

Backgrounder

The effects of poverty on education outcomes

Being poor is...

“Feeling shamed when my dad can’t get a job.”

“Pretending that you forgot your lunch.”

“Being afraid to tell your Mom you need gym shoes.”

“Not buying books at the book fair.”

“Not getting to go on school trips.”

– Grade 4 and 5 students

Teachers see the effects poverty has on students everyday and we worry about how their lives will unfold. We know that a child’s performance in school is strongly related to socio-economic status and that a good education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of poverty for poor children.

- BC is home to the highest average wealth in Canada and the largest gap between the wealthiest and the poorest households. The richest 50% control 95.7% of the province’s wealth leaving precious little for the rest of the population.
- Poverty in British Columbia is structural, brought about by a low-wage market, woefully inadequate welfare provisions, the loss of low-rent housing, and discrimination. Balancing basic expenses of rent and food on limited income is increasingly difficult.
- BC has the highest rate of poverty in Canada for the fourth year in a row.
- Among low-income families with children, 66% live in unaffordable housing (costing more than 30% of their total income). Low-income families rather than individuals, are the fastest growing group of users of emergency housing (shelters and hostels).

- Since 2001, the number of children served by food banks in our province has doubled and family visits have increased by 145%.

Poor children are from poor families

- We can not discuss poor children in isolation from their families. Poor children live in poor families. Child poverty rates will never come down unless the government pays attention to the needs of poor families.
- Poor families are often poor in different ways. Lots of families are poor because they work in low-paying jobs. Some families become poor because of a marriage breakdown; some parents may have an alcohol or drug problem; some may have a low level of education; others may be parenting on their own. Being poor on its own is not a formula for failure, but many of our students are not only poor but have one of these additional life circumstances that put them at risk for failure at school.

Some families are hit harder than others

- Families on welfare, First Nations families, and lone-parent families are all particularly stressed by inadequate income and resources.

- Women on welfare are more likely to be single, with no grandparents in the household, and to be in low-paid, inflexible jobs with no sick-leave provisions.
- Female, lone-parent families are, on average, \$9,400 below the poverty line.
- 37% of all children in BC rely on welfare incomes—the result of family job loss, the death of a parent, separation or divorce, or flight from an abusive relationship.

First Nations families

- 1 in 4 First Nations children live in poverty; 1 in 8 is disabled (double the rate for all children in Canada).
- 46% of First Nations children under 15 live with a lone-parent.
- 40% of off-reserve children live in poverty.

Immigrant and racialized families

- According to the 2001 Census, 49% of recent immigrants and 34% of racialized families live in poverty. Why? Low-paying jobs, a job market that does not recognize work experience or other-country credentials, and racial discrimination in employment.

The working poor

- Even full employment is not an assured pathway out of poverty. About 34% of families living below the poverty line are working full time for the entire year. This is an increase over 1993 where it stood at 27%.
- Of course, those who cannot find full-time work are even worse off.
- BC had the highest rate of working poor in the country at 10.2%—double the Canadian average.

- The working poor are forced to spend most of their income on housing. The total number of working poor using food banks jumped to 12% of the total clients served by food banks last year, up from 9%.
- One quarter of Canadians are in jobs that pay under \$10/hour. Forty percent have precarious part-time, contract, temporary jobs, or are self-employed.

References

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