



## **TIME TO MEET OUR RESPONSIBILITIES TO BC'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

Submission to Select Standing Committee  
on Finance and Government Services

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

#810 – 815 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 1B4

Phone: 604-709-6962/1-800-307-1212

[info@firstcallbc.org](mailto:info@firstcallbc.org)

[www.firstcallbc.org](http://www.firstcallbc.org)

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By First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

## WHAT IS FIRST CALL?

First Call advocates that children and youth in British Columbia get “first call” on government and societal resources.

The 98 member organizations that form the provincial coalition that is First Call believes that we all share responsibility for our children. First Call is non-partisan and cross-sectoral, and its members are united in striving for a province in which all children have opportunities to thrive and become fully contributing citizens in our communities as they grow up.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

Children and youth are wholly dependent on their families and communities. They have little voice in government policy development, and they can't vote.

We know that many families are struggling to get by, many are raising their children in deep poverty, and we know that not all families have the skills and resources to effectively advocate for their children.

We know that many children in British Columbia are removed from the care of families who cannot keep them healthy and safe. At any time, over 7,000 children and youth are living in government care, in foster homes or group homes. Indigenous children are over-represented in this population.

We know that these children will need special help to overcome the trauma of their life experiences, and that they have not had the benefit of stability to support their development.

We know that many extended families are willing to help, but they need adequate financial and service supports in order to do so. There are over 11,000 children in BC being raised by their grandparents, doing their best to keep things on track when the children's parents cannot properly care for them, or are incarcerated.

We know that many children live in circumstances that will not be improved by any trickle down effects of economic growth in their communities.

We also have critical knowledge about how children's brains develop, and how crucial their early years' experiences are to their later chances of becoming successful contributing members of our communities.

There is ample evidence that socioeconomic position is the most important determinant of health. Children who are raised in poverty are less healthy and at greater risk of developing chronic diseases during their life course. More recent evidence shows that this impact lasts a lifetime, even when that child grows up and escapes the cycle of poverty.

This underlines the critical importance of investment in public education. In our society, public education has a powerful role to play in reducing inequities and improving opportunity for children who live in impoverished circumstances or are otherwise vulnerable.

## WHAT ARE OUR RESPONSIBILITIES TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

Aside from moral and ethical imperatives that most British Columbians share, we have made some more formal principled commitments our children.

For example, Canada is a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. That means that we agreed, in 1990, to a broad framework of children's rights to special protections, education, health, child care and family supports, and to have their best interests taken into account in all matters affecting them.

Since the 2015 Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and its 94 Calls to Action, there is a special context to public policy development and resource allocation in Canada. Governments across our country have indicated that they will be taking implementation of these recommendations seriously. Many of these recommendations have direct impacts on Indigenous children, while others will have a major impact on their circumstances over time. Providing the needed resources to properly support Indigenous children and families has important implications for the 2017 provincial budget.

## WHAT IS THE CURRENT SITUATION?

First Call publishes an annual *BC Child Poverty Report Card*. In 2015, BC had a child poverty rate of 20.4%. More than half (50.3%) of all BC children in lone-parent families are poor.<sup>1</sup>

For Indigenous children in BC, the alarming statistics show over 50% of Indigenous children living on reserve, and more than 30% living off reserve, are living in poverty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2015 Child Poverty BC Report Card, First Call, [www.still1in5.ca](http://www.still1in5.ca)

<sup>2</sup> Shameful Neglect, Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada (2016) Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/05/Indigenous\\_Child%20Poverty.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/05/Indigenous_Child%20Poverty.pdf)[https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/05/Indigenous\\_Child%20Poverty.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/05/Indigenous_Child%20Poverty.pdf)

Indigenous children and youth are also twelve times more likely to be in government care than non-indigenous children and youth. Despite comprising a small percentage of BC's child and youth population, they make up over half of the children and youth in care.<sup>3</sup>

Among youth in the care of government, over 50% are on income assistance within six months of aging out of the system. The participation rate in post-secondary education and training is increasing but still very low, limiting the likelihood these youth having a secure future as contributing members of their communities.

When it comes to child care spaces, affordability and accessibility are major issues. Parents are paying huge monthly fees or deciding they cannot afford to work because of the cost of child care. In BC there is a regulated space for only 18% of children 0-12 years.<sup>4</sup> A 2012 study of the First Nations ECE sector in British Columbia found that 23% of First Nations communities in BC had no early childhood education and care services.<sup>5</sup>

Children with special needs face long waits, especially for assessments and speech and language services. For young children, long waiting times represent irreplaceable developmental opportunities lost.

The inadequacy of mental health services and alcohol and drug treatment services for youth have become a major issue. Whether it is the popular media reporting on challenges faced by families in finding and getting the help they need, or formal reports such as the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth January 2016 report on Child and Youth Mental Health in British Columbia, *Concrete Actions for Systemic Change*, we are well aware of major systemic problems, as well as prescriptions for change.

Programs serving women and children fleeing violence have not received budget increases for years, effectively leading to cuts in services and lack of supports for front line staff doing very difficult work. This is the situation for many other provincially contracted child, youth and family services, at the prevention and crisis intervention ends of the spectrum.

For many B.C. families the impacts of poverty are compounded by an affordability crisis in housing. Increased housing costs mean less money for food, and the stress trying to avoid homelessness. Twenty-four percent of BC lone parents are food insecure and one third of lone-parent families are in core housing need in this province.<sup>6</sup>

Recent initiatives to eliminate clawbacks of child-related benefits from families with children on income and disability assistance, and to remove barriers for single parents to

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<sup>3</sup> Growing Up in BC - 2015, Representative for Children and Youth, Office of the Provincial Health Officer [https://www.rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports\\_publications/guipc-2015-finalforweb\\_0.pdf](https://www.rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/guipc-2015-finalforweb_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>The State of Early Childhood Care and Education in Canada 2012 (2014), Carolyn Ferns and Martha Friendly [http://ywcacanada.ca/data/research\\_docs/00000322.pdf](http://ywcacanada.ca/data/research_docs/00000322.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (2012). Training, recruitment and retention in the First Nations ECE sector: Background paper. Available online at: [http://www.acc-society.bc.ca/files\\_2/documents/BackgroundPaper.pdf](http://www.acc-society.bc.ca/files_2/documents/BackgroundPaper.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2015 Child Poverty BC Report Card. [www.still1in5.ca](http://www.still1in5.ca)

move into paying work are good steps in the right direction. However, families raising children on assistance are still living in deep poverty because welfare rates are so low.

In the public schools, the number of children with identified special needs has been steadily increasing, as the number of special education teachers has been in decline.<sup>7</sup> This has left more parents scrambling to find the learning supports their children need. Parents have also been obliged to spend hours of their time advocating for their schools to be properly funded, made seismically safe, or even to remain open.

Cuts to public post-secondary institutions have led to unaffordable tuition fees and crushing levels of student debt. Students who must borrow to attend post-secondary school are paying a 30% premium for their education, compared to those who do not have to borrow. Students who are being pushed out of the current model of colleges and universities today are disproportionately Indigenous, racialized, queer and trans, people with disabilities, people raised in single-parent homes and people from low-income families. They are being further marginalized by the unaffordable costs of a post-secondary education.

In summary, it is clear that we are not meeting our responsibilities to our children and youth on a number of fronts.

At First Call, we believe that no British Columbian would agree that it is acceptable for our children to become victims of the circumstances they find themselves in because they can't get the help they need to reach their potential.

## WHAT DOES FIRST CALL RECOMMEND?

We recommend that the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services tell government that it is time to address the service gaps, inequities of opportunity, and needs for specialized services among B.C.'s children and youth.

While this will require an ongoing investment, ample evidence confirms that optimizing the development of our children will result in a significant return on the investment and downstream savings over the long term:

- A stronger, better-skilled work force
- Healthier communities and reduced expenditures for health services
- Better parenting of future generations
- Increased school success and reduced demand for specialized education support
- Reduced crime and criminal justice system expenditures
- Reduced mental health and addictions problems
- Less reliance on income assistance

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<sup>7</sup> BCTF Education Funding budget brief  
<https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/Briefs/EducationFundingBrief2016.pdf>

### Specific Recommendations re Poverty Reduction:

Adopt a comprehensive provincial poverty reduction plan with specific targets and measurable outcomes to inform the work of the Committee in future years. Some of the measures that this plan should contain include:

- increasing income and disability rates significantly to bring them into line with actual living expenses, indexing them to the annual rise in the cost of basic living expenses;
- building more social and affordable rental housing, while better protecting renters from rent-related evictions;
- raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour and indexing it annually;
- ensuring living wages are paid to all direct and indirect government employees, including in the health care sector and the contracted social services sector;
- redesigning the BC Early Childhood Tax Benefit into a BC Child Benefit that covers children under 18, and increasing the maximum benefit to \$1,320 per child per year;
- eliminating MSP premiums - First Call appreciates that MSP premiums for children in lone-parent families will be eliminated in 2017, but this should be just a first step to the full elimination of what is basically an flat tax; and
- reinstating tuition-free education for adults taking adult basic education to upgrade secondary courses so they can apply to post-secondary training programs, and for adults needing to learn English as an additional language.

### Specific Recommendations re Early Childhood Investments:

Recommit to the goal of reducing early childhood vulnerability by making significant investments in the 2017 budget to address the scale and scope of the socioeconomic realities facing the majority of families with young children today.<sup>8</sup> This includes:

- addressing the child care crisis for parents by starting to implement the [\*Community Plan for a Public System of Integrated Early Care and Learning\*](#) (the \$10 a Day Plan);
- eliminating wait times for young children with developmental challenges who need access to assessments and therapies;
- improving access to quality early childhood development and care programs for Aboriginal children and families both on- and off-reserve; and

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<sup>8</sup>Make BC's Young Children and Families a Priority, A Call to Action (2015), First Call <http://firstcallbc.org/early-years-call-to-action/>

- providing stable, enhanced funding for parent/family support programs that are accessible and welcoming for all families.

### **Specific Recommendations re Services for Vulnerable Children and Youth:**

- Ensure that the Ministry of Children and Family Development has sufficient resources to support more services to keep children at home with their families when it can be made safe to do so, and to strengthen the system of guardianship workers, foster parents and other caregivers when it is not.
- Ensure government contracted services for children, youth and families receive sufficient funds to respond to the needs of their clients. This means acknowledging the need for annual increases to match growing needs and rising costs, including salaries and wages to address recruitment and retention issues in the field.
- Extend and enhance financial, educational and relational supports for youth transitioning out of government care at age 19 and offer the extension of foster care to youth up to the age of 25.
- Develop policy to address the financial support needs of children being raised by grandparents and other kinship caregivers that is inclusive of those with and without legal guardianship.

### **Specific Recommendations re Public and Post-Secondary Education:**

- Act on the recommendations from the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services of the past two years that have called for adequate, stable, and predictable funding for K-12 public education;
- Provide funding and resources to support the early identification, designation and appropriate educational program for students with special needs.
- Reduce post-secondary tuition fees, re-introduce a needs-based grant program and provide interest free student loans.

## **CONCLUSION**

Failing to meet our responsibilities to our children and youth by under-investing is a penny wise, pound foolish strategy for government to be following. It is more expensive to our society and our provincial budget to allow children and youth to miss developmental windows, to languish in poverty, to end up homeless, to disconnect from school without graduating, to suffer untreated addictions and mental illnesses, to fall through the cracks of an over-stretched child protection system, and to experience so many other preventable harms. It is also extremely unjust.