts**, or other publications, please contact:

Edmonton Social Planning Council
#41, 9912-106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 1C5
Telephone: 423-2031
Fax: 425-6244



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