



Toward a poverty-free BC:

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition submission to the BC Government review of the TogetherBC poverty reduction plan

1. Introduction

This submission advocates for an approach that includes increased financial and social supports for people experiencing poverty and measures to reduce the cost of living for all who call BC home. It focuses on seven “big mover” policy priorities that would profoundly change BC’s social fabric and well-being by largely eliminating deep poverty within five to seven years.

- Raise social and disability assistance rates to the poverty line
- Transform the province’s income support system, drawing on the BC Basic Income Panel’s recommendations
- Address discrimination and stigma by adding social condition as protected grounds to the BC Human Rights Code
- Accelerate a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing
- Prioritize targeted Indigenous Poverty Reduction Measures (in line with DRIPA and the TRC Calls to Action)
- Make public transit fare-free and creating a publicly-owned intercity or inter-regional bus service, and
- Close the gap between the living wage and the minimum wage

By no means should these be the only policies considered; we do not map every key poverty reduction lever in this submission, but note, in particular, the excellent work done by the BC Basic Income Panel, along with the many essential recommendations brought forward by PRC member organizations, lived experience experts, and others. Poverty is not inevitable - it is a policy choice, not an individual choice; a poverty-free BC is possible.

1.1 BC PRC role and approach

The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (PRC) comprises over 80 organizations, stakeholders, and people with lived experience of poverty collectively advocating for an end to poverty, homelessness and inequality in British Columbia through public policy and law reform.

The PRC understands poverty as a direct result of economic inequality and policy choices that violate economic and social rights, not an inevitable or naturally occurring phenomenon. Eradicating poverty is

not an impossible or utopian dream but a reality requiring upstream, intersectional, systemic solutions. Nobody should live below the poverty line in a province as wealthy as BC. Poverty causes suffering, impacts the mental and physical health of families and communities, contributes to family violence, and continues to be a profoundly stigmatizing and disempowering experience for many people who call BC home.

The PRC was founded to advocate for a provincial poverty reduction plan. In 2019, the PRC's advocacy contributed to the TogetherBC Poverty Reduction Strategy (TogetherBC or the 'Strategy'). The PRC has since developed a broad, comprehensive policy platform called the [Blueprint for Justice](#), which outlines our overall policy vision and recommendations for the BC government to expand its initial progress. The Blueprint is based on four principles: [economic security](#), [universal basic services](#), [equity](#), and [climate justice](#), with each section containing specific policy recommendations. In addition to this submission, we urge the government to draw on the Blueprint, created by policy experts with direct input from people with lived and living expertise who can best articulate the injustices they face and how to transform them.

1.2 TogetherBC and the Need for a transformative agenda

The introduction of the TogetherBC Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2019 marked a significant policy shift in BC. Overall, the Strategy was well-designed, taking a comprehensive, cross-government approach and setting targets with timelines for reducing overall poverty rates in the province. The Strategy was accompanied by a suite of welcome policy changes – notably, the BC Child Opportunity Benefit (now called the BC Family Benefit), scheduled increases to the minimum wage, significant investments in child care, some new investments in affordable housing, and several long-overdue changes to the rules for accessing social and disability assistance.¹

Together BC was a significant first step; however, the strategy's overall targets were insufficiently ambitious and notably failed to include a target for reducing the depth of poverty or a substantial increase in BC's abysmally low social and disability assistance benefits. While the strategy signalled a substantial shift in provincial appetite for action and contributed to some reductions in the official poverty statistics,² deep poverty remains entrenched.

Since then, the province has brought in several further positive measures, including the most robust suite of temporary pandemic-related supports of any province in Canada.³ Poverty rates declined substantially in 2020 across Canada thanks to pandemic income supports, primarily the federal CERB program (and subsequently the CRB). BC saw the second-largest drop in poverty thanks to its relatively strong pandemic measures.⁴ BC Budget 2023 also announced substantial new affordable housing

¹ Our submission uses the terms "social assistance" and "disability assistance" to refer to what is often also called "welfare". We avoid the term welfare due to the stigma it often carries. We use "income supports" to refer to the wider suite of programs that social and disability assistance are part of, and that also includes programs like the BC Child Opportunity Benefit and other targeted benefits provided by the federal and provincial governments.

² Although it is too soon to assess the impact of the BC Child Opportunity Benefit given families began receiving it in 2020 and the lag in data on poverty rates.

³ [Still Picking up the Tab | Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#).

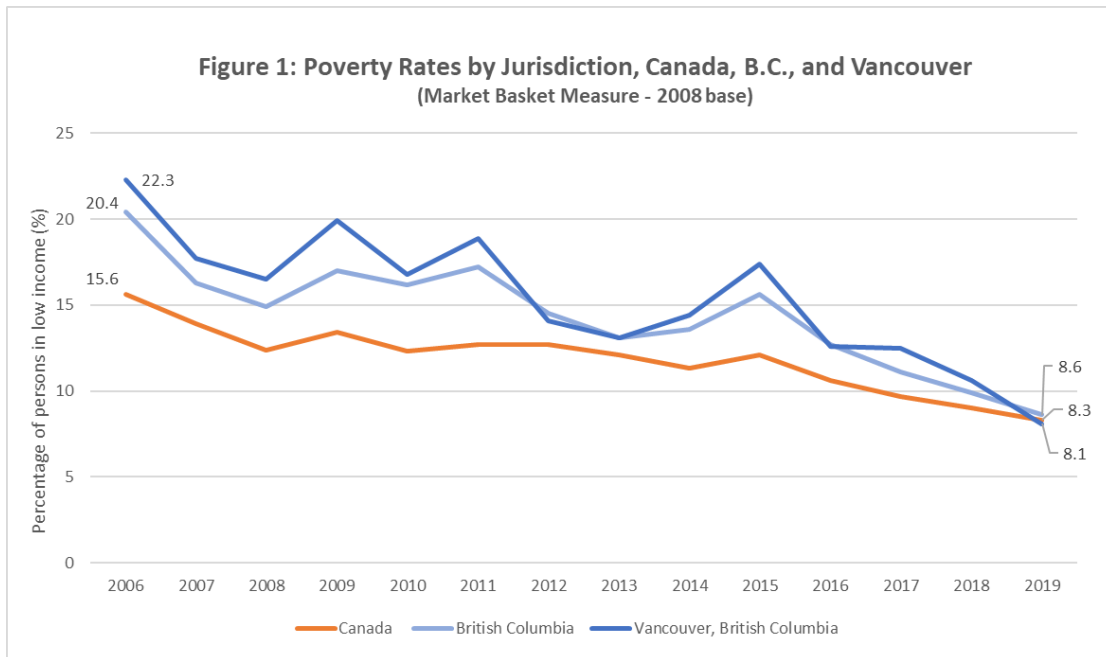
⁴ [An unexpected consequence of the pandemic: Poverty declined sharply in Canada | Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#).

investments, an incremental increase to social assistance shelter rates, and a significant boost to the Climate Action Tax Credit.

Given the temporary nature of pandemic income supports, sky-high rents in many communities around the province, and the rising costs of goods and services due to inflation (especially for groceries), poverty rates risk returning to their pre-pandemic levels or even increasing. The seven big-mover policy recommendations presented in this submission represent transformative action that would accelerate the initial progress that has been made.

1.3 The state of poverty in BC

Historically, BC's poverty rate has been higher than the national rate, and Vancouver had a higher poverty rate than the rest of the province (Figure 1). After 2006, the BC, Vancouver, and Canada poverty rates declined, and the gap between them also slowly narrowed. As discussed in the Final Report of the British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income⁵, the convergence of these poverty rates is noteworthy, especially since 2017. The public policies that most likely contributed to this reduction were, federally, the Canada Child Benefit (introduced in 2016) and the increase in the OAS/GIS supplement for low-income seniors (since 2015), along with significant and long overdue increases to the minimum wage.



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 11-10-0135-01. MBM 2008 base.

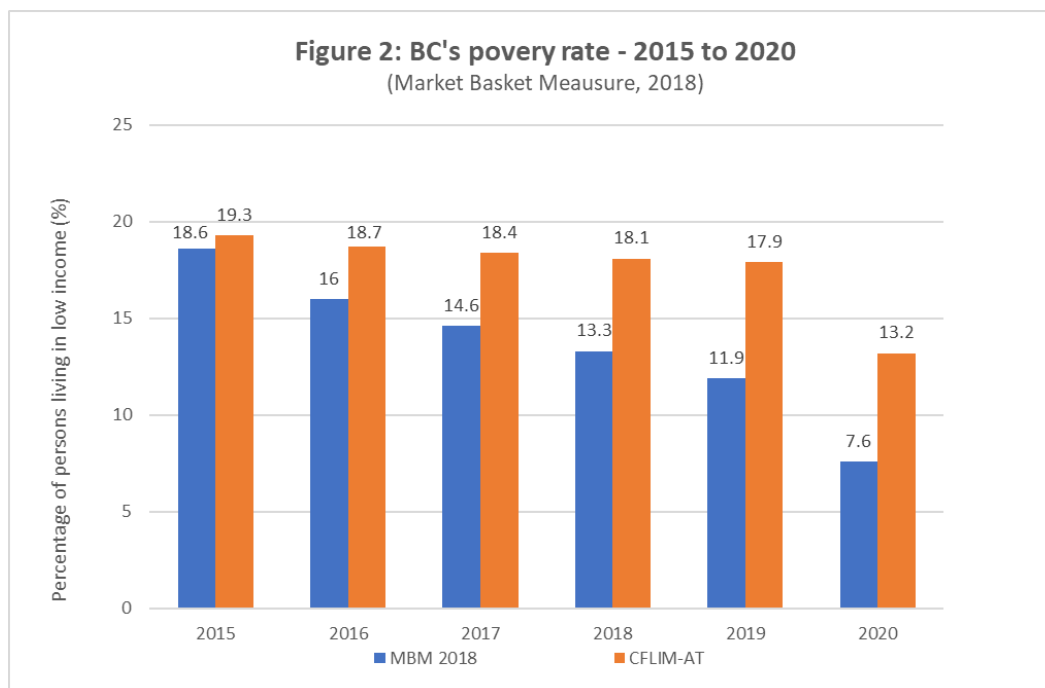
Beginning in 2020, BC's poverty rate declined substantially as federal and provincial action was taken in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the introduction of CERB and CRB and a variety of short-term provincial supports. Actions taken during the pandemic demonstrate that major

⁵[Covering All the Basics: Reforms for a more just society. Final Report of British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income.](#)

progress is quickly achieved when the will is there, a clear reminder that the persistence of poverty in BC is a policy choice, not an inevitability.

However, it is essential to consider that Statistics Canada projects that the national poverty rate will increase to 7% in 2021 (a 9.2% increase over 2020), with a more significant change projected for 2022, to 9.8% (a 41.5% increase).⁶

It is also essential to consider that while the Market Basket Measure (MBM) has been adopted as the official poverty line by the BC and federal governments, this measure has limitations. The MBM is an absolute measure of poverty that uses a basket of goods and services to determine the income a family would need to meet its most basic needs.⁷ However, it excludes many people who live in deep poverty (among other limitations).⁸ It is essential to also look at the Census Family Low-Income Measure, After Tax (CFLIM-AT), which is a relative measure of poverty calculated as 50% of the median (middle) income for a given family size.⁹ As Figure 2 shows, in 2020, 7.6% of persons living in BC were low-income using the MBM, while the CFLIM-AT estimated a poverty rate of 13.2% for that same year.



⁶ Market Basket Measure poverty thresholds and provisional poverty trends for 2021 and 2022 | Statistics Canada. Statistics Canada's projections were made using an estimate of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase of 6% in 2022. The CPI ended up being higher – 6.8% – so the increase in the poverty rate is likely underestimated.

⁷ The basket of goods and services is associated with a modest standard of consumption adjusted for family size and geographic region. For example, a family of four living in Vancouver in 2021 would have to spend approximately \$ 2,074 in clothing, \$ 4,733 in transportation, \$ 12,704 in food, \$ 20,272 on shelter, and \$ 12,101 in other expenses. In 2021, a family such as this one that had an annual, disposable income below \$51,884 would be living in poverty. The MBM thresholds are available at [Statistics Canada Table: 11-10-0066-01](#).

⁸ See Campaign 2000's 2022 Child Poverty Report Card for a review of the strengths and limitations of different poverty measures: [Pandemic Lessons: Ending Child and Family Poverty is Possible](#).

⁹ The MBM is based on data from the Canadian Income Survey (CIS) while the Low-Income Measure (After-tax) is based on tax data.

Source Statistics Canada Table 11-10-0135-01, Low-income statistics by age, sex and economic family type, and Table 11-10-0018-01, After-tax low-income status of tax filers and dependants based on Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM-AT), by family type and family type composition.

Further, the MBM is typically measured using the Canadian Income Survey. However, the latest Census shows a higher rate of poverty for 2020 than the income survey: 9.8% vs 7.6% in BC.¹⁰ Using the Census data, Nova Scotia and British Columbia had the highest poverty rates among the provinces – 9.8% compared to the national average of 8.1%. Vancouver had the highest poverty rate (11.2%) of all census metropolitan areas in Canada.¹¹

Although the number of people living with low incomes in BC has declined, some people are still being left behind, as pointed out in the final report of the BC Basic Income Panel¹²:

The overall working-age poverty rate is only slightly higher than the child poverty rate for B.C., but when broken down by family type, significant differences are apparent. Specifically, single parents and adults without children are the groups with the highest rates, several times more than couples with or without children. (p.14-15)

Since 2016, the child poverty rate has been decreasing in BC. According to the latest BC Child Poverty Report Card, which uses CFLIM, “in 2020, the child poverty rate in British Columbia was 13.3%. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of BC children (0–17 years old) living in poverty dropped by 40,060.”¹³ However, the probability of living in a poor household increases for racialized children, Indigenous, and/or lone-parent families, especially those led by women. Further, experiencing poverty as a child has lifelong impacts.¹⁴

The 2021 Census data showed that the poverty gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people varied little as the poverty rate among Indigenous people declined, mirroring the overall poverty trend in Canada from 2015 to 2020. The poverty rate – measured by the MBM - among the 63,345 Indigenous people enumerated in Vancouver was 13.9% in 2020, 2.8% higher than the non-Indigenous people rate.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that the MBM is currently unavailable for Indigenous people living on reserves, which sets aside the high cost of its intrinsic circumstances, such as remoteness or lack of accessibility. Indigenous people are more likely to experience poverty, with less access to basic services and fewer social and economic opportunities than the rest of the population.

Poverty rates alone do not provide a complete picture, however. They tell us how many people are in poverty but not about the depth of poverty – the gap between the average incomes of people living in poverty and the poverty line itself.

As Figure 3 below shows, in BC, the working-age population experiences the most significant depth of poverty (with an average income 36.6% below the MBM). For children, it was 30.9% and considerably for

¹⁰ [Disaggregated trends in poverty from the 2021 Census of Population | Statistics Canada.](#)

¹¹ [Disaggregated trends in poverty from the 2021 Census of Population | Statistics Canada.](#)

¹² [Covering All the Basics: Reforms for a More Just Society. Final Report of British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income.](#)

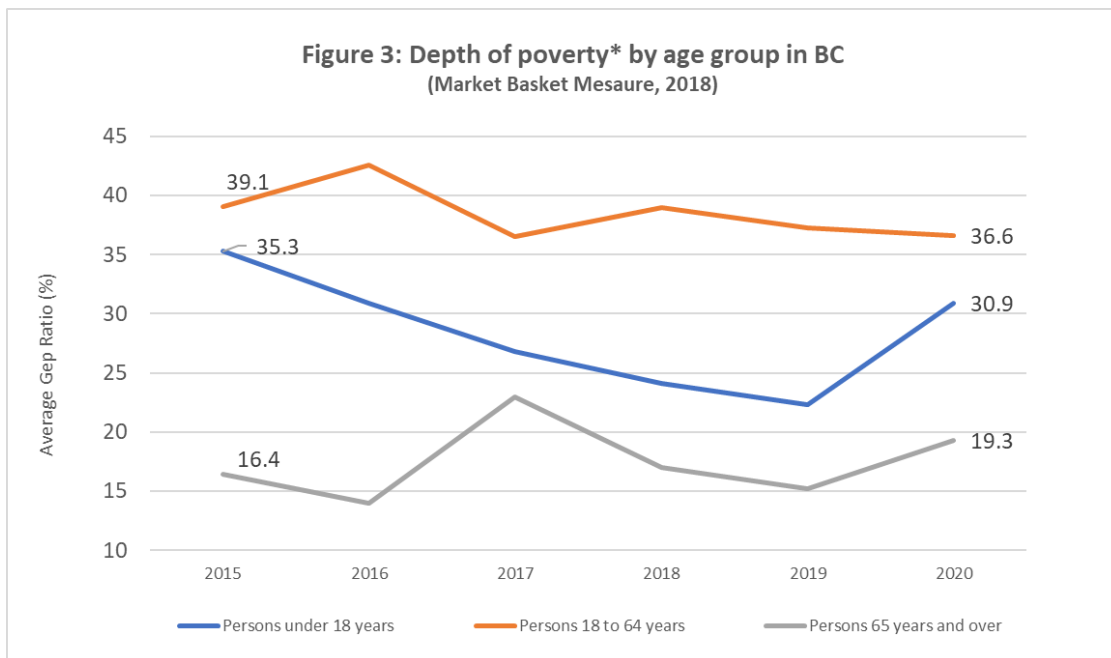
¹³ [2022 BC Child Poverty Report Card |First Call: Child and Youth Advocacy Society.](#)

¹⁴ [Understanding Systems: The 2021 report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty | Canada.ca.](#)

¹⁵ [Disaggregated trends in poverty from the 2021 Census of Population | Statistics Canada.](#)

seniors, 19.3%. BC food banks saw a 78% increase in use by BC seniors over the last five years,¹⁶ indicating that the cost of food and necessities is becoming a crisis point for many experiencing deep poverty. The government must develop a plan to address the rising cost of food beyond funding charitable food responses; there are better courses of action when food insecurity is fundamentally economic insecurity.

People living in deep poverty are most likely to receive social assistance. Figure 4 illustrates the deep poverty imposed on people who rely on social and disability assistance in BC. Even after accounting for federal and provincial tax credits/benefits (including child benefits for families with children), household incomes are far below the poverty line, particularly for single adults.

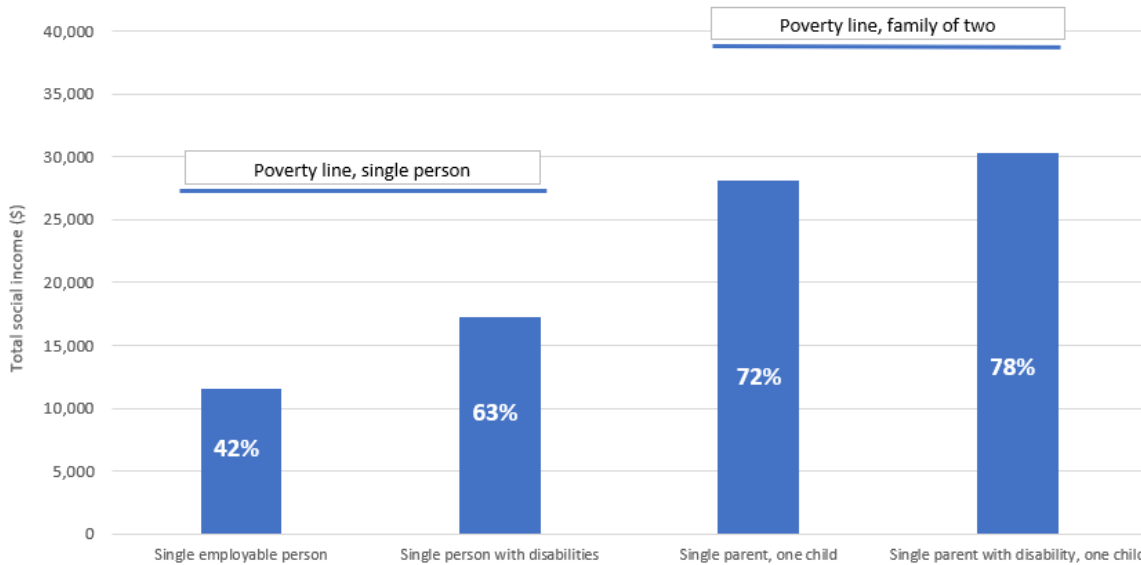


Source: Statistics Canada. Table 11-10-0135-01 Low-income statistics by age, sex and economical family type. *The depth of poverty in Figure 3 is the average gap ratio, the average difference between each poor person's household income and the MBM for their household type. The average gap ratio is a percentage of the MBM income thresholds.

¹⁶ [BC Seniors: Falling Further Behind | Office of the Seniors Advocate BC.](#)

Figure 4: Total social assistance income compared to the poverty line

(2022 social assistance rates and MBM projected poverty line for 2022)



Sources: Social assistance income calculated using 2022 rates does not include increases announced on BC Budget 2023. The 2022 poverty line is the projected one calculated by [Statistics Canada](#). Authors' calculations based on the methodology used in Maytree Welfare in Canada: British Columbia ([Welfare in Canada - British Columbia - Maytree](#)). Annual welfare income includes applicable Canada Child Benefit income, BC Early Childhood Tax benefit, the federal GST credit, the BC low-income carbon tax credit, the BC sales tax credit and annual "Christmas" and back-to-school supplements for the calendar year. [Statistics Canada projected 2022 MBM thresholds](#).

Poverty in BC tells a clear story: the more marginalized your identity, the harder life is, and the harder it becomes to access pathways out of poverty. Poverty impacts people differently, and quality of life is also essential. For people who regularly lose their heating or electricity, cannot afford a cell phone, are fleeing violence, or rely on non-profit food providers for meals, the importance of a dignified life and meeting basic needs cannot be overstated. People in poverty - for example, seniors with disabilities or queer youth exiting care - often face multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization and compounded barriers. Any poverty reduction plan must address these intersectional barriers. Poverty reduction measures need to be equity-centered and created with the meaningful engagement of and accountability to people with lived experiences from various social locations, experiences, and identities.

The PRC Community Action Network (CAN)¹⁷ comprises people with lived and living experiences of poverty. We hear extensively from CAN members: about experiences of anti-Black racism at the food bank, with rental prospects, or in schools; about fears of losing children to the child welfare system as a consequence of being poor; about avoiding critical dental care for years because of cost or skipping meals to make sure kids have school supplies. The discrimination, shame, and systemic barriers they regularly experience create additional burdens as they struggle to care for themselves and their families. These burdens include the "time poverty"¹⁸ associated with lining up for services and other forms of deprivation. Many CAN members describe being poor as a full-time job. They have been made to feel dehumanized or humiliated in accessing services, sometimes withdrawing from them entirely, even if it means fewer resources.

¹⁷ [Community Action Network \(CAN\) | BC Poverty Reduction Coalition](#).

¹⁸ [Time poverty: Obstacle to women's human rights, health and sustainable development | PMC](#).

The 2021 report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty clearly outlines that “having more marginalized identities increases the risk of living in poverty.” Further, the depth of poverty these groups experience is largely unknown, as precise disaggregated data as a result of this marginalization doesn’t exist; there are language barriers to newcomers, a lack of trust in government supports, or other barriers such as anxiety over immigration status, unreliable phone or internet service, inter-generational trauma from residential schools, or even growing up in poverty that may prevent people from sharing their experiences.

2. Seven big-mover policy priorities:

The following policies are titled big movers, given the powerful impact they would quickly have on eliminating poverty in BC, especially for those currently experiencing deep poverty and those with marginalized identities. They focus on incomes and access to services — as access to healthcare, housing, social connections, culture, legal services, and other societal and public resources pose challenges for many who experience poverty.

These big movers should be completed or be significantly underway within the next five-year period of the poverty reduction strategy.

2.1 Raise social and disability assistance rates to the poverty line

Context/rationale: The gap between social and disability assistance rates and the poverty line is wide, despite several modest incremental increases to these benefits in recent years. Many voices have long called on the province to raise social assistance rates substantially.

While some may be concerned that significantly increasing social and disability assistance rates would be a hard sell politically, opinion research shows that most British Columbians favour bringing rates up to the poverty line.¹⁹ The public conversation about income support fundamentally changed during the pandemic, with CERB having provided Canadian society with the experience, in essence, of a temporary basic income program. CERB provided temporary income support of \$2,000/month, just shy of the MBM (Vancouver) poverty line threshold for a single person.

There is no way around the reality that social and disability assistance rates are abysmally low and have the effect of legislating deep poverty. By comparison to the CERB benefit of \$2,000 per month, the current maximum social assistance rate for a single person is \$1,060 (including the recently announced increase to the shelter amount).

As the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has pointed out, “While the majority of the poor are not on social assistance, most of those in deep poverty are... deep poverty in our province is mainly a story of inadequate welfare rates.”²⁰

TogetherBC’s focus on breadth targets means it has not addressed the depth of poverty many marginalized and equity-deserving groups are experiencing and the entirely preventable human suffering that results. As noted in the National Advisory Council on Poverty’s 2021 report, Black Canadians, racialized Canadians, newcomers immigrants, refugees, Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQ individuals all

¹⁹ [British Columbians approve of the province’s COVID-19 response & want a more equitable, sustainable economy post recovery—regardless of party affiliation | Policy Note.](#)

²⁰ [Deep Poverty: BC Government Can—and Should—End It | Policy Note.](#)

face higher rates of poverty²¹ – low social assistance rates compound the marginalization of these groups and directly contribute to a variety of other challenges including homelessness, poor mental and physical health, unsafe conditions for sex work, food insecurity, and others.

We also note that many people experiencing deep poverty in BC have difficulty accessing assistance or simply are not eligible —unhoused people, sex workers, people who are “undocumented” or have precarious immigration status, and those in grey economies like vending.

Actions needed:

- Increase social assistance and disability assistance actual rates to the poverty line (Market Basket Measure) as a centrepiece of the 2024 BC Budget and index rates to changes in the poverty line.
- Combine the shelter and support allowance components of social and disability assistance payments.
- Substantially increase earnings exemptions for those receiving social and disability assistance and end the clawback of unearned income.

Some argue that raising rates will draw people out of the labour market. However, the evidence suggests any such impacts would be small.²² Alongside expanded earnings exemptions and further increases to the minimum wage, such effects would likely disappear altogether.

2.2 Transform the province’s income support system, drawing on the BC Basic Income Panel’s recommendations.

Context/rationale: Social assistance is part of a larger income support “system” in BC but is fragmented and needs transformation. In 2018, the provincial government appointed an expert panel to investigate the feasibility of a basic income as a potential tool for poverty reduction in BC. Following rigorous and extensive research, in December 2020, the panel issued a comprehensive report with detailed recommendations for creating a more cohesive income support system that includes basic services and targeted cash transfers.

Actions needed: Draw on the BC Basic Income Panel report recommendations, which provide a roadmap for a cohesive provincial income security system.

- The BC Basic Income Panel report is extensive and includes 65 recommendations, including reforming social assistance (Temporary Assistance) to reduce the “welfare wall”; providing extended health benefits for low-income people in BC; enhancing support for low-income families with children; increasing housing for people fleeing violence; mandate a ministry to support former youth in care; and others.
- In addition, we call for an end to the [spousal cap](#) restrictions on social assistance, which force disabled individuals to be financially reliant on romantic or intimate partners.
- Implement the Red Women Rising report recommendation for residential school survivors to have a guaranteed livable income and housing for the rest of their lives.²³

2.3 Address discrimination and stigma by adding social condition to the BC Human Rights Code.

²¹ [Understanding Systems: The 2021 report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty | Canada.ca.](#)

²² [Final Report of British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income.](#)

²³ [Red Women Rising: Indigenous women survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside | Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre.](#)

Context/rationale: Living in poverty is not a choice that individuals make for themselves – legislative and policy failures create and sustain poverty. People living in poverty and sheltering in public spaces, people who use drugs, people with low incomes, sex workers, and others from marginalized communities experience discrimination based on social conditions, trapping them in cycles of criminalization and further impoverishment. According to the BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHR), “while many of those discriminated against based on social condition also have other intersecting characteristics, such as race or disability, protected by the B.C. Human Rights Code, many people face social or economic disadvantage who cannot avail themselves of these protections”.²⁴ This addition would support a human rights approach to reducing the stigmatization and criminalization of poverty.

We hear from people with lived experience of poverty that employers, landlords, housing providers, and others continue to discriminate against people based on factors like their postal code, income, drug use, sex work etc. The addition of social condition to the human rights code would create better legal rights and conditions for people experiencing intersectional poverty across BC.

Actions needed:

- Work with the BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, PIVOT Legal Society, and other groups to add “Social Condition” to the B.C Human Rights Code as a prohibited ground for discrimination.
- Require public institutions and services to audit their policies and practices to match an updated provincial Human Rights Code that includes social condition, including bringing municipal by-laws and hearings processes into compliance.²⁵

2.4 Accelerate a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing

Context/rationale: The housing crisis deprives many British Columbians of the right to secure affordable housing, with people in poverty among those most severely impacted. According to Statistics Canada data, BC has the dubious honour of “leading the country as the province with the highest rate of unaffordable homes.”²⁶ The lack of a supply of new, actually affordable rental housing amid an ultra-low vacancy is increasing the pressure on renters.

The BC NDP’s 2017 election promise was to build 114,000 affordable rental, non-profit, co-op and owner-purchase housing units over ten years – a very positive commitment. However, the government is significantly behind. An update on this promise by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, using numbers from the 2022 BC Budget briefing notes for the Minister of Housing, showed that just over 12% of the 114,000 targets were completed as of March 31, 2022. Of the 13,901 completed, the majority (4,229 of the total completed) are units aimed at the most vulnerable and homeless. Another 8,418 units are supported through loan programs, with the bulk of these (6,077 units) for student housing. However, 80% of the target remains without commitment, and we are now over halfway through the 10-year timeline.²⁷

²⁴ [Adding ‘Social Condition’ as a Protected Ground to B.C.’s Human Rights Code | British Columbia’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner.](#)

²⁵ [The Case for Social Condition | Pivot Legal Society.](#)

²⁶ [B.C. is the most unaffordable province for housing in Canada, census data shows | CBC News.](#)

²⁷ [Still so far from home: An update on BC’s 114,000 homes promise | Policy Note.](#)

One strategy that could accelerate and provide a foundation for a much larger expansion is a self-financing model in which public and non-profit housing projects cover their upfront costs with ongoing rental income: “The model is based on the idea that the government can borrow at cheaper interest rates than the private sector and can amortize those costs over a longer period (50 or more years, if desired), both of which can further reduce break-even rents.”²⁸

Failing to provide adequate, affordable housing and not addressing poverty's underlying causes — including colonialism, racism, and displacement — aggravates homelessness. The 2020/21 Report on Homeless Counts in B.C. identified 8,665 individuals experiencing homelessness (assessed by 16 homeless counts conducted in March 2020 and April/May 2021). It notes, “When comparing communities that completed a count for both the 2018 report and 2020/21 report, there is an 11.5% increase in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness. Of all survey respondents, 39% identified as Indigenous. Almost two-thirds (62%) of survey respondents indicated they had been without a place of their own for one year or more, and the most common answer from respondents regarding the reason for housing loss was not enough income (30%).”²⁹

Gender-based violence is also profoundly linked to housing; staggering numbers of women return to violent partners because of a lack of affordable housing. More transition homes for women, girls, and gender non-conforming people are badly needed.³⁰

Lived experience experts also offer analysis that having to prove your income to access housing creates barriers and can force people to disclose private information that could put them at risk of criminalization. Ensuring housing is truly affordable relative to people’s real incomes is essential.

Actions needed:

- [We echo the CCPA-BC’s call for a province-wide plan to build new dedicated, non-market affordable housing that aims for a quarter million units over the next decade or 25,000 new non-market units per year.](#)³¹
- Implement vacancy control across BC. Low vacancy rates are a crucial predictor of homelessness in the US³², and we know when there is a housing shortage, people get squeezed down the housing spectrum and into homelessness.
- Increase the province-wide stock of all forms of social housing, including accessible units, and ensure the right to housing for marginalized groups, in particular, Indigenous people, women, and children experiencing or fleeing relationship violence, disabled people, youth leaving care, children, low-wage workers, single parents, trans and gender non-conforming people, and others who experience deeper poverty in BC.
- Ensure SROs have acceptable standards of housing, which must include the right to heating and cooling as mitigation tools for extreme weather and adequacy as outlined in the Rights To

²⁸ [Financing public housing: How a massive expansion of rental homes can literally pay for itself | Policy Note.](#)

²⁹ [2020/21 Report on homeless counts in B.C. | Homelessness Services Association of BC.](#)

³⁰ [BC Housing’s COVID-19 Response: - Additional Safe Spaces for Women and Children Leaving Violence | Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia.](#)

³¹ [Still so far from home: An update on BC’s 114,000 homes promise | Policy Note.](#)

³² [Homelessness Is a Housing Problem | Sightline Institute.](#)

Housing³³ human rights framework. Adequacy means addressing long-term issues such as black mold, rodents, pests, broken elevators, and other erosions to the quality of SROs, shelters, and social housing.

- Deploy no-cost income-qualified retrofit programs at scale to ensure all British Columbians can benefit from energy-efficient and climate-resilient homes.
- Enable energy security for all, addressing affordable access to essential energy services like heating, lighting, and cooking.³⁴
- Design systems to address the immediate impacts of homelessness by employing a person-centred approach that considers the intersectionality of the barriers experienced by each individual while safeguarding their inherent dignity and personal autonomy.

2.5 Prioritize targeted Indigenous Poverty Reduction Measures

Context/rationale: In BC, as elsewhere in Canada, poverty rates are much higher for Indigenous people, including Indigenous children. According to the 2022 BC Child Poverty Report, “The overall child poverty rate on 59 BC First Nations reserves in 2020 was 29.2%, more than twice as high as the overall child poverty rate, with at least 3,900 children living in poverty. And the child poverty rate on rural reserves was 33.9%, much higher than the 25.2% rate on urban reserves.”³⁵ Poverty perpetuates the 2SMMIWG (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Two-spirit Peoples, and Girls) crisis.

The BC Basic Income Panel commissioned a report, “Income Supports and Indigenous People’s in BC: An Analysis of Gaps and Barriers,” which states that “the lack of available or appropriate data, noted throughout this report, demonstrates a clear gap in how poverty and well-being are measured and reported on, for and by Indigenous people in Canada and BC.”³⁶ The report identified barriers to income supports and services that Indigenous peoples face, including while transitioning from on- to off-reserve supports. The report also outlines clear recommendations to address these disparities. These include removing obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities, addressing systemic colonial racism in governmental services, strengthening local Indigenous food systems, and affordable housing options, increasing Indigenous-specific harm reduction and treatment supports, and more.

Indigenous-specific poverty reduction measures need to be prioritized and self-determined by Indigenous nations and organizations to be consistent with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.³⁷ Given historical and ongoing colonization in Canada, and the atrocious violence, dispossession, and harm committed against Indigenous Peoples, a targeted Indigenous-led approach is required. Such an approach must address the depth of poverty that many individuals, families, and Nations continue to experience as a direct result of genocide, the dispossession of land, the Indian Act, residential schools, and child apprehension/removal.³⁸ The historical context is critical to “understanding the mechanisms by which

³³ [Right to Housing Legislation in Canada | The National Right to Housing Network](#).

³⁴ [Household energy affordability in BC: Submission to the Energy Affordability Working Group](#).

³⁵ [2022 BC child poverty report card | First Call](#).

³⁶ [Income supports and Indigenous Peoples in B.C.: An analysis of gaps and barriers](#).

³⁷ [Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples Act | Province of British Columbia](#).

³⁸ [Understanding systems: The 2021 report of the National advisory council on poverty | Canada.ca](#)

colonization, genocide, land dispossession, and forced assimilation policies translate into the conditions of poverty that the Indigenous people experience today in B.C.³⁹

Actions needed:

- We support the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres calls on BC to “commit to developing an Indigenous specific poverty reduction plan, within a decolonizing anti-racist lens, complete with specific goals, targets, timelines and accountabilities”⁴⁰.
- The Native Women's Association of Canada has put forward a suite of recommendations, including “investing in Indigenous-specific services that are culturally relevant in social service areas such as reintegration and bridging programs for incarcerated Indigenous women, addiction and detox centres, housing and shelter supports, child care, and employment centres.”⁴¹ Indigenous-specific programs, run by and for Indigenous peoples and communities, must be part of reconciliation in the context of poverty reduction in BC.
- Implement the Red Women Rising recommendation to implement human rights, Indigenous rights, and gender-based analysis in the conception and implementation of all poverty reduction strategies, policies, legislation, and decision-making.⁴²
- Implement calls to action within provincial jurisdiction from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, and implement recommendations from the Income Supports and Indigenous Peoples in BC report.

2.6 Make public transit fare-free and create a publicly-owned intercity and inter-regional bus service

Context/rationale: In 2021, the BC government made public transit free for children and youth under 12. This commendable decision should be extended to make public transit fare-free to all riders. A reliable, affordable, and dignified service intersects broad issues like climate, poverty, and disability: saving money, taking cars off of streets, speeding up climate action, and creating a barrier-free transportation option for all community members. Eliminating fares would reduce the criminalization of poverty – and money spent on policing fare evasion could be redirected to increasing service capacity for more riders and service routes.

Multiple cancellations, cutbacks, and privatizations, especially of bus services, have created a crisis in transportation in Northern BC.⁴³ The Red Women Rising Report calls for “free public bus transportation between each town and city located along the entire length of Highway 16 and all other highways, with safe homes and emergency phone booths along the length of all the highways”⁴⁴ as a key strategy to mitigate the

³⁹ [Income Supports and Indigenous Peoples in BC: An Analysis of Gaps and Barriers.](#)

⁴⁰ [Indigenous poverty reduction consultations: A summary report | The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres.](#)

⁴¹ [Poverty reduction strategy: The Native Women's Association of Canada engagement results | Native Women's Association of Canada.](#)

⁴² [Red Women Rising: Indigenous women survivors in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside | Downtown Eastside Women's Centre.](#)

⁴³ [BC needs a public intercity transportation service | Policy Note.](#)

⁴⁴ [Red Women Rising: Indigenous women survivors in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside | Downtown Eastside Women's Centre.](#)

MMIWG2S crisis that has particularly culminated on Highway 16, or “Highway of Tears.” The Native Women’s Association of Canada also indicates that “affordable transportation is essential in accessing culture,” one of the major strategies they identify as key in Indigenous-specific poverty reduction.⁴⁵

Action needed:

- Eliminate fares for all public transit riders in BC, starting with children and people in poverty.
- Roll back privatization and put the public back in public transit, including making BC ferries fare-free or sliding scale for travel.
- Invest in increased infrastructure and service, including improving service and safety by establishing 24/7 bus routes.
- Expand and improve an inter-city and inter-regional bus service.
- Add safe homes and emergency phone booths, and improve cell phone connection along all the highways connecting Northern BC to mitigate the MMIWG2S crisis.
- Improve transit infrastructure, including expanded HandyDART infrastructure and accessible transportation options, which should also be fare-free.
- Consider special accommodations for fly-in, northern, and remote communities.⁴⁶

2.7 Close the gap between living wage and minimum wage

Context/rationale: The provincial government’s decision to increase the minimum wage in 2022 in line with inflation (over the prior calendar year) was positive and should continue. However, there is no rationale for how the minimum wage is set in the first place, and the disparity between the minimum and living wages is substantial. The living wage is calculated based on a family’s basic needs for housing, child care, food, transportation and other minimum living costs in a specific community. It considers the offsetting impact of government income supports and public services like child care that concretely reduce out-of-pocket costs. If implemented, other policy recommendations in this submission would offset future increases in the living wage by reducing the cost of living (ex., fare-free transit, increasing the supply of affordable rental housing).

Actions needed:

- Close the gap between BC’s current minimum wage rate of \$15.65, the Metro Vancouver living wage rate of \$24.08, and Victoria’s Living Wage rate of \$24.29 an hour by 2026 with regular annual increases to reflect changes in the cost of living.⁴⁷
- In the meantime, commit to the BC government becoming a living wage employer to tackle low wages in the public sector and contracted partners and to set a leading example.
- Create more employment opportunities for Peer Work for people who cannot engage in traditional forms of employment. Ensure the minimum wage and other employment standards

⁴⁵[Poverty reduction strategy: The Native Women's Association of Canada engagement results | Native Women's Association of Canada.](#)

⁴⁶ [Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the National Inquiry into the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.](#)

⁴⁷ While living wage rates are currently calculated based on the cost of living in specific communities, a uniform minimum wage is required provincially. We recommend adopting the Metro Vancouver rate as the provincial minimum standard for all workers.

applies to farm workers, Peer Workers and others who may be excluded, including those in the gig economy.

4. Conclusion

Poverty rates continue to be unacceptably high in BC, especially for those pushed into deep poverty. Eradicating poverty requires ambitious, systemic, and intersectional policy solutions. This brief sets out seven high-priority areas with key recommendations from our stakeholders, policy experts, and folks with living experiences of the impacts of poverty. These recommendations would reduce human suffering and stigma and create safer, healthier communities by largely eliminating poverty within 5-7 years. They would also profoundly impact deep poverty in BC and increase the quality of life materially for many made most marginal and who need urgent help.

Implementing these seven big-mover priorities would also help alleviate BC's other pressing crises, including those related to the toxic drug supply, housing affordability, and climate change, and by increasing social inclusion and public safety. A poverty-free BC is possible, realistic, and within our collective power to achieve within this time frame with strong leadership.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit for the Poverty Reduction Strategy's first review - and we look forward to seeing what next steps are taken to achieve BC's poverty reduction and eradication goals.

Many thanks to the policy experts, lived experience experts, volunteers, board of directors, and coalition members who provided input, expertise, and guidance in this submission.

This policy brief was prepared by Rowan Burdge, Tania Oliveira and Shannon Daub. Special thanks to Tania Oliveira for her research and writing support.

The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition office is on traditional, ancestral and unceded xʷməθkʷiyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) territories home of the Hul'q'umi'num', SENĆOŦEN and Skwxwú7mesh Sníchim speaking peoples. We acknowledge colonization's historical and present-day practices and recognize that poverty is interwoven with colonization, oppression and genocide. We strive to be in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and communities in the assertion of Indigenous peoples' rights, cultural practices, land defence and food harvesting.