

Alberta 2022 Budget Analysis:
*Impacts on Affordable Housing,
Healthcare Service Delivery and Workforce Capacity*

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BACKGROUND

This report analyses the Alberta Budget 2022 announced on February 24, and its future implications for Albertans. Using the social gradient framework outlined by Canadian Public Health [6], this report evaluates impacts of budget investments on Albertans' Social Determinants of Health (SDH). This report focuses on the SDH factors such as Housing, Health Services and Education. Within these sectors, the report addresses affordable housing and the real estate market, post-pandemic job security, and social inclusion in conjunction with higher education investments. In healthcare the report highlights the privatisation and expansion of health services to for-profit companies and the mental health and addiction services in Alberta in response to the alarming opioid crisis.

The purpose of this analysis is to highlight key concerns that Budget 2022 leaves unaddressed compared to the advancements the Alberta Government hopes to make through provincial investments. This report also provides recommendations for further research and investigation into provincial investments and service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 Impacts on Social Determinants of Health

Social Determinants of Health refer to social and economic factors that influence an individual's health, sustainability and lifestyle. Some SDH examples are income and income distribution, job security, education, gender, race, housing, social exclusion and early childhood development factors. [6] These indicators are also closely linked to each other and affect a community's overall well-being and economic prosperity in the long run. For example social exclusion, health and education are linked to job security, income, food insecurity and healthy living. Thus, one indicator can have multiple impacts community wide and the economy.

COVID-19 has had an immense impact on Alberta and has exhausted multiple public systems exasperating already existing issues like the 2015-16 recession and an increase in long-term unemployment. [1] Other impacts include a drop in mental health stability, economic uncertainty and isolation. [5] According to a Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) survey, coping mechanisms that improved mental stability included social connectedness and self-development (57% and 49%). From this physical activity, health and self-care were listed as top three in self-development. [5]

This data suggests that SDH have a profound impact on the improvement of individual lives and the overall turn around of an economy. Hence, these mechanisms must be supported by programs and services that address mental health, uncertainty in employment, and self-development.

Post-Pandemic Financial State

Across Alberta, approximately 340,000 jobs were lost and the unemployment rate skyrocketed to 15% by May of 2020 and currently 47,000 Albertans remain unemployed. [1] As of January 2022 the unemployment rate has decreased to 7.5% with an expected growth rate of 2.5% by the Alberta government. [1] Within this time, Albertans experienced their lowest point with social exclusion, mental illness rising, and a decrease in overall quality of living and an increased cost of living. There has been critique by the opposing New Democrat Party, stating that investments

towards health, social services, housing and education are meagre given the static tax brackets and inflation increase. [4]

Not only have individual SDH indicators fallen drastically, but there is now the added pressures of the rising cost of living with a non-competitive living wage experienced by Albertans. [8] There is a need for a robust financial structure that supports individual needs and reflects the challenges that the pandemic has caused and exasperated.

Highlights of the Alberta Budget 2022

The Alberta budget, *Moving Forward*, boasts low taxation and the first balanced budget in seven years reaching a surplus of \$500 million. This is a turnaround from last year's \$17 billion deficit and increase on \$2.3 billion in revenue as compared to the prior fiscal year. [1] It is noted that much of this revenue comes from an increase in oil prices, corporate tax receipts and the federal government transfers. [2] From this, current investments outlined in the budget include:

- \$118 million towards implementation and delivery of *Stronger Foundations* [1] addressing affordable housing and the goal to add 25,000 additional buildings primarily funded by the National Housing Strategy.
- \$3.7 billion allocated towards community care, continuing care and home care programs for seniors. With this, underused affordable housing stock will be sold to for-profit companies [3]
- Effective October 2022 introducing the Natural Gas Rebate Program, which aids on costs in Natural Gas utilities that surpass \$6.50/GJ. [2]
- \$100 million for Community and Family Support, inclusive of sexual assault services (\$13 million) and family violence prevention programs (\$5 million). [1]
- \$7 million towards non-profit organizations addressing social problems in Alberta. [3]
- \$20 million towards mental health and addictions recovery-oriented programs and services, and an additional \$30 million towards children suffering with academic challenges and mental health. [3]
- \$22 billion towards operating expenditures for healthcare infrastructure and building healthcare capacity through the Emergency Services Department with an increase in resources.
- Expanding hospital services through encouraging for-profit healthcare delivery as an alternative option to public health services.
- \$105 million towards meaningful employment opportunities combined with federal rebates (e.g., Canada Workers Benefit) to fulfil the labor demand requirements of Alberta's economy. [1]
- Launch of Alberta 2030 plan, *Getting Albertans Back to Work*, focusing on innovation and private sector involvement to address lack of skills in workforce and long-term unemployment. [20]

AFFORDABLE HOUSING INITIATIVES

Financial State of Housing Market

Alberta's real estate market is experiencing a post-pandemic boom, where sales of homes have increased with an increase in investment from other provinces in the last two years. [11] Calgary alone has reached a rate of 2.5% on real estate values and Edmonton is expected to rise up to 7%. For the real estate market this is an excellent opportunity for advancement, for Albertans this means a rise in cost of living and housing. Along with rising home values, the cost of utilities and electricity are also rising. Budget 2022 introduces a Natural Gas Rebate for homes and businesses that exceed the assigned limit of \$6.50/GJ. However, it is interesting to note, that in 2021 the highest natural gas level was \$5.328/GJ. [12] Whether this rebate will aid Albertans significantly is unknown at this time. During these times, housing policies and affordable housing strategies must align for the best interest of Albertans and long-term survival on an economic scale.

Determinants of Affordable Housing

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) identifies income thresholds (limits) that determine an individual's capability to afford a home in a specified community/region. Alberta uses these thresholds to determine eligibility for affordable housing. [9] CMHC indicates that housing is considered affordable when it is less than 30% of household income within a given municipality. In addition, *Bill 78: Alberta Housing Amendment Act* [13] allows the Minister to determine which units are considered affordable. There is an online tool available to enable Albertans to access a wider range of options for affordable housing. Pathways of affordable housing in Alberta include: [8]

- Community housing program for single family homes prioritizing families with dependants and less than \$25,000 in assets.
- Seniors' self-contained housing with no asset threshold prioritizing low-income seniors. Rent is based on 30% of household income.
- Seniors' lodge with provision of meals, housekeeping and recreational activities. Rent is set by lodge operator and must ensure that each senior is left with at least \$322 disposable income per month. Priority is given to 'functionally independent' seniors who would not otherwise be assisted in a health care facility.
- Rent supplement subsidy towards accommodation of choice in either a Rent Assistance Benefit (RAB) provided to those below low-income thresholds, or Temporary Rent Assistance Benefit (TRAB) provided to working low-income households in 'transition' within careers or jobs.
- Specialized housing for targeted populations such as Indigenous, people with disability, marginalized and homeless individuals. Specialized housing is unregulated and grant funding is provided to housing operators by the partner ministries, Children's Services, communities and social services.

Stronger Foundations Review

The Affordable Housing Review Panel consulted several non-profit housing providers in Calgary. Yet, these reviews were *said* to be seldom reflected in Stronger Foundations. [9] Recommendations included: [10]

1. Increased funding towards rental assistance programs
2. Low-cost financing options for low-income families and individuals
3. Increased supply of affordable housing through provision of land
4. Transparency and predictability in housing investments moving forward
5. Introduction and increase of mixed-income housing models
6. Improvements in tax exemptions within housing
7. Collaboration and involvement of private sector
8. Improving quality and sustainability by transferring housing assets to capable non-profit organizations

Recommendations one, five and seven were followed through by the Stronger Foundations plan, whereas most recommendations above were not listed in the strategic plan. In addition, housing assets were transferred to for-profit companies for quality control and maintenance as opposed to the non-profit sector, who would have prioritized resident needs primarily. [8]

The purpose of the strategy is to transform the housing system and make it accessible, affordable and sustainable. Alberta government allocates \$118 million from budget 2022 to implement and carry out the delivery of the strategy with the following expected outcomes: [8]

- Encourage partnerships and collaboration with for-profit companies by amending its role as owner and operator to regulator and funding.
- Reduce ‘red-tape’ through loosening operating rules, providing new operating models, and flexibility towards housing stock management in hopes to balance financial sustainability.
- Simplify eligibility criteria for families and seniors through system transparency and prioritization of rent setting.
- Holistically evaluate projects and plans by for-profit sector for approvals and support needed by companies.

Per these goals, Alberta government intends to loosen the Alberta Social Housing Corporation (ASHC) regulatory structure to follow-up on their promise to reduce ‘red-tape’. ASHC is governed by the *Alberta Housing Act*, which has been amended through *Bill 78* to allow for partnerships and collaborations with for-profit organizations. This gives ownership and maintenance responsibilities of the affordable housing stock to for-profit companies. [8]

Loosening restrictions towards regulation, maintenance and quality control of the housing stock allows for-profit companies to set their own guidelines. While there is a regulatory role that the

government will play through the competency-based housing management body, the purpose of reducing red tape works by loosening operating rules and introducing flexibility. This can impact the quality and maintenance of an already underfunded housing system and may make costs higher for individuals residing in these homes.

In addition, municipalities have been provided the ownership, operation and funding responsibilities for affordable housing within their jurisdiction. This provides municipalities more leniency to determine their jurisdictional needs. Yet, the strategy does not address how the provincial government will fund this program in addition to funding for-profit ownership. [9] There has been recent speculation towards the development of permanent housing for people exiting homelessness in Edmonton that was not funded by the provincial government and lacks implementation investment to move forward. [14] This was part of the request for an additional \$8.9 million for operation of homeless housing, by Edmonton municipal government, which was excluded from budget 2022. [3]

Additional Implications

As per above, affordable housing such as single-family homes and seniors' housing is based on 30% of household income. Families and dependents must have less than \$25,000 in assets to be prioritized for affordable housing, whereas seniors' self-contained housing has no asset threshold. This indicates that a lenient eligibility criterion is required for single families, given there are more rigorous determinants of eligibility for a single family than seniors. Hence, families must meet rigorous criteria and longer wait times to obtain housing as opposed to seniors who require self-contained housing. It is then no surprise that "senior households represent a [smaller] portion of the Albertans waiting for affordable housing" (Alberta Seniors and Housing, 10). This correlates with the detailed criteria for single families to obtain housing. The strategy does not elaborate how the eligibility criteria will determine simplicity in the system to lower wait times and provide a higher supply of single-family affordable housing.

HEALTHCARE SERVICE DELIVERY

Allocation of Healthcare Funds

The federal funding for provincial-territorial healthcare costs has increased from 22% to 35%. Alberta government uses these funds within budget 2022 to prioritize emergency services, COVID-19 contingency plans, and community care incentives. [1] With this, budget 2022 maintains a \$3.9 billion investment in community and social services. In addition, for-profit companies have been given the opportunity, to provide specified healthcare services to mitigate the wait times in the public system. [18]

This includes certain surgical procedures to be provided by Chartered Surgical Facilities (CSFs). Private facilities that will operate as an alternative option for certain surgeries (e.g., orthopedic surgeries). This provides patients with a choice in service delivery as wait times increase and availability of staff decreases as we have seen in the pandemic. Other funding allocated towards healthcare and social service costs includes:

- \$20 million towards mental health and addiction services with a focus on recovery-oriented programs. This funding also includes the expansion of ICU beds in the mental health intensive care unit. [16]

- \$64 million towards Emergency Medical Services to advance healthcare capacity and address system pressures. [1]
- \$100 million towards Community Support Services to enable preventative social service programs for Metis settlements. [15]
- \$13 million towards 16 sexual assault centres throughout Alberta to address sexual violence [15]
- \$6 million towards non-profit organizations to address social issues in Alberta through the Civil Society Fund. [15]

Private Healthcare Services Review

Alberta Health Services (AHS) and Alberta Precision Laboratories have established an agreement with DynaLIFE to deliver community laboratory services province-wide under DynaLIFE. This shifts the public service delivery responsibility to private companies such as DynaLIFE. [1] Alberta government claims to use the remaining savings from this agreement and reinvest into AHS front-line services. In addition to this, private facilities have been authorized to deliver certain surgeries to reduce wait times and shift some burden off the public healthcare system. While these policy changes were controversial in the voting period, they remain Alberta's new approach to healthcare service delivery.

DynaLIFE is known for its busy hallways and quick services. Moving forward this agreement may result in wage reduction and increase in automation to deliver services quicker and reduce wait times. Likewise, private services are associated with giving preference to healthier patients with less complex needs and lower quality of care to mitigate costs and benefit shareholders, this would directly impact the quality of healthcare delivery in Alberta. [21] Further implications include: [22]

- Laboratory job uncertainty with only 1400 lab workers contracted out of 6000 professionals that the Health Sciences Association of Alberta represents.
- Reduction in transparency with healthcare workers about quality and maintenance. Staff consultation will decrease over time shifting the focus of healthcare from patient-centric to profit-centric.
- An increase in speed, volume and cost-cutting resulting in declined accuracy of service delivery.
- Due to privatisation of healthcare, prices may vary in services hence Albertans with differing financial situations may be unable to afford certain services. [23]

Opioid Crisis in Alberta

From January 2020 until March 2020 the number of visits to Supervised Consumption Sites (SCS) in the urban areas of Alberta peaked a record of 114,430 total visits. From 2020 until 2021 there was an increase in opioid related deaths, December 2021 alone marked 178 deaths. [18] Prior to this, provincial efforts to reduce opioid related poisoning had caused an 8.6% decrease in

number of deaths. This correlates with the devastating effects the pandemic had on Alberta on a mental health scale.

From 2020 to 2021 self-reported reversals have increased, an indication that naloxone kits are saving lives (2020: 8,554; 2021: 15,093). [19] This also implies a higher usage of opioids as more naloxone kits are being used in residences where the majority of overdose deaths occurred in the year 2021. [19] In addition, since majority of these deaths occurred in private residences, this shows that SCS were successful in their reversals of overdose and saving lives on an overall basis.

The age group that was most affected was from 25-60, also comprising the working class. This compliments further data showing urban cities are the hub for majority of opioid deaths (Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat). [19] A survey held by the Canadian Mental Health Association measuring COVID-19 impacts showed that most respondents were also from urban areas(51.7%). Hence, a high degree of correlation between the decline in mental health due to isolation, economic uncertainty and social connection to an increase in opioid use and further, opioid related deaths in Alberta.

Implications on Mental Health and Addiction Services

Per above, the Alberta surveillance data confirms that opioid related harms increased significantly in the beginning of March 2020 which coincides with the decrease in usage of treatment and harm reduction services. [21] In response to this, the Alberta Government has expanded the Opioid Dependency Program (ODP) which offers support services, psychosocial and medication treatment services to individuals dependent on opioids. [20] While there are no direct fees associated with program attendance, prescribed medications are assigned to the patient's pharmacy. Patients without health benefits have to cover the cost of the medications on their own.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in the United States has identified an increase in usage and overdose of fentanyl related deaths due to the mixture of fentanyl in other drugs such as cocaine, heroin and MDMA. NIDA highlights that fentanyl is more cost effective to use for drug traffickers than purified opioids, as fentanyl produces a 'high' faster than other opioids and is cheaper to purchase thus increasing revenue. However, fentanyl is also a more dangerous additive as it is a synthetic opioid (i.e., lab manufactured), and more commonly involved in overdose deaths. [23] This insight correlates with Alberta's increase in fentanyl related deaths from 2016 until 2020, [21] as the latter half of 2020 "94% of all opioid deaths were related to fentanyl" (Government of Alberta, 9).

The Alberta Government invested in the ODP and recovery-oriented programs within emergency services; however, investments towards harm reduction initiatives went unaddressed in the budget. The ODP services limit availability to medium and high-income groups *only*; who can afford the medications or have health benefits to cover the cost of medications. Also, without harm reduction services available, individuals are left with a lack of treatment options. Legalized safer drug supply remains a possible solution for the current increase in fentanyl deaths in Alberta.

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE CAPACITY

Investments towards Education

The nature of work and workforce capacity has changed on a global scale. There is higher demand for advanced technological, social, emotional, critical thinking and leadership skills. [24] Provincial economic plans must keep up with these changes and ensure the workforce develops skills to fill future job vacancies. For example, British Columbia's economic plan, *Stronger BC*, [28] works towards skill development in youth and unemployed residents to replace their aging workforce. It offers educational infrastructure and skill development services as a strategy to keep up with these global changes.

In comparison, the *Getting Albertans Back to Work* economic plan encourages collaborations and partnerships with for-profit companies to invest and influence educational practices and learning outcomes. This is an incentive to internationalize higher education in Alberta and attract global investments in the Province. There is also a push to attract international students for financial gain and to market Alberta's education institutions globally. Additional strategies include: [1]

- \$171 million targeted towards technology, agriculture, financial services and aviation disciplines to increase enrolment and innovation.
- \$64 million in conjunction with the Canada-Alberta Jobs Grant for Work Programs, for skill development and training in Labor and Immigration.
- \$73 million to implement and deliver the Alberta 2030 Plan for advancement of Alberta technology and innovation strategies
- \$25 million in operating funds and \$47 million in capital investments towards 'Alberta at Work' Plan, which includes the re-structuring of foundational studies from K-12 to offer a 'smooth' transition to post-secondary education.
- \$38 million towards micro-credential programs and apprenticeships with 1200 work-integrated learning opportunities.

These investments total \$264 million to support a targeted educational group and align with Alberta's market needs. [1] Along with these changes, foundational education from K-12 will experience an increase in options. Charter schools, which provide a greater degree of curriculum-based autonomy, most being faith-based, are being expanded in Alberta to offer parents' choice in education according to the *Education Act*. [29] In addition, home schooling is also expanding flexibility in teaching outcomes for the same reasons. The foundational studies from K-12 will also focus heavily on educational delivery practices that centralize science, technology and entrepreneurship. The hope is that students will fall into certain disciplines at an earlier age and transition into post-secondary efficiently. [1]

The Alberta 2030 Plan

Alberta government focuses on rigorous commercial involvement in the Education sector, for fiscal year 2022-25, in hopes to advance economic prosperity and open Alberta's doors to the global network. The methodology is to increase the financial gain from the education sector through expanding private sector involvement in education decisions and curriculums. This

allows the private sector to implement ‘commercialization’ in the higher education sector and standardize learning outcomes based on market needs.

Commercialization refers to the management of an institution or organization by a for-profit company to focus on net profit and market interests. Consequently, there is a larger focus on expanding areas of education where there is a higher demand for those relative jobs in the Alberta economy. These areas include technology, agriculture, financial services and aviation. [24] These areas will standardize educational practices for enrolled students to attain and develop a desired skill set to support the innovation and market interests of the for-profit companies that invest in these areas. By increasing the incentive to enrol in these areas, Alberta government will use these investment funds towards infrastructure, maintenance and building research capacity. [25]

Stakeholders consulted during the Alberta 2030 Plan initiatives included industry employers, post-secondary board chairs, presidents, faculty and staff, Indigenous community members, K-12 representatives and general public. [24] This exhaustive list did not include non-profit organizations that focus on education policy, families of enrolled students and students themselves. There is a lack of focus on student experiences and vocalized needs of teachers and families within the educational business plans. This implies that these decisions were primarily constructed on a top-down scale, which is defined as decision makers at the top organizing the structure for the people at the bottom of the ministerial ladder.

Implications of Strategies

It is interesting to note, that previous attempts at K-12 public education privatisation have been unsuccessful in other provinces such as New Brunswick, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Studies have shown that prior private-public partnerships (P3s) lack accountability for student success and quality maintenance of institutional spaces. [27] Furthermore, these partnerships require profitable investments for private companies which may increase costs for the government in ensuring public interest is prioritized as well as private interest. Charter schools and other foundational options for K-12 learning must be evaluated and regulated on a criterion that standardizes practice and learning outcomes to the best interests of the students. This objective may not fall under the private-sector agenda when maintaining an educational institution for profit, causing concerns for families and further burden on the education system.

A high degree of commercialization could impact the self-development of students on a long-term scale. Studies show that a lack of investment in early care learning and an incorporation of market values in the education system early on result in the diminishing value of education for students over time. [27] Long-term this will impact their desire to attend post-secondary institutions that further promote market interests; consequently, impacting the economy and a resulting skill shortage. While promoting high-demand jobs is important for a prosperous economy, ensuring children and students in the system are being prepared for the social world and the workforce are both necessary.

COVID-19 exasperated prior labour shortages and long-term unemployment. Barriers for under-represented groups in the workforce increased with growing business challenges. Alberta has a need for creative skills and problem solving to build the Province’s competitive advantage. [25] This workforce development will require collaborations within public and private sector; however, it will also require social and personal development on an individual level. There are concerns about the level of involvement the private sector should have on decisions about

education delivery. [26] Social and emotional development are important aspects in foundational studies to elevate students and prepare them for adulthood and its challenges. This would require an educational institution to teach life skills in diverse contexts along with professional skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report reviewed the Alberta 2022 budget from a holistic perspective to discuss various impacts that trickle down from targeted investments. Further research and evaluations are needed to address the impacts relayed in this report on affordable housing, healthcare service delivery and education and workforce capacity. The recommendations presented build on the Social Determinants of Health framework [6] to analyze potential solutions that build individual capacity within Albertans. This report encourages that building individual capacity leads to a healthy lifestyle and sustainable community providing an overall advantage to the economy through a bottom-up approach.

Affordable Housing Initiatives

Given the rising cost of homes, inflation, and static wages it is essential for the Government of Alberta to implement within the Stronger Foundations strategy, a higher regulatory system and non-profit involvement in affordable housing; prioritizing Albertans' needs. In addition, municipal governments should be provided with funding and operating investments to carry forward their responsibility in ownership, maintenance and regulation of affordable housing.

The limits that provide Rebates in Natural Gas should be re-evaluated based on data showing highest limit reached annually, as only then would this benefit consumers. Further rebates should be considered that also strive towards climate change initiatives and a green economy.

Healthcare Service Delivery

An evaluation criterion must be standardized and transparent to mitigate the potential rising costs of healthcare services as private facilities operate. The public healthcare system is built on the best interests of patients using the services, this idea should also be reiterated in the private facilities to ensure healthcare staff, patients and quality of service is maintained to its best potential.

There are implied needs for intervention strategies where an individual's Social Determinants of Health and opioid use are simultaneously examined to identify recovery and support needs. These strategies could be a collaboration of harm reduction and recovery-oriented programs offering choice in treatment options to patients. Furthermore, an increase in legalized drug supply is a potential solution to lucrative drug trafficking business where substances are mixed to save costs.

Education and Workforce Capacity

While collaboration between the private-sector and public sector is a crucial and profitable step forward in providing a world-class education system, it is equally necessary to ensure students' development needs are prioritized. The private sector will prioritize their market needs primarily before students' educational requirements such as availability of study resources, flexibility in learning strategies and self-development. These areas should be closely regulated.

The government-regulated system must also be transparent to offset the potential impacts a marketized education system can have on students' overall aspirations and development in conjunction with preparing them for the workforce. While high-demand jobs are important to account for, upholding the values of the *Education Act* [29] and cultivate a love of learning by promoting student aspirations regardless of economic needs, is equally crucial for innovation in the long-run as innovation is derived from creativity and the love of learning.

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