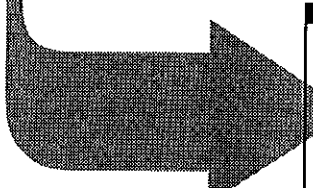


Quickfacts

Edmonton Social Planning Council

THE FACTS

December 1998



- Alberta's Child Welfare caseload has jumped 48.5 per cent since 1993.
- Alberta's per capita Child Welfare rate is now 1.3 children per 100.
- Every child on the caseload costs the department about \$25,000 a year. However, no one has calculated the lifetime costs to the child, family and community.
- As welfare incomes drop, Child Welfare rates climb. From 1995-96 to 1997-98, the department cut \$100 million from welfare. At the same time, Child Welfare costs went up \$70 million.
- The increase is not due to increased awareness: reports of abuse or neglect have dropped 9.7 per cent since 1995.
- The increase is not due to increased reports of child abuse. In 1997, only 183 investigations showed children at risk of sexual abuse—an 83 per cent drop since 1995.

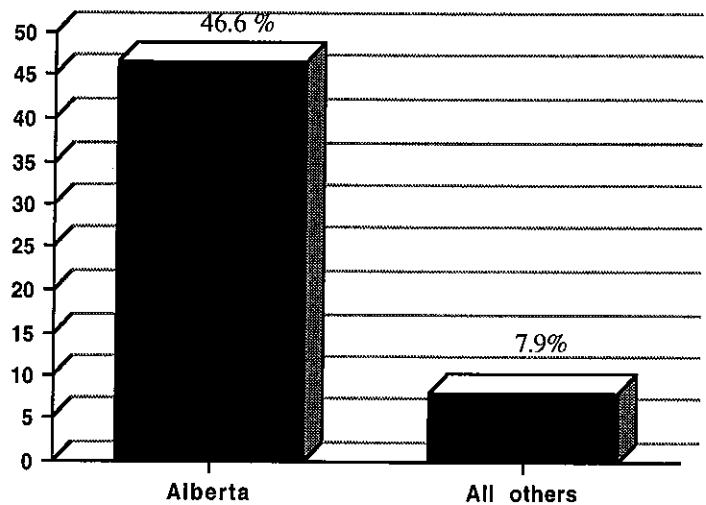
RISING CASELOADS

Alberta's Child Welfare caseload has jumped 48.5 per cent since 1993 when the Government of Alberta introduced its welfare reforms. There are now 11,796 children under government protection—3,816 more than in 1993.

On average, Alberta Family and Social Services has taken almost two children into protection every day since 1993.

From 1993 to '97, Alberta's children-in-care caseload climbed by 46.6 per cent. In all other Canadian provinces and territories combined, the number of children in care increased by an average of only 7.9 per cent. Alberta's per capita Child Welfare rate is now 1.3 per 100 children. □

Percentage Increase of Children in Care
Alberta and Other Prov/Terr Combined



Source: Child & Family Services Annual Statistical Report
Children in care (about half the caseload) are generally removed from the home and placed in foster care or another form of government care. See page 3

Welfare cuts put more children in care

Alberta's Child Welfare caseload started to climb in 1993, as the department cut its welfare rates.

The provincial welfare caseload dropped by 63.4 per cent from March 1993 to March 1998. According to the Alberta Family and

Social Services 1997-98 Annual Report, the reduced caseload resulted in a \$56 million saving during 1997-98.

See More children in care page 2

"To get help for your family, you have to do something drastic.... You have to go to Child Welfare."

“We'll be celebrating Christmas this year,” says Brenda. “It's the first time in four years.” It won't be a huge celebration, but Brenda has bought a few Christmas lights. For the last four years, Brenda has been fighting Alberta

Family and Social Services, trying to get help for her daughter. Her fight has finally paid off, but to get the help she had to take drastic steps. She had to place her daughter in foster care.

See Turning to ... page 2

TURNING TO CHILD WELFARE

"I am sorry to say, but it was her birthday. I called a friend and we drove her down to the Crisis Unit. I wanted her to have a better life. I wanted her to live in a home where they could afford to raise her. When you can't care for your child, you get desperate."

Brenda's problems started when she fell ill and developed a medical condition that leaves her unable to work. When she fell ill, her daughter was nine years old. "For six months, I lay in bed while my daughter cared for herself. We ate a lot of soup and spaghetti—stuff my daughter could prepare herself. Social Services knew what was going on, but wouldn't help."

Brenda and her daughter were receiving \$745 a month. Rent was \$550 a month, plus utilities—more than the accepted Alberta Family and Social Services shelter allowance. "Social Services wanted me to move but my doctor said I couldn't. I couldn't take any major changes."

By February 1998, Brenda faced \$700 in back bills. "Three different social workers told me they would take my child out of my home if my utilities were cut off. I started to think they were right. She would be better off somewhere else."

Within Alberta Family and

Social Services, Supports for Independence (SFI), or welfare, helps families and individuals without enough money to live. Child Welfare protects children from abuse and neglect.

The Child Welfare caseload has always included families on welfare. But most welfare families aren't involved with Child Welfare. SFI, or welfare, can actually help families through crises so their problems never become serious, and Child Welfare never has to become involved. Today, SFI isn't providing that kind of help. Instead, families are turning to Child Welfare for basic necessities, once available through SFI.

Brenda's daughter found life in foster care much better than life at home. "At home, she was teased—made fun of all the time. She had no new clothes, no money for school field trips. As soon as she went into care, she got new clothes, got involved with sports, went swimming and to the movies. She had three square meals a day. When I wanted her to come home, she said, 'But Mum, they are going to put me in swimming lessons.'"

Foster parents receive from \$13.15 to \$22.06 per day per child for basic maintenance, depending on the child's age. Although Brenda couldn't receive any help for her daughter,

her foster parents were entitled to \$19.29 a day or \$578 a month for basic maintenance, plus a skill fee between \$142 and \$690 a month, depending on the foster parents' training.

Brenda's daughter is now back at home. With Child Welfare in the picture, she now qualifies for counseling and a bus pass. Brenda and her daughter are also receiving an extra \$300 in rent. "I should have had that money for the last four and 1/2 years. But the social worker said no. When you are on assistance, you qualify for nothing. To get help for your family, you have to do something drastic. I know I am not alone. You have to go to Child Welfare or they won't give you any help.

"There is nothing preventive any more. When I got sick, my daughter should have had counseling. But I was told that costs too much. She should have had a youth worker, but I was told they had cut back drastically on youth workers."

Brenda says her health is returning, and she is looking forward to a better future. However, her daughter has paid an enormous price. "Living this way has eroded her self-esteem. My daughter's problems all stem from lack of money." □

More children in care

Every child on the caseload costs the department about \$25,000. So a large part of the welfare savings has gone directly to Child Welfare.

From 1995-96 to 1997-98, the department cut \$100 million from the welfare budget. At the same time, Child Welfare costs went up \$70 million. In May 1998, an internal review by the consulting firm Coopers & Lybrand showed the department does not understand why caseloads are climbing: "We did not find any evidence that the program (Child Welfare) had undertaken a comprehensive analysis of what was driving up caseloads and cost per case...."

Back in 1996, Alberta Family and Social Services Minister Lyle Oberg addressed a meeting of the Family and Social Services Supply Sub-committee. He admitted having to hire 200 new Child Welfare workers and being puzzled by the rising caseloads.

"We are a little unsure as to why the need has increased so significantly," Oberg reported. "We are seeing this as a national trend."

However, ESPC statistics show this is not a national trend. Child Welfare rates are falling in six other Canadian provinces and territories. Newfoundland, P.E.I., New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and the N.W.T. have all seen drops in caseloads. □

PUBLIC REVIEW

Some communities still refer to the '60s and '70s as the "scoop," because so many children were taken into care.

During the 1980s, the Government of Alberta tried to reverse the trend. A public inquiry into the Child Welfare system led to the Cavanagh Report and a new *Child Welfare Act*. The new Act protected families and the rights of the child. Child Welfare workers tried to keep children in the home and families together. At the same time, the department set new educational standards for Child Welfare workers.

In 1984, Richard Cardinal, a Metis foster child, died in the department's care. This led to a second

inquiry by Dr. Ray Thomlinson, dean of social work at the University of Calgary. The inquiry affected how the Act was interpreted and followed.

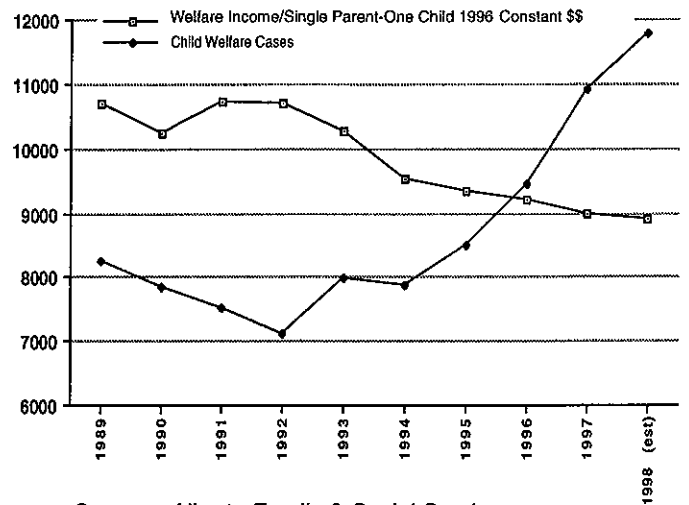
Today, Child Welfare rates are again out of control. The department's unsuccessful attempts to explain the increases show a lack of understanding of families, welfare and child protection. The explanations raise more questions than they answer. The Government of Alberta is now on the verge of privatizing and regionalizing children's services. It is taking this major step despite its lack of understanding of this major public area.

The inquiries of the 1980s helped to create a more humane *Child Welfare Act*,

policies and standards. The current crisis in Child Welfare begs for another comprehensive public review. Before we put more

Alberta families and children at risk, we need to ask more questions, get better answers and find workable solutions. □

Welfare Incomes and Child Welfare Rates

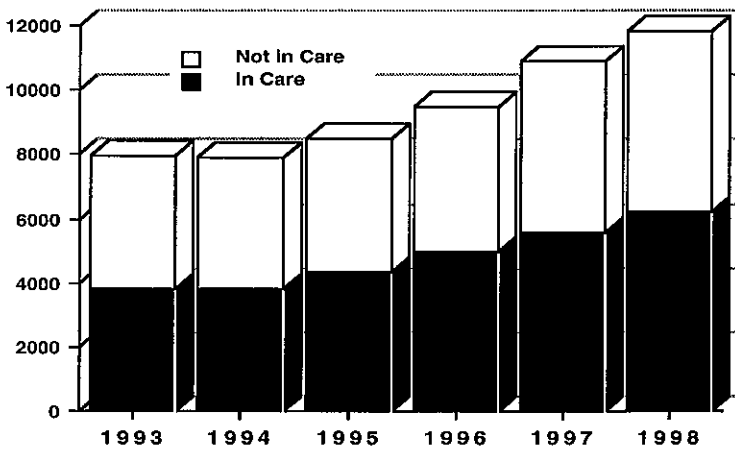


Sources: Alberta Family & Social Services; National Council of Welfare

As welfare incomes drop, Child Welfare rates climb.

More children removed from families

Total Alberta Child Protection Caseloads 1993-1998



Source: 1993 - 1997, Child & Family Services Annual Statistical Report; 1998 Alberta Family & Social Services

The Alberta Family and Social Services 1997-98 Annual Report gives another reason for the increase. "The department is getting involved earlier," it states, "through means such as in-home support agreements." This is also not correct.

In Alberta, Child Welfare services include two forms of child protection—*in care* and *not in care*. When children are *in care*, they are

generally removed from the home and placed in foster care or another form of government care. Children who are *not in care* usually receive support in the home. Since 1993, the greatest increase has been with *in care*—children removed from the home. □

A drop in reports of abuse and neglect

According to the Alberta Family and Social Services 1997-98 Annual Report, the number one reason for the Child Welfare increase is "increased awareness about the need to report abuse." ESPC statistics show this is not the case. In the last few years, fewer and fewer Albertans reported child abuse or neglect. In 1995, the department received 50,997 reports or allegations of abuse or neglect. In 1998, the department received only 46,026 reports or allegations. That is 4,971 or 9.7 per cent less.

The Alberta Family and Social Services 1997-98 Annual Report also blames "increasingly difficult and complex cases" for the increasing caseload. In fact, we are seeing a dramatic drop in sexual and physical abuse cases—the most difficult and complex cases.

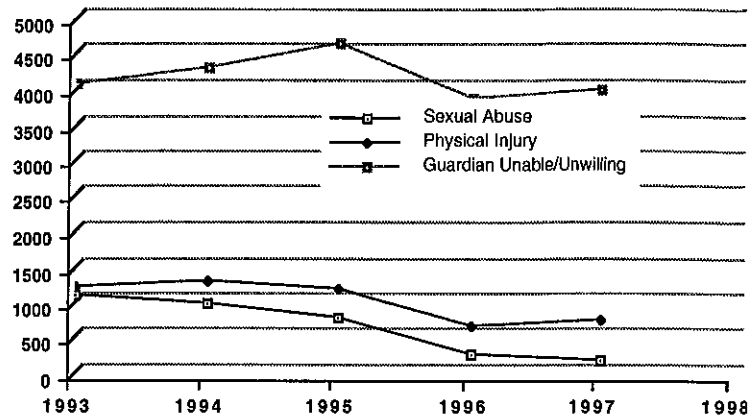
In 1993, 1,095 Child Welfare investigations

showed children at "Risk of Sexual Abuse by Guardian." In 1997, only 183 investigations showed children at "Risk of Sexual Abuse"—an 83 per cent drop. In 1993, 1,192 investigations showed "Risk of Physical Injury by Guardian" as the assessment. By 1997, this number had dropped to 740—a 37.9 per cent drop.

Before deciding to place a child in care, the worker assesses the risk to the child. When Child Welfare workers report a drop in difficult sexual and physical abuse cases, we should see a drop in the caseload. Unfortunately, this is not the case. We are seeing dramatic increases.

Low-risk factors appear to be pushing children into care. In 1997, 3,963 investigations showed "Guardian Unable or Unwilling to Provide the Necessities of Life." These

Assessment Outcomes - Physical Injury, Sexual Abuse, and "Unable/Unwilling to Provide Necessities" 1993 - 1997



Source: Child & Family Services Annual Statistical Report

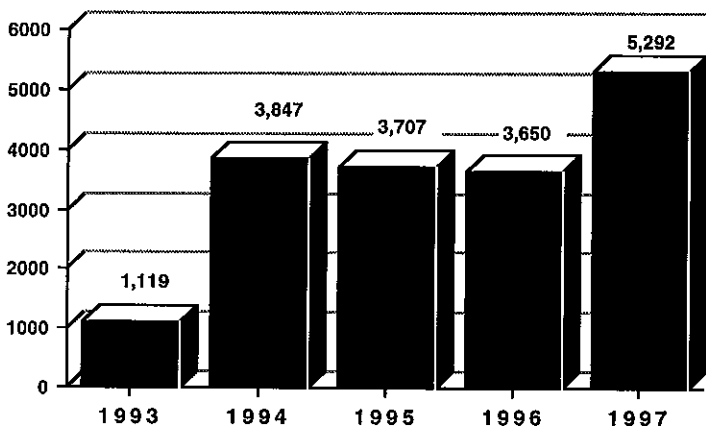
children are not at risk of abuse. Instead their parents are unwilling or unable to feed, clothe and shelter them. In the past, adequate rates and flexible programs may have protected these children from risk. Today, with welfare cuts, Alberta Family and Social Services has also cut the preventive services, programs and special allowances that protect children from risk.

More and more workers are reporting, "Protection Needs Indicated but not Substantiated." In 1993, only 1,119 investigations fell into this category. In 1997, 5,292 cases investigations reported "Protection Needs Indicated but not Substantiated"—a 373 per cent increase.

Although the department is still operating under the 1985 Child Welfare Act, it may be interpreting the Act more narrowly. The

investigation may show a child is at risk, but the worker, under pressure to keep caseloads down, cannot act in the child's interest. This demands further review. □

Assesament Outcomes - "Protection Needs Indicated but Not Substantiated" 1993 - 1997



Source: Child & Family Services Annual Statistical Report

For copies of *Quickfacts*, call, write or e-mail the

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