

BCAAFC | BC Association
of Aboriginal Friendship Centres

Indigenous Poverty Reduction Consultations: A Summary Report

Prepared By

***The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres
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Background

The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition has called for a comprehensive plan to address poverty in British Columbia with legislated targets and timelines and since 2008 more than 400 organizations have signed on to the call. Calls have also been issued by the Union of BC Municipalities and by the BC Legislature's own finance committee.

While BC is one of the wealthiest provinces in Canada, it also has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. The Government recognizes that previous efforts to reduce poverty were narrow in scope and failed to address the issue. They are now prepared to take a more multi-pronged, evidence-based approach.

Last fall, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction initiated BC's long awaited plan to examine the issue of poverty and developing a strategy to address it. A 28-member advisory committee has been tasked with gathering input from across the Province and provided a budget of \$1.2 million to support a province-wide engagement process.

Twenty-one (21) of the twenty-five (25) Friendship Centres hosted 'Indigenous Poverty Reduction Consultations' through February and March of 2018, with some Centres hosting two sessions. A total of 1509 respondents participated in the consultations through in person interviews, surveys and facilitated sessions. Indigenous perspectives will be critical to the success of the Province's poverty reduction agenda given the disproportionately high number of Indigenous families living in poverty in the province. More than a quarter million Indigenous people (First Nations, Inuit, and Metis) call BC their home; one in six Indigenous people in Canada live in the region.¹

This paper provides a high level summary of the feedback received from Indigenous participants at these sessions and offers recommendations for consideration by Ministry officials as they move forward on the development of BC's first-ever Poverty Reduction Plan. Twenty Friendship Centres contributed to the consultations engaging more than 1300 clients in conversations about issues that prevent poverty reduction.

Poverty, in Context

Defining and measuring poverty is complex, and for that and other reasons, Canada has yet to establish an official definition for it. Poverty can be measured using both absolute and relative terms, but in developed countries like Canada, it is relative.

¹ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-656-x/89-656-x2016011-eng.htm>

Poverty is generally defined as the lack of sufficient income to provide for the basic necessities of life, consistent with the norms of the society in which one lives.² Therefore, while many poor people in Canada have full time jobs (often called the “working poor”) and can make more in one week than people in developing countries make in a year, they can still be living in poverty. Relative poverty is poverty just the same, and it can have devastating long-term impacts on community, family, and individual health and wellbeing.³

The Conference Board of Canada uses low-income measures, which are *relative* measures of income, to assess how people fare compared with the general population. The poverty line is calculated as 50% of the national median income. The poverty rate is calculated as the share of the population with disposable incomes (after taxes and government transfers) below this poverty line.⁴

The Conference Board conducted an analysis of how Canada performs and released a *Society Report Card* last year that measured social performance or quality of life in Canada relative to that within peer countries.⁵ Canada received an overall “B” grade, ranking us 10th among 16 peer countries. Canada ranked high on life satisfaction but poorly relative to top-ranked peers on poverty, income inequality, gender wage gap, and voter turnout.⁶

The Society Report Card also gave British Columbia a “B” grade overall placing the province 12th among 26 comparator jurisdictions. On income inequality and poverty however, BC scored “C” grades. The province’s lowest grade, a “D,” was recorded for its gender wage gap.⁷

Had their report card been based solely on Indigenous peoples’ realities, it is safe to assume that both BC and Canada would receive failing grades overall. This assumption is based on the poor overall health and socioeconomic status of Indigenous peoples nationally, but also, on other report cards, like the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI).

The HDI is a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and income per capita indicators. A country scores higher HDI when life expectancy at birth is longer, the education period is longer, and the income per capita is higher.⁸ When the HDI was applied to Indigenous peoples only, Canada placed 63rd out of 185 countries, a significant drop from its eighth place ranking, where it had placed as a whole (2016).

² <https://academic.oup.com/heapro/article/14/4/355/708255>

³ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/news-and-education-magazines/poor-developed-countries>

⁴ <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/provincial/society/poverty.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/default.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/provincial/society.aspx>

⁷ http://www.conferenceboard.ca/press/newsrelease/17-04-05/British_Columbia_Earns_a_“B”_On_Conference_Board_Of_Canada_s_Society_Report_Card.aspx#

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Development_Index

The Friendship Centre's Role in Addressing Poverty

Friendship Centres have been economic, social and cultural hubs in cities and towns across Canada for more than 60 years. They are safe, open places where Indigenous people and others gather to support and learn from each other, and connect or reconnect with their cultures, kin, and languages. Centres offer a broad continuum of holistic, client-centered, culturally based and linked supports that assist urban Indigenous peoples and their families through life's many transitions. The primary purpose of the Friendship Centre Movement is to assist and support people, and youth in particular, in their efforts to access the services they need to facilitate their equitable engagement in the Canadian economy. This work fundamentally includes poverty prevention and reduction.

The Friendship Centres' unique and extensive service delivery network facilitates horizontal cross collaboration among community-based organizations and both the private and public sectors. This approach allows them to align and channel multiple facets of local poverty reduction endeavours into effective programming to meet the needs of urban Indigenous peoples.

One key strength of the Friendship Centre network's poverty reduction approach is that they are brokers in their communities, building partnerships between like-minded organizations, leveraging community presence and support, strengthening connections and breaking down barriers between the general public and the urban Indigenous community.

The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFC) acts as a central coordinating body that communicates and negotiates with government and other stakeholders on behalf of its 25 member Centres across the province. With over 1000 employees, the BC Association is one of the largest Indigenous community-based service providers in BC, and an integral part of the longest standing Indigenous service-delivery network in the country.

The Association plays a key role in ensuring community members' voices are heard and their perspectives integrated into plans intended to resolve long-standing issues like poverty. Great care was taken to see that those who took part in consultations felt safe, included, and respected. Discussions were opened in a good way, often with prayer and song, with local Elders and knowledge keepers offering supportive words. Every meeting included good wholesome food and snacks.

Indigenous people who access services through Friendship Centres manage poverty largely as an outcome of colonization and the many forms of Indigenous specific racism; systemic, structural, institutional, and individual. These racism encounters have impacted Indigenous lives every day, over generations, resulting in intergenerational traumas, economic and social exclusion, and poverty. Centres have recognized the complex nature of poverty and the

linkages to colonization and exclusion, and are uniquely positioned to ensure Indigenous peoples are not left behind as the province moves forward on poverty reduction. In honour of those who so generously contributed to these proceedings, one Friendship Centre offered the following words to set the stage for what some considered to be a difficult topic of discussion:

We acknowledge the historical trauma and losses of First Nations people, and the loss of traditional rights, cultural practices, food harvesting, and land use has brought our people to points of despair, homelessness, extreme poverty, and continue to live in inadequate conditions. It is the hope and the will of the people that stood out in these events; their willingness to step forward, to share, to create hope, speaks to their resilience.

Consultation Outcomes: an Overview

Safe affordable housing was identified as the top priority, based on analysis of the consultation feedback at Friendship Centre-hosted sessions. Most input came from participants who were directly impacted by the issue of poverty, i.e., were living it. This is important context in the interpretation of the outcomes. While many expressed gratitude for the opportunity to contribute, it was clear that most were and are in a state of crisis.

Participants were asked to identify and prioritize barriers to addressing poverty. The number one barrier overall was affordable, safe housing. There is simply not enough affordable housing to meet the need. In addition, where affordable housing exists, it tends to be located in unsafe neighbourhoods, and the units themselves are inadequate or in a state of disrepair, and in some cases, health hazards. Participants provided multiple examples of racist experiences with housing. Some were not provided with the basic privacy and dignity by landlords with surprise inspections, no locks on doors, limits on visitors, no overnight visitors, etc. These comments were not just coming from the downtown eastside of Vancouver, these comments also came from Port Alberni, where participants specifically asked us to do something about the slum lords providing very poor housing in the area of town known as the 'Ghetto'.

In the North West region of the province the local friendship centres report the homeless population increased with the influx of the oil and gas crews. Pipeline and gas terminal crews from out of the area have been buying houses and taking the renting housing stock that had previously been available to people in poverty. The rental rates have become inflated with few rental houses available. For many more Indigenous people who access and rely on the lower end of the rental housing market, there is nowhere to live.

Many participants reported living in unsafe conditions and environments and called for concerted efforts by their municipalities to conduct housing inspections. Indoor air quality is impacted by over crowding (an issue raised at more than one session). Black mold can easily

take hold when housing units are overcrowded and not properly ventilated. People also complained about bed bug infestations in their rental units and were concerned about the potential health hazards. Children and seniors are particularly vulnerable in these types of situations.

Participants called for more rent controls and subsidies, and for cities to build more affordable housing units. They also said that affordable housing developments should be integrated into the community, not segregated into their own areas creating more “hoods”.

In the context of rent control, participants talked about possible implications of calling for property owners and landlords to do their part. They expressed concern that there might be less affordable housing overall if landlords were forced to accommodate their needs, and feared that it would result in more homelessness. They pointed to provincial incentives as one way to ensure landlords “don't walk away”. Some participants cited their fear of landlords who could threaten to put them out on the street. They felt there was no effective recourse to the control that ‘slumlords’ had over their lives.

Participants referred directly to provincial and other policies they perceived as being either unfairly applied or inadequate and insufficient. Further, while some called for more financial literacy and essential skills programming to assist in managing their households, they were painfully aware that their circumstances would not change unless they made or received more money per month.

Participants also pointed to a lack of shelter beds available in their communities. They talked about their concern for seniors and disabled people on fixed incomes who are at greater risk of losing their homes when their rent is increased. Urban groups in particular talked about “renovictions” as an ongoing concern. It is a reason landlords are increasingly using to evict tenants so that they can raise the rent exponentially.

There was a general sentiment that the cycle of poverty is perpetuated by social assistance policies, and that in order to address poverty social assistance policies would need to change. Participants consistently called for increases in social assistance to keep pace with the cost of living, but in a manner that protects them from the landlords taking any increases in social assistance rates.

Several people raised the issue of the rising cost of living as the number one barrier to addressing poverty. They reported having to choose between paying the bills or making rent and putting food on the table. Some reported having to skip meals to pay the bills. Others reported an increased dependence on food banks in order to make ends meet. Participants said that food security is a key concern and increasingly, a barrier to addressing poverty.

Urban participants accessing charitable prepared foods such as soup kitchens associated poverty with poor health, particularly with access to little more than overly salty high carbohydrate foods and deli meats, with little access to fresh fruit or vegetables.

There were numerous suggestions put forward related to capping or subsidizing utilities like hydro and gas as one way to alleviate hardship people are experiencing. In the north the hydro rates have increased substantially and people speculated the replacement of hydro meters were the reason. Some called for more affordable childcare (universal childcare) and more supports for transportation (i.e., free bus passes). Childcare and transportation issues affect peoples' ability to access employment opportunities in an equitable manner. Some participants talked about hitchhiking along the Highway of Tears to get groceries for the family even though it was well known to be unsafe for Indigenous women.

Some of the more innovative suggestions were put forward to address food security issues including on-line food banks, more community gardens, more "specials" offered by local grocery stores during welfare week, not the week before, and support for more food hamper and school lunch programs. Food insecurity is a public health concern, and is linked to higher rates of obesity in low-income homes.⁹ Obesity is a risk factor for a variety of serious health problems such as type 2-diabetes and cardiovascular disease, conditions disproportionately carried by the Indigenous population.¹⁰ Parents were frustrated they couldn't afford healthy breakfast and lunches for their children. They usually received cheap high carbohydrate meals such as cereals and noodles to satiate their hunger. In the north the high cost of transporting fresh food made milk, vegetables and fruit unaffordable.

Participants seemed to be aware of how funding for supports and services are allocated and felt that their municipalities were not contributing enough. Some of the solutions proposed by participants can be described as short term fixes (i.e., more subsidies, more food banks, more rent caps, more flexible rent restrictions and more second chances with damage deposits, to name a few), but these calls illustrate that participants are most concerned about meeting their immediate and basic needs. It is difficult to talk about addressing this issue in broad, comprehensive terms when you are worried about the essentials.

Others, who were less aware of the services available, felt that there should be a provincial navigation system or resource guide developed so that people could better access the services they need. They also felt that there is a lack of coordination of resources for available services, and suggested "social service centres" in communities as a rational solution.

Some solutions brought forward built upon what is already working in communities.

Participants felt that in order for Friendship Centre programs and services to be more effective,

⁹ <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.ca/&httpsredir=1&article=6275&context=etd>

¹⁰ <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2008001/article/10487/4060770-eng.htm>

they simply needed to be expanded or enhanced. Not all Friendship Centres offer the same services; however, if support was provided to build upon established best (wise) practices, and what is working in community, there might be less people in crisis. Friendship Centres have been in the business of poverty reduction for decades; with more funding directed towards the work Centres do, participants felt that the issue of poverty would be alleviated.

Some participants told us they moved off reserve and into increased poverty in rural and urban communities due to lack of housing in their home reserve community. They stated they moved, for education purposes. Some women stated they left their reserve community due to domestic violence and sexual abuse, and they want to try to improve their physical safety.

Participants expressed frustration with being racialized and judged for their socio-economic status. They said landlords, employers, and others were quick to dismiss them based on their appearance. Sadly, some participants seemed to be humbly asking for help to manage their oppression. The fact that being poor is their reality and if there was less judgement and more support and understanding, their circumstances could be manageable.

Participants expressed frustration with the on/off reserve differentiations in social assistance rates and the accessibility of services. Participants expressed frustration with services that were set up without being able to serve them in the town where they were living. For example, in a small northern BC community, participants told us their First Nations based services agency was no longer available to them in their community. To use the service they had to find a way to get to the service agency which had moved to a community over one hour's drive along the highway with no public transportation system between the two communities.

Many people talked about the loss of access to their First Nation's supports services. One woman with a child with highly specialized needs was refused service by her First Nation because she was living in another First Nations community. The community in which she lives refused her service because she is not a member of that First Nation. She is unable to find housing in the nearby towns that have hospitals and extensive services. The family has gone without hydro in order to provide food for her children. She hitchhikes to the local town to get groceries and is often reprimanded by the police for doing so when there is a bus available. However the circuitous route of the bus means she spends all day making what would normally be a two hour trip to get groceries. The child wishes for a warm and safe home for the family.

Many people reported feeling hopeless, overwhelmed and even depressed because of their situations. The linkages between poverty and mental health and addictions in adults are well documented;¹¹ some session participants argued that poverty and addictions exist in tandem.

¹¹ <http://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/poverty-and-mental-illness/>

Due to the complex nature of this relationship, it was agreed that poverty cannot adequately be addressed without attending mental health and addictions issues.

Poverty passed from one generation to the next will also require a complex, multi-pronged response, particularly due to its impacts on children. According to the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth, there is a strong association between poverty and child and youth mental health issues. The odds of a child or youth from a family living in poverty having a mental health problem are three times that of a child from a family that is not living in poverty. This relationship is stable and consistent across countries, measures of poverty, methods of determining diagnosis and different times.¹² The research also shows that poor children tend to experience higher levels of antisocial behaviour.¹³

BC may be faced with more serious poverty related problems in the near future given that one in five poor people in the province are under the age of 18; the poverty rate for children in single mother-led households in BC is a shocking 49 per cent.¹⁴ These demographics and associated trends may see the cycle of poverty and addictions continuing unabated, well into the future, if sufficient focus and resources are not strategically targeted.

Some of the discussions that occurred were more emotional than others were and in one session, people reportedly expressed anger and resentment at their situations. Again, solutions were not as readily available as they might have been given how overwhelming their realities are. People simply want relief.

BCAAFC notes the many pathways out of poverty are filled with trip lines, snags, and traps that discourage achievement of success for Indigenous people. Mainstream education and training system for example is often a poor cultural fit for Indigenous people. The costs to get into school are too high, loans are often inaccessible, and the Indigenous student often goes without the latest technology required for classroom success. While in school the omission of culture and lack of inclusion of Indigenous people and world view is offensive and classroom comments that pathologize and problemize Indigenous people make it difficult to complete a training or education session. Students who succeed make a choice every day to allow themselves to endure further colonization to achieve a degree.

Barriers to Poverty Reduction

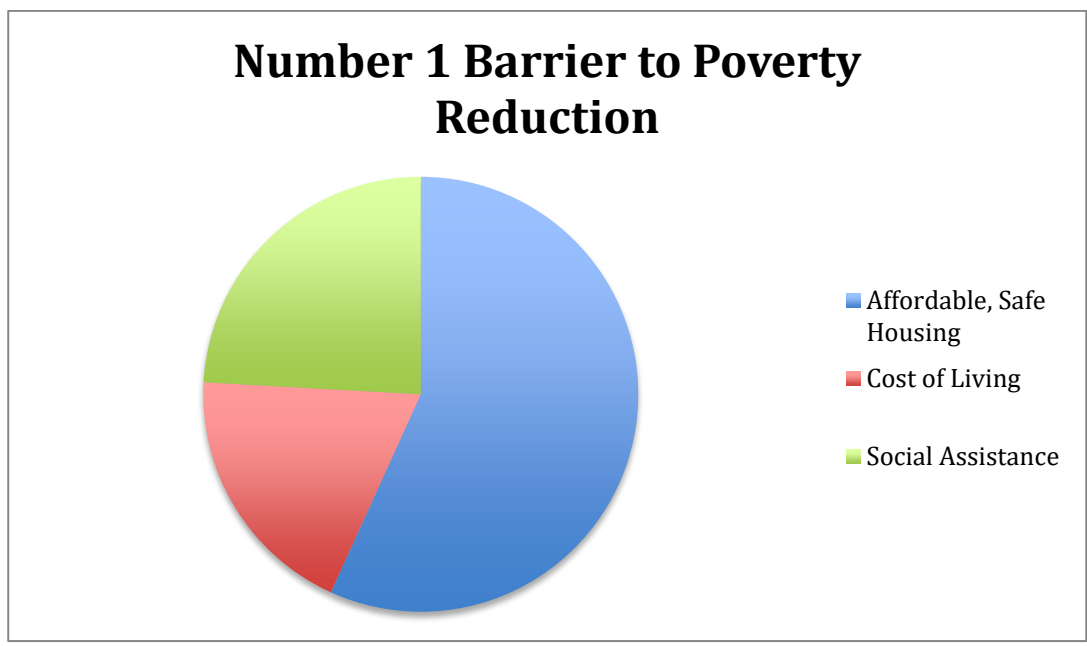
The following pie charts provide an overall picture of outcomes recorded at all of the sessions that were hosted by Friendship Centres in BC. When asked what the number one barrier to

¹² https://www.excellenceforchildandadulthood.ca/sites/default/files/resource/policy_poverty.pdf

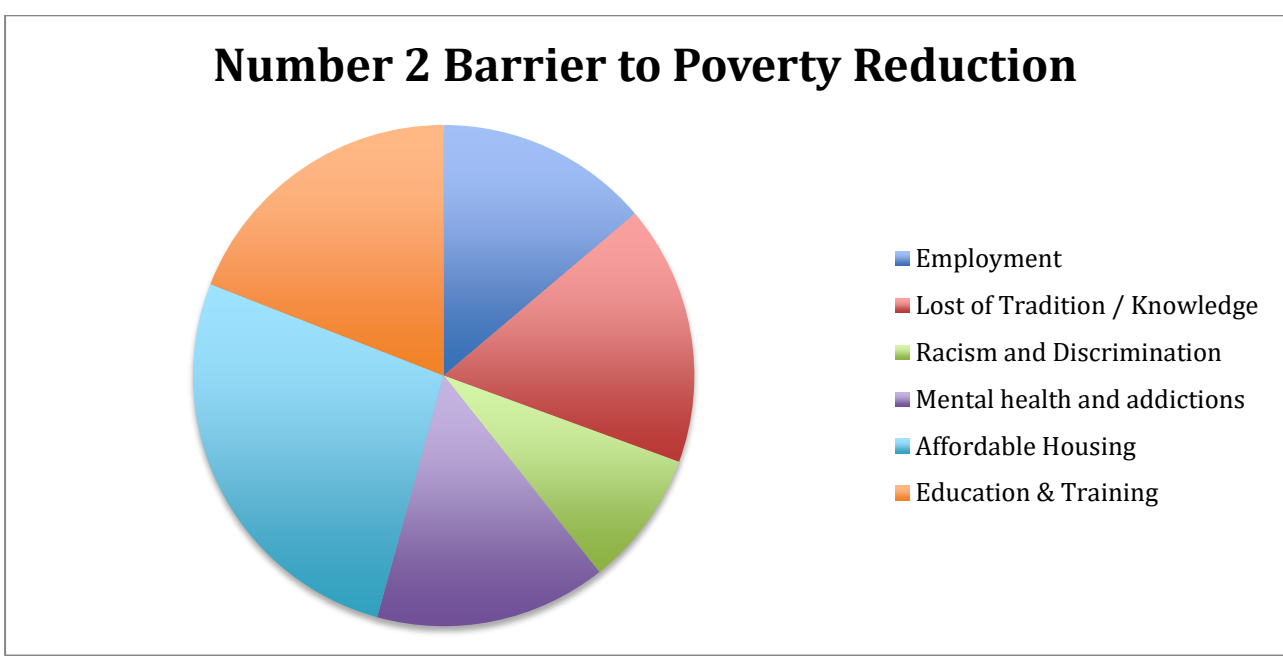
¹³ Long-Term Poverty Affects Mental Health of Children, *Science Daily*, February 9, 2006

¹⁴ https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2017/01/ccpa-bc_long-overdue-poverty-plan_web.pdf

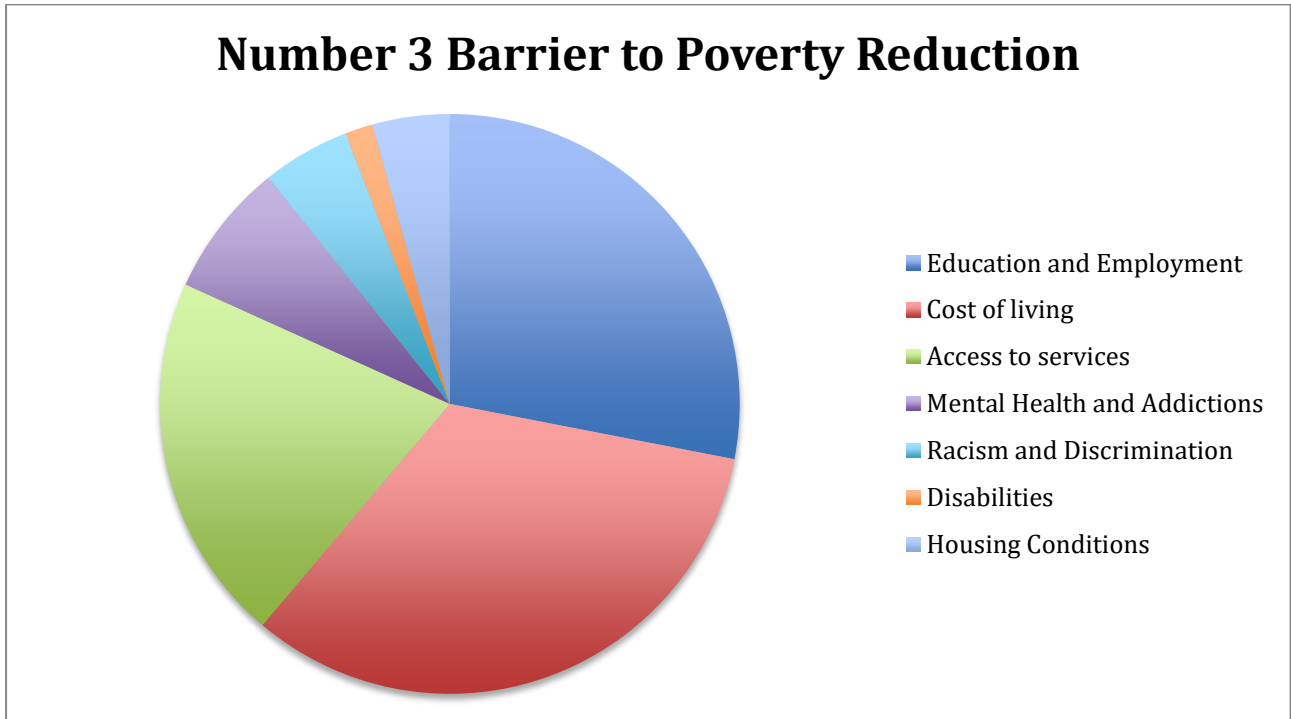
poverty reduction was, three issues emerged. Affordable, safe housing was by far the issue identified at all sessions, as creating the biggest barriers to poverty reduction:



When asked what the second biggest barrier was, six issues emerged. Employment issues, affordable housing, and education and training were key outcomes:

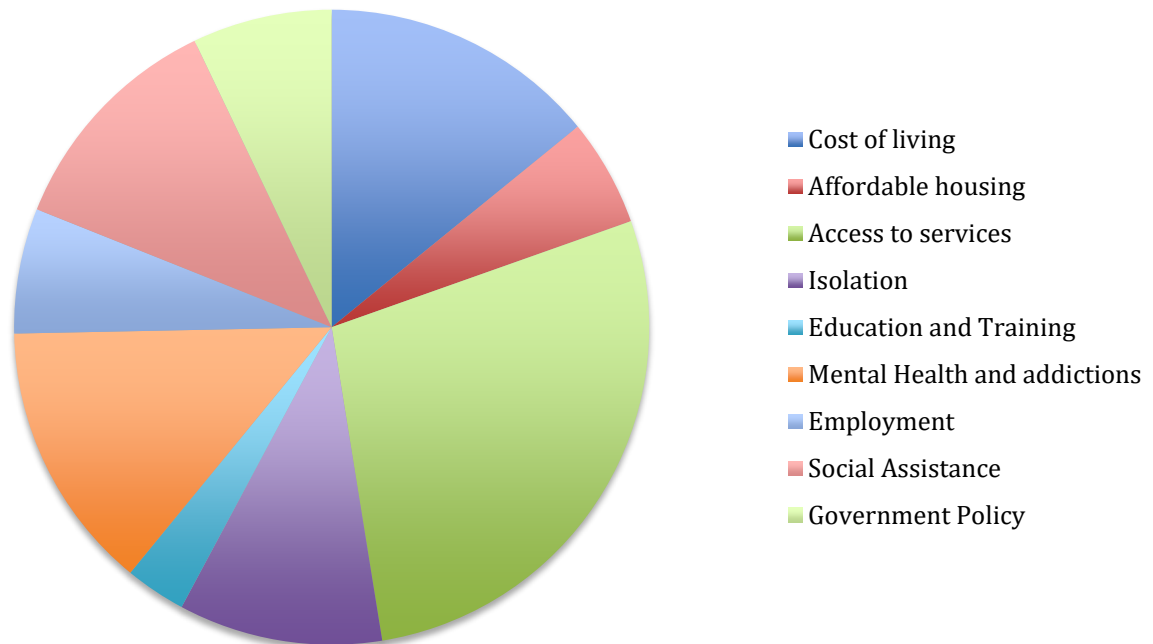


The third biggest barrier question brought forth the issue of education and employment, followed closely by cost of living issues, and access to services:



The fourth biggest barrier question highlights issues related to access to services:

Number 4 Barrier to Poverty Reduction



Concluding Remarks

Addressing poverty may be one of the most complicated and multifaceted issues of our time, and how we go about doing so will be a direct reflection on us as a society. Poverty affects crime rates, health and mental wellness, substance abuse rates, and poor educational outcomes, which, in turn, affect the economy. It is in everyone's best interests to eradicate it.

Poverty has changed the nature of the urban landscape; it has also changed the country's basic societal makeup. It is responsible for the widening socioeconomic gap between rich and poor, and carries a stigma that isolates us from one another. Those struggling with poverty are often forced to the fringes of society and experience discrimination and social exclusion daily.

Reducing poverty will require more than incremental increases in social assistance, subsidies, and minimum wage, or the imposition of rent controls. It will require significant policy change

in the education, employment, justice, and the health and child welfare systems; it will require attitude and behaviour shifts within the bureaucracy and among decision-makers, employers, teachers, and property-owners; and, it will require a collaborative, collective commitment by all community members in all sectors to examine and understand the underlying root causes of poverty. Of course, it will require consistent and sustained political will.

The Friendship Centre consultations consistently revealed that existing programs and services are not meeting the need as it relates to making meaningful progress to reducing poverty. However, the outcomes also showed that it is challenging, and perhaps unfair, for people living in crisis to identify solutions that extend beyond meeting their immediate needs. Participants noted that racism and discrimination were barriers to addressing poverty and called for cultural competency training. While it has been well documented that Indigenous peoples' poor health and socio economic status is a result of colonization and systemic racism, it is understandable that participants spoke little about these broader issues or how to address them.

There was however, a lot of discussion around the "cycle of poverty" and how it is perpetuated. More specifically, how poverty leads to increased rates of addictions and mental health issues and similarly how ongoing addictions and mental health issues can in turn, lead to increased poverty rates. A deeper analysis of the cyclical characteristics of poverty and addictions sees a call to address the issues simultaneously.

As part of the whole-person wellness model for service delivery, many Friendship Centres offer either formal mental health / addictions counselling or work closely with partner organizations to link individuals to appropriate alternate services. With increased support to do this important work, Friendship Centres could play a valuable role in breaking the cycle.

Recommendations

1. Commit to developing an Indigenous specific poverty reduction plan, within a decolonizing anti-racist lens, complete with specific goals, targets, timelines and accountabilities.
2. Identify and systematically remove the structural, racialized barriers of social and economic exclusion of Indigenous people. Set out specific targets, timelines and accountabilities.
3. Increase housing stock for Indigenous people in both urban and rural communities, including safe secure housing for women and women as single parent families.
4. Adopt rent controls and social housing health inspection processes.
5. Place the community at the centre of the poverty reduction plan and build the suite of wraparound services around the clients' needs, where they live.
6. Enable Indigenous food security by enabling Indigenous access to traditional land, and water based cultural food resources.

7. Establish standard breakfast and lunch programs in schools.
8. In communities with no public transit and where people need to drive long distances for services, establish community based passenger van and car share programs
9. Increase access to jobs, trades, skills training and development for Indigenous people.
10. Develop equitable and inclusive hiring policy and standards for BC that rectifies indigenous exclusion from the economy.
11. Implement and implement an urban Indigenous economic development strategy to increase Indigenous inclusion and long term attachment to the Canadian economy.
12. Increase access to culturally relevant human rights services to address racism and other systemic factors leading to the cycle of Indigenous specific poverty.
13. Adopt cultural competency training requirements and establish cultural safety, decolonizing and anti racist policy standards for provincial officials, local decision makers including property owners (landlords), private sector employers, social workers, and others in order to increase awareness of the historical and current impacts of colonization.
14. Increase culturally appropriate community based and accessible services for Indigenous people including decolonizing employment, education and life skills training and supports, mental health and substance use, and child and family supports.
15. Conduct an analysis and identify best practices in poverty prevention and reduction programs for the purpose of enhancing and expanding them to be delivered in other parts of the province. Friendship Centres are the organization of choice for Indigenous people seeking supports and are uniquely positioned to play a key role in addressing the issue with more support. Greater consistency in the types of programming/services offered by Friendship Centres will ensure that clients can access the same services regardless of where they live.
16. Immediately begin the process of collecting baseline data on the outcomes of poverty (such as homelessness) in order to include concrete realistic goals and milestones in the poverty reduction plan.
17. Recognize the cyclical relationship between poverty and addictions and take measures to ensure that they are addressed simultaneously.
18. Evaluate provincial policies and practices related to social assistance and child welfare for the purpose of improving them to meet community needs.
19. Expand and improve emergency/crisis services across the province.