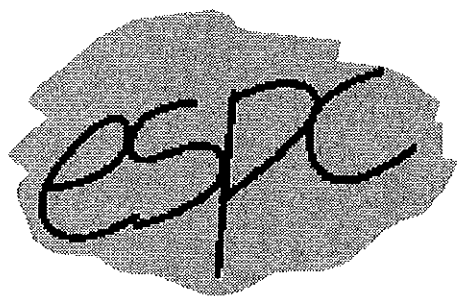


Alberta Children's Forum

First Circle: Uniting for Children

Poverty & Physical Needs

3 Good Ideas



e d m o n t o n

SOCIAL PLANNING

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The Edmonton Social Planning Council accepted the invitation to join the Steering Committee of the Alberta Children's Forum—First Circle, Uniting for Children—because it was an opportunity to work toward solutions for Alberta children.

Poverty & Physical Needs

Of several important themes discussed at the Forum, Poverty & Physical Needs will be a major focus. Children who live in poverty, who do not have their physical needs met, cannot participate in school and community and live healthy, safe lives.

3 Good Ideas

The forum's final report will include a concise list of action steps. The Edmonton Social Planning Council is putting forward three good ideas that could become action steps.

The ideas are:

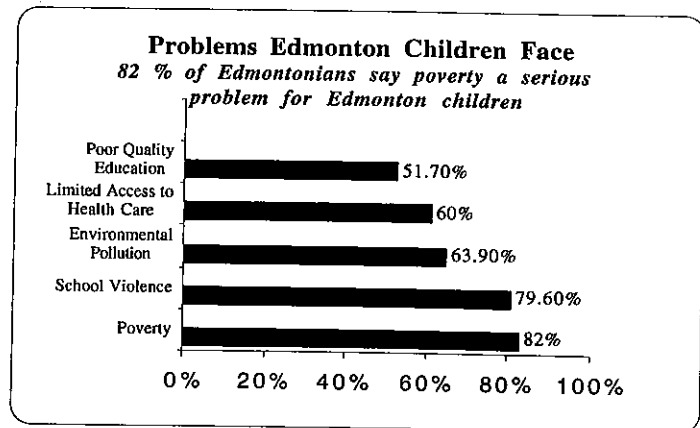
- **a comprehensive school lunch program**, so no Alberta child goes hungry
- **a rent subsidy program**, so no Alberta child becomes homeless
- **matching welfare shelter allowances to the cost of rent**, to protect children in welfare families from hunger and homelessness

The following pages describe each idea.▶

Poverty No.1 Problem

Most Edmontonians believe poverty a serious problem, especially for children, says poll

A majority of Edmontonians say poverty is a serious problem for our children, a new opinion survey shows. Health care, education and environmental issues stole our attention throughout the '90s. Now poverty is taking centre stage as the most serious problem Edmonton children face.



The poll by Advanis market research for the Edmonton Social Planning Council found that more than eight out of 10 Edmontonians—82 per cent—agree poverty is a serious problem for Edmonton children. Advanis interviewed 500 Edmontonians. The random sample poll is accurate plus or minus 4.65 per cent of the time, 19 times out of 20.

Almost as many—79.6 per cent—agree school violence is a serious problem for children. Only five out of 10 say quality of education is a serious problem.

Poverty Increasing

Despite the strength of the Alberta economy, only 7 per cent believe there has been a decrease in poverty in Edmonton. Sixty-six (66) per cent of Edmontonians say poverty has increased during the '90s. Another 20 per cent say it has stayed the same. Sixty-five (65) per cent of Edmontonians believe that out of every 10 individuals, three or more cannot afford basic necessities.▶

Government Has Responsibility

Edmontonians also believe government has a major role to play. Almost nine out of 10—88 per cent—say government has a responsibility to make sure all children have their basic needs met.

Eight out of 10 Edmontonians say government should introduce programs to help needy children. They support government-funded school lunch programs and a rent subsidy program for low-income families. ■

Child Poverty is a Serious Problem for Edmonton Children

Strongly Agree	50.9 %
Somewhat Agree	31.1 %
Total	82 %

Government has a responsibility to make sure all children have basic needs met

Strongly Agree	66 %
Somewhat Agree	22 %
Total	88 %

■ Idea 1

A comprehensive school lunch program, so no Alberta child goes hungry

77 % of Edmontonians say government should fund school lunch programs

In 1997, the average income for a two-parent family in Alberta was \$66,746. At the same time, many families are so poor they are skipping meals and going without fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy. In March 1999, Alberta's food banks served 50,784 people, including 19,755 children. Edmonton's Food Bank serves more than 13,372 different children in one year.

A recent survey by Edmonton's Food Bank and the Edmonton Social Planning Council found that many Edmonton children are undernourished. About 47 per cent of families turning to the food bank say their children aren't getting the nutrition they need.

Children Missing Meals

Seventy-three (73) per cent say they cannot afford to feed their children enough fruits and vegetables. Fifty-eight (58) per cent say they cannot afford enough meat for their children, while 41 per cent say they cannot afford enough dairy.

Parents are going without food to feed their children. During the month before the survey, 46 per cent went without food for a day or more. Eighteen (18) per cent of the parents say their children are missing meals because there is not enough food.

Urgent Need

At its 1998 Annual General Meeting, the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta endorsed a resolution calling on the Government of Alberta to "support the social responsibility of a high needs school aged children feeding program." ▶

The Alberta Growth Summit identified school lunches as an urgent need. "Action: Nutrition must be emphasized. In cooperation with communities, hot lunch programs should be implemented immediately in schools where there are hungry children. Lunch programs should exist in all schools by 2005."

The Joint Stakeholder Committee on Children & Poverty, established by the Alberta Teachers' Association, called on the government of Alberta to "develop a breakfast/lunch program for schools and deliver that program in the least intrusive way."

Affordable Solution

The Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation operates school lunch programs in 12 Edmonton schools. Betty Dean, principal of McDougall School where the program serves 90 of the 200 students, says it has improved their attendance, behaviour, attention and performance.

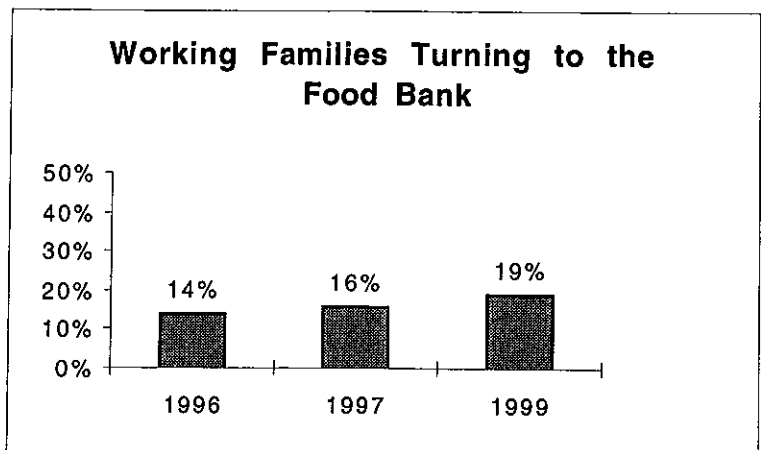
British Columbia already has a provincial school lunch program that serves 45,000 children in 345 schools. That program costs \$14.8 million a year. ■

Idea 2

A rent subsidy program, so no Alberta child becomes homeless

80% of Edmontonians say government should create a rent subsidy program for low-income families

Nineteen (19) per cent of families turning to Edmonton's Food Bank are working poor with low-paying jobs that don't pay enough to make ends meet. Others are students, the unemployed, seniors relying on Canada Pension or Old Age Security and welfare recipients.



Fifty-four (54) per cent of families turning to Edmonton's Food Bank live on less than \$1,000 month. The average family income is \$1,097 per month. On average, families with one child live on \$970 a month, while families with two children live on \$1,006 a month. Seventy-one (71) per cent of respondents say they turn to the food bank because of ongoing money shortages. Of those, 19 per cent describe the problem as underemployment.

Homeless Families

Twenty-eight (28) per cent of families turning to Edmonton's Food Bank were homeless some time during the past five years. Edmonton's Social Planning Council and Edmonton's Food Bank surveyed 100 families and found 28 had been homeless during the last five years. The families included 65 children. Forty-three (43) were under 12. ▀

Most of the families that became homeless stayed that way for one or two months. Twenty-one (21) of the 28 homeless families moved in with other family members. Three (3) families actually lived on the street.

Of the families that had been homeless, seven had been evicted.

Near Homeless

Most of the families that turn to the food bank are dangerously close to becoming homeless. Seventy-five (75) per cent had been late with the rent, and 42 per cent had missed rent payments during the past two years.

Sixty-four (64) per cent moved in the past two years, while 20 per cent moved more than once.

Preventing Homelessness

In November 1998, the City of Edmonton, Alberta Family and Social Services and Alberta Municipal Affairs joined forces to form the Edmonton Task Force on Homelessness. The following May, the Task Force released *Homelessness in Edmonton: A Call to Action*, a report that acknowledged the seriousness of homelessness in Edmonton.

The Task Force conducted a day-long homeless count and found 836 homeless persons, including 70 homeless families and 112 homeless children.

Ninety-three (93) per cent of families that turn to the food bank live in rental accommodation. A rent subsidy program would keep these families in their homes and ensure that no Alberta child becomes homeless. ■

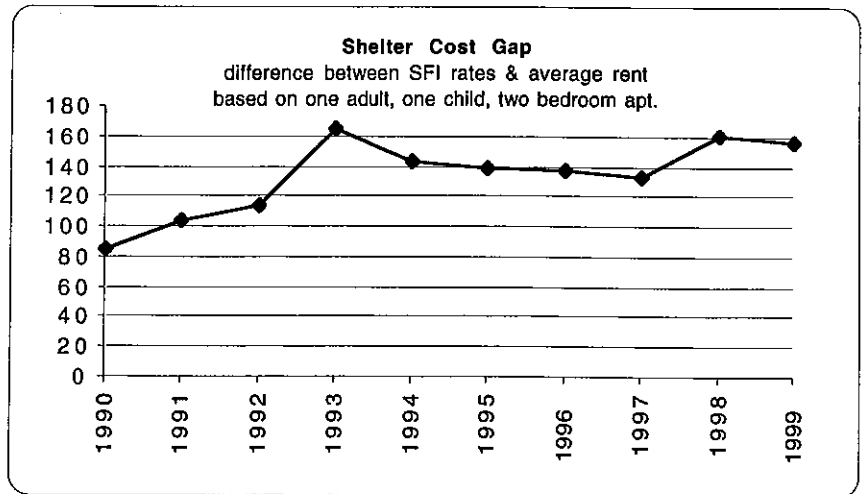
Idea 3

Match welfare shelter allowances to rent, to protect children in welfare families from hunger and homelessness

41% of Edmontonians say government should raise welfare rates

Welfare rates include a shelter allowance to cover housing costs. Unfortunately, this allowance does not match the rents Alberta families must pay.

When setting shelter allowances, the actual cost of rent has never been a benchmark or target. Instead, rates go up and down as government budgets fluctuate and priorities change.



During the last five years, the gap between shelter allowances and Edmonton rents has widened. In 1990 in Edmonton, the gap for a single parent on welfare was \$86. By 1999, that gap in Edmonton had grown to \$157. For families in Calgary, the problem is even more serious.

75% Can't Afford Rent

Between April and May 1999, Edmonton's Food Bank and the Edmonton Social Planning Council conducted a study of families that turn to Edmonton's Food Bank. In September, the two groups released *Often Hungry, Sometimes Homeless*, the results of that study.▶

Nearly half the families turning to Edmonton's Food Bank depend on Supports for Independence (SFI), the official name for welfare. Forty-five (45) per cent of families say SFI is their main source of income, while another 4 per cent rely on SFI as secondary income.

Most of these are so poor they have trouble paying the rent. Seventy-five (75) per cent had been late with the rent, and 42 per cent had missed rent payments during the past two years.

Families turning to the Edmonton's Food Bank pay an average of \$424 a month for rent. The SFI shelter rate for a parent with one child is \$428. In Edmonton, the average two-bedroom apartment rents for \$585, so these families are renting the cheapest housing they can find.

According to Canada Mortgage and Housing (CMHC), in Calgary, the average two-bedroom apartment rents for \$702 a month.

In July 1998, the Government of Alberta provided information to the ESPC revealing that about two out of every three welfare recipients spend more for shelter than they received from welfare.

No money for utilities

Above rent, these families pay an average of \$99 a month for power, gas and water. Officially, the SFI shelter allowance covers rent and utilities. However, for families on welfare, the shelter allowance only pays part of the rent. There's nothing for utilities. Even when families are renting the cheapest housing they can find, they would need another \$96 to pay utilities.

Often Hungry, Sometimes Homeless found that 19 per cent of respondents have had their power cut off. Ten (10) per cent have had their gas shut off and 35 per cent have had their phone disconnected. ►

Rents Climbing

Across Alberta, vacancy rates are dropping and rents are climbing. CMHC reports that Edmonton's vacancy rate dropped 5.8 per cent between 1996 and 1998 (from 7.7 per cent to 1.9 per cent). CMHC projects further decreases in 1999, with an anticipated vacancy rate of 1.5 per cent. Average rental rates are for all apartment units in the City of Edmonton. Statistics on rental and vacancy rates have been taken from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *Rental Market Report, October 1997 Survey* and *October 1998 Survey*.

During the same period, average rents increased 7.1 per cent. This year, the predicted increase is another 6 per cent. If this prediction comes true, renters will cope with an overall increase of 13 per cent in average rents in just three years.

Cheap Rent Hard to Find

At the same time, the supply of affordable housing continues to shrink. The Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, a joint government-community planning body, reported a net loss of 1,434 "low income affordable" units from 1991 to 1996.

Additional hardship results from the fact that housing costs vary widely from city to city. An adequate rate in Bonnyville may mean no money for food in Calgary. The impact of the swings in the rental market must be softened with good, flexible policy.

Basing welfare rates on 85 per cent of the average rent in any given community would not make housing affordable for all welfare families. However, it is financially achievable and would still create an incentive for welfare recipients to find the cheapest rent possible. Essentially, it requires moving welfare rates back up to 1990 levels when adjusted for inflation. ■

