INCOME SUPPORTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN B.C.
An Analysis of Gaps and Barriers

FULL REPORT

Anke Kessler, PhD | Jacqueline Quinless, PhD

Table of Contents

Foreword

The First Nations Leadership Council is both pleased and disheartened to share this report. The findings of this report document what we know exists in our communities, both on and off reserve. It is vital that this research was undertaken in a responsible way and shared. However, it is saddening that the various factors contributing to the findings of this report have been, and are still, allowed to continue.

This report highlights what First Nations have always known: that well-being is not simply a lack of poverty and that the barriers to achieving well-being go far beyond basic financial support. However, it also identifies many issues and challenges faced and imposed on Indigenous people in accessing the current systems of support to address poverty, meaning that even the programs intended to provide the minimum needs are failing our people.

The findings of this report point to many causes of poverty in Indigenous communities and to one that is causal to most others: the trauma that our communities and people know well. This trauma resulted from forced removal of our Peoples off their territorial lands, imprisonment of our children in residential schools that purposely disconnected our People from their families, communities, culture, and traditional practices, and the long-reaching impacts of colonialism on our people. As this report outlines, even the practical barriers to accessing support are often rooted in this underlying issue, for example, the lack of access to appropriate health care or specialized support, the racism encountered by Indigenous people in accessing programs and services, and the hardships caused by two uncoordinated systems operating on and off reserve. Moreover, 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 B.C.

We want to recognize the many leaders, members, and those that work in our communities for their important contributions to this research, in particular the Tsleil-Waututh, Nak'azdli, Lower Similkameen, Fort Nelson, Tseshaht, and Xaxli'p First Nations. We also want to thank the research team and all those who supported this work, in particular Dr. Anke Kessler and Dr. Jacqueline Quinless, as well as the B.C. and federal governments that supported the research of an unbiased third party looking in part at the effectiveness of their programs and program results.

While this report demonstrates clearly the issues with the current systems, it also makes recommendations for addressing them. We urge government, both federal and provincial, and other service providers, organizations, and institutions to review these recommendations and take serious steps to implement them.

Sincerely,

First Nations Leadership Council (The BC Assembly of First Nations, the First Nations Summit, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs)

Acknowledgements

The following material was developed as part of the Guaranteed Basic Income project commissioned by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Province of British Columbia.

We respectfully acknowledge the unceded territories of the Tsleil-Waututh, Nak'azdli, Lower Similkameen, Fort Nelson, Tseshaht, and Xaxli'p First Nations, where important knowledge for this report was gathered. A project of this magnitude could not be possible without the tremendous efforts of many people. We are grateful to the community leaders and researchers who provided their guidance and acknowledge the following people for organizing and bringing forward community voices to ensure they are heard: Angela George, Gabe George, and Kirsten Touring; Bill Tallio and Carrie Terbasket; Hugh Braker, Ahmber Barbosa, and Destani Dick; Nadeen Sinclair; Jessica Erickson; and Lucy Saul. We also acknowledge additional contributions from the following team members for ongoing research and editorial support: Terry Mack, Eve Taylor, Cristina Scott, Bryan Rowley, Tara Todesco and Joel Palmer.

The study was conducted in direct partnership with the First Nations Leadership Council and the research panel members. One objective of this work is to increase and strengthen relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities through an Indigenous research project. The research team worked closely with the First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC), the B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (SDPR), and each participating community to outline the methodologies and to prepare a work plan template for data collection that specifically addresses the socio-economic information requirements of the project. We are especially grateful to FNLC members Cheryl Casimer and Kukpi7 Judy Wilson for their leadership and Elena Pennell for her technical support. Their leadership was critical to the success of this project, and their wisdom and guidance were essential to the partnership that provided strength and direction to this project.

We are grateful to the SDPR for providing the data and funding a study that would look closely at its own programs, and for encouraging independent research. We would particularly like to thank Molly Harrington with SDPR. Molly oversaw the project and was always available when we needed her to facilitate our work. She worked tirelessly to see the project through all the way to her retirement. Numerous other people working on behalf of the B.C. government also deserve our appreciation for doing their best to help us with data demands and processes, including Rob Bruce, Denise Sandison, Daryn Martiniuk, and Leah Squance from SDPR, and Brittany Decker from the Ministry of Citizens' Services.

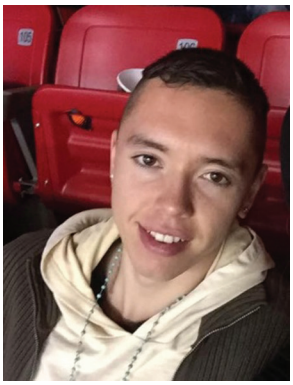
The secondary data we drew from for this project came from the B.C. government through their Data Innovation Program (DIP) and from Statistics Canada, as well as other sources. In particular, we wish to thank BC Hydro for compiling data on energy consumption in First Nations communities for us. Indigenous Services Canada, notably Joseph Damaso, deserves our thanks for providing province-wide data on the recipients of on-reserve Income

Assistance and facilitating our attendance at two of their B.C. training workshops for Band Social Development Workers.

Many researchers have contributed to this journey and helped bring this project to a successful conclusion, and we are grateful for their work. Fernando Aragon spent countless hours at the Regional Data Centre to analyze the 2016 Census data and extract the statistics we needed. Bill Warburton did the same for us in the secure research environment in which the DIP data were housed. They did most of the hands-on data work, taking the time to carefully respond to our requests. We also acknowledge Inez Hillel, Shirleen Manzur, Jamal Dumas, and Zachary Robb for their contributions as research assistants, as well as Jeff Hicks, who had worked on several projects for the BC Expert Panel on Basic Income, and who graciously provided us with data and results pertinent to the study. We are especially grateful to David Green, Chair of the Expert Panel, under whose direction the research was initiated. It was David who asked us to conduct the study and facilitated our access to resources. We deeply appreciate the trust he put in us.

Finally, this report was prepared by Dr. Anke Kessler and Dr. Jacqueline Quinless. Dr. Kessler lives and works on the unceded territories of the Tsleil-Waututh (səl̓ilw̓ ətaʔɬ), Kwikwetlem (kwikwəƛ̓ əm), Squamish (Sḵwx̱ wú7mesh Úxwumixw) and Musqueam (xwməθkwəy̓ əm) Nations. Dr. Quinless lives and works on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples of the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations and the SENĆOŦEN-speaking W̱SÁNEĆ Nation. We are grateful for the editorial expertise provided by Martha Kertesz and Sandy Reber, Reber Creative.

About the Artwork



Charles (Chazz) Elliott is a Coast Salish artist from the T'sartlip First Nation on southern Vancouver Island. The artwork depicted in this report is called "Community" and is Chazz's visual illustration of how Indigenous peoples work in a communal way to support and lift each other up.

Chazz says that his interest in the arts has been passed down from his ancestors to his parents and then to him. His father is master carver Charles Elliott Sr. He teaches Chazz about carving and Salish design. His mother, Myrna Crossley-Elliott, teaches him about plants and medicine. Her weaving is also a great influence and inspiration for Chazz.

He explains, "In the past, I have worked with cedar and also hard woods like maple and yew wood for carving. I have painted drums, canvas, and murals on walls. I have worked with fibres such as plant roots, bark, and wool, which I look to further explore as harvest season approaches."

Content Warning

At the end of May 2021, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced that the remains of 215 children were found in unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. A month later, 751 unmarked graves were discovered on the grounds by the Cowessess First Nation at Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan. These numbers continue to rise across Canada. Since May, Indigenous communities across Canada, and especially our community partners, have experienced tremendous grief and pain as they process these horrific discoveries. The following report covers topics including, but not limited to, colonial violence, substance use, and issues related to poverty. The information and material presented in this report may trigger unpleasant feelings, thoughts, and responses. The KUU-US Crisis Line Society provides a First Nations- and Indigenous-specific crisis line available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, toll-free anywhere in B.C. at 1-800-588-8717.

Disclaimer

This report was prepared by Dr. Anke Kessler and Dr. Jacqueline Quinless for the sole benefit and exclusive use of the First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC), the communities of Tsleil-Waututh, Nak'azdli, Lower Similkameen, Fort Nelson, Tseshaht, and Xaxli'p. Funding for this research was provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, Government of British Columbia.

The material contained in this report reflects the best professional judgement of the researchers, based on the information gathered and available at the time of its completion and as appropriate for the scope of work. Any use that a third party makes of this report, or any reliance or any decision based on it, is at the discretion and responsibility of such third parties. The researchers have prepared this report in the level of skill and professionalism that is consistent with members of the social sciences profession working under similar conditions at the time the work was performed. The information contained herein should not be construed as to define, limit, or otherwise constrain the Indigenous rights of the aforementioned communities or other First Nations or Indigenous peoples or the FNLC. All inferences, opinions, and conclusions drawn in this report are those of the interview participants and the authors and do not reflect the opinions or policies of the Data Innovation Program, the Province of British Columbia, or the FNLC. For all inquiries, please direct questions to Dr. Anke Kessler, Department of Economics, Simon Fraser University.

Executive Summary

Project Background

The purpose of this research project was to conduct a study to analyze gaps and barriers in income supports for Indigenous peoples in the province of British Columbia. This project came out of consultations with the First Nations Leadership Council after the creation of the Expert Panel on Basic Income in 2018, as part of the B.C. government's commitment to developing a poverty reduction strategy. It was important that First Nations leadership would be at the forefront of all aspects of the project, including the community-based research activities involving First Nations communities across the province of B.C.

A co-leadership model was chosen to ensure First Nations voices would be heard. Cheryl Casimer and Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, on behalf of the First Nations Leadership Council, worked in partnership with Dr. Anke Kessler (Department of Economics, SFU), and Dr. Jacqueline Quinless (Department of Sociology, University of Victoria).

Mandate and Objectives

The mandate of the project was to examine the current system of income supports available to Indigenous peoples in British Columbia and to understand barriers, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. Specifically, the project's objectives were to:

- Provide an overview of the current socio-economic status of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia with respect to various indicators of well-being (health, education, poverty measures, and disposable income).
- Study how the Indigenous population compares to the non-Indigenous population on a number of socio-economic indicators, and examine the role of income support systems in alleviating or amplifying existing differences.
- Examine the current system of public income supports available to Indigenous peoples in British Columbia.
- Identify gaps in the provision of income supports for people living on- and off-reserve and in urban, rural, and remote communities.
- Identify the primary reasons that Indigenous peoples are not participating in specific programs and develop potential recommendations to reduce or eliminate the gaps.

Project Overview

The research framework and findings for this project are rooted in community-based approaches to Indigenous knowledge generation, which we supplemented with advanced statistical analysis using quantitative data. We used responsive research and the TRAC method, which uses trans-local relationships, responsibility to partners, accountability mechanisms, and community timeframes to weave the findings together and ensure that Indigenous community voices are centred throughout the research. The findings of this project are described in two reports: a summary report and this full report.[1]

This report is presented in four parts. Part I begins with a contextualization of the historical impacts of colonization as they relate to poverty creation for Indigenous peoples. It then provides a socio-economic overview of Indigenous peoples in B.C., including a description of standard poverty measures and how Indigenous peoples in B.C. are represented in income support programs. Part II of the report gives detailed information on what we heard from community voices, including Key Knowledge Advisors and Income Assistance recipients. It provides a narrative of Indigenous voices on experiences with the income support systems currently available in B.C., including gaps and barriers. This part of the report also adds the perspectives of front-line income support workers in and outside of First Nations communities. The last part of this section highlights forms of resilience and Indigenous resurgence in First Nations communities that generate well-being and confront the gaps and barriers that exist. Part III of the report shows results from a quantitative analysis of secondary data that help us describe and identify consequences and determinants of poverty and dependency on social assistance, utilizing standard measures of poverty that are being used by governments to aid in policy formation. It is important to note that the statistical analysis presented in this part of the report is a one-of-a-kind analysis, guided by the First Nations Leadership Council and drawing on a unique dataset that contained information on all B.C. residents over a considerable time period, linking data from several British Columbia ministries, notably the Ministries of Education, of Health, and of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. Part IV of the report concludes with a summary and a list of recommended actions to address the identified barriers and gaps moving forward.

Data Gathering and Methodology

This report combined a variety of data sources to help shape our research and the findings. To ensure that the voices of those familiar with income supports are being heard, we prioritized community-based research while gathering the experiences of income support recipients and social workers, which we supplemented by secondary data from sources such as the Canadian census, data from Indigenous Services Canada, and data from the B.C. government.

[1] Both reports are available at https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/poverty-reduction-strategy/basic-income-report.

Community-Based Research

For research conducted in the community, we applied a responsive research framework approach and the TRAC method as a way to braid social scientific methods and Indigenous methodologies. Responsive research is grounded in the TRAC method (Quinless & Corntassel, 2018) which builds Trans-local relationships, acknowledges Responsibility to partners, includes Accountability mechanisms, and honours Community timeframes. An important part of the TRAC method process was the drafting of a unique collaborative research ethics agreement for each of the six participating Nations. The agreements were subsequently approved through Band Council resolution. Allowing for community-specific ethics agreements is a practical application of the TRAC method relevant to Indigenous engagement and facilitates compliance with the "Our Data, Our Stories, Our Future" vision that guides the First Nations Information Governance Centre's principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating research data with First Nations communities (2021).

Secondary Data Analysis

The analysis benefited greatly from access to data from the B.C. Ministry of Health, the B.C. Ministry of Education, and the B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (SDPR). These data were then linked by the B.C. government's Data Innovation Program (DIP) and made available to us in a single, highly informative dataset, which we accessed through Population Data BC. We also used 2016 Census microdata through the Statistics Canada's Research Data Centre located at Simon Fraser University, in addition to data from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and auxiliary data from BC Hydro on average energy consumption on-reserve, and a survey of client satisfaction provided to us by SDPR. In our analysis, we used standard statistical tools to summarize the data and document relationships.

An important caveat to our data work is that the DIP dataset did not include (federal) income tax data. Tax data would have contained information on earnings, income support, and taxes, which is critical for a full evaluation of B.C.'s income support systems in terms of meeting its objectives, both for the general population and for Indigenous peoples.

Key Findings

Community-Based Research

Resilience and Indigenous Resurgence: We learned that communities have developed strategies to overcome gaps and barriers through Indigenous resurgence of cultural and traditional ways of life. Indigenous peoples are strong and vibrant, and Income Assistance recipients are resilient and turn to family and friends regularly as a way to cope with the nominal amount of income support provided. In many instances, even the Band will step in to fill gaps in income support and services. In many cases, community members come

together to help each other and make sure that Income Assistance recipients do not fall through the cracks within the system.

Barriers and Gaps in Income Support for Indigenous Peoples: Our findings identified a variety of specific barriers and gaps that people must overcome to receive support. They are listed below and further detailed in the report.

Barrier 1: Colonization and Systemic Racism in Government Services
Indigenous peoples continue to be exposed to deeply disrespectful and racist procedures, policies, and individual attitudes when accessing government services, perpetuating a culture of mistrust held by Indigenous peoples towards government. This generates apathy toward publicly funded services and often prevents Indigenous individuals or families from receiving the support for which they are eligible.

Barrier 2: Accessing and Navigating the Support System
Indigenous Income Assistance recipients face a multitude of obstacles when accessing and navigating the support system, from difficult-to-understand procedures to onerous bureaucratic processes, missing face-to-face support and human connection, and a lack of access to phones, computers, and internet.

Barrier 3: Obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities (PWD)
There was an overwhelming sense among our research participants that a vast majority of Income Assistance recipients should be receiving Persons with Disabilities (PWD) support; yet we document in the data that there are disproportionately fewer Indigenous than non-Indigenous PWD recipients, which is likely driven by barriers in the application process. This is a serious discrepancy because PWD status has a number of important benefits over regular income support, from higher monthly payments and a more generous earnings exemption, to additional (often health-related) supports that people can access.

GAP 1: Insufficient Benefit Levels
The current social assistance amounts are insufficient compared to what is required to meet basic needs. Income support does not normally cover costs for the duration of the month. In some cases, not being able to live off the support that is provided resulted in having no choice but to purchase unhealthy foods or food that is less nutritious or, worse, to food insecurity. Off-reserve, clients would visit shelters, food banks, and other charitable organizations to make up for the difference to keep them fed, clothed, and sheltered.

GAP 2: Transitions from On-Reserve to Off-Reserve
Key Knowledge Advisors expressed a general concern with respect to the challenges for community members transitioning off-reserve. The process for accessing services is not smooth and frequently results in delays and other obstacles to receiving support for eligible persons.

GAP 3: Lack of Affordable, Accessible, and Safe Housing

Many voices we heard for this report also identified either a lack of housing or housing affordability as the number one gap in service that affect families or individuals on Income Assistance, partly due to a grossly inadequate shelter allowance. For people living off-reserve, our conversations indicated that a lack of affordable housing is the number one unmet need of Income Assistance users. Lack of housing stock, a tight rental market, and high rents, combined with discrimination in the housing market, contribute to elevated levels of homelessness. If people manage to stay in their accommodations, the inadequate shelter allowance leads to food insecurity because they need to spend the transfer earmarked for basic needs on shelter instead.

GAP 4: Lack of Transportation, Employment Supports, Training, and Life Skills Development

A lack of transportation and access to transportation was identified by Key Knowledge Advisors as a gap in service for off-reserve Income Assistance recipients and as a barrier for on-reserve members seeking employment. Lack of available jobs, education, and training, as well as health issues, make re-entering employment for Income Assistance clients on-reserve difficult and often impossible.

GAP 5: Gaps in Eligibility and Supplemental Supports

Many community members suffer from severe trauma rooted in colonial assimilation policies and practices aimed at suppressing their own identity, which is being passed through the generations. Participants felt that this issue has not been given adequate attention. The associated chronic conditions such as anxiety, lack of confidence or difficulty functioning in social settings need to be recognized and addressed. Social assistance is too narrowly defined, and the range of disabilities currently covered by Disability Assistance is too restrictive, effectively ignoring “invisible” disabilities that do not manifest overtly.

Secondary Data Analysis

The underlying theme that emerged in the analysis of our secondary data is that income support programming as well as other governmental efforts directed at improving the well-being of Indigenous residents have so far failed to close the gaps between the experiences of Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples in B.C. Discrepancies continue to persist and, in some cases, have grown over time. We outline our specific findings below.

Importance of publicly funded income support: We document that government transfers are critical to reducing the depth of poverty for all subpopulations. In a counterfactual world without government transfers, the poverty gap (the difference between income and the poverty line) would be 2.5 times wider for families in First Nations communities and over 3.2 times wider for Aboriginal families off-reserve. Transfers are also important for lifting families out of poverty, but less so. Without government aid, poverty rates (the proportion of the population below the poverty line)

would be 1.7 times higher for families in First Nations communities, and 2.1 times higher for non-Indigenous families. Child benefits play a larger role in alleviating poverty than social assistance, particularly on-reserve. Eliminating child benefits would raise the poverty gap on-reserve by over 45 percent, whereas eliminating social assistance would only result in a corresponding increase of 14 percent.

Lack of affordable and safe housing for Indigenous peoples: One in three households on-reserve live in dwellings in need of major repairs. This compares to about one in ten Indigenous households off-reserve and one in 20 non-Indigenous households. Overcrowding is an issue, as well, when the dwelling does not have enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the household. According to the National Occupancy Standard (NOS), 14 percent of First Nations households on-reserve live in housing deemed unsuitable. The rate for their non-Indigenous off-reserve counterparts is half that, at 7 percent. One important aspect of the generally poor quality of housing in First Nations communities is that it impacts hydro expenditures, which amplifies housing costs. On average, the electricity bill of a typical family in a First Nations community is almost 50 percent higher than the rest of the population. As a result, the percent of household income in First Nations communities spent on electricity is over twice as high as the corresponding figure for non-Indigenous households, who have lower electricity bills and higher disposable incomes on average.

Lack of accessibility and imperfect take-up of income support by Indigenous peoples: The data provide additional evidence to supplement what we heard from community on how a lack of information and documentation, hurdles in the application process itself, and lastly, stigma, racism, or a mistrust in government act as barriers to receiving benefits for otherwise eligible individuals and families. Specifically, we document that a disproportionately high number of First Nations, namely over 15 percent or roughly 18,000 people, did not file a tax return in 2015. Over 6.8 percent, or about 8,500 people, had no CRA record at all. Without a tax return, a substantial percentage of the Indigenous population miss out on government supports delivered through the tax system. We also show that regions with a higher proportion of Indigenous residents have been more severely affected by a loss of in-person service delivery by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The interview participants stated that outsourcing of services to Service BC offices was substandard in the scope and quality of services they offered. We conjecture that the decline of face-to-face support, in combination with a complicated and onerous application process (particularly for disability support), has discouraged enrolment and resulted in elevated numbers of Indigenous peoples who are eligible not accessing support. Lastly, our results show that Indigenous Income Assistance recipients are consistently over-represented in regular "expected to work" support and consistently under-represented in disability support. In light of the fact that the mental and physical health indicators of B.C.'s Indigenous population fall significantly short of province-wide figures (outlined in this report), this finding is disturbing and points squarely at persistent Indigenous-specific barriers in the application process for Disability Assistance.

Poverty and education are inextricably linked. Children growing up in low-income families face unique challenges and barriers such as poor nutrition and health, poverty-induced stress, and a lack of parental support, which impede their chances of educational success. Our findings revealed that compared to their non-Indigenous classmates in the same school and year, with the same parental background, living in the same family type, and with the same provincial skill assessment score Grade 7, the likelihood of First Nations youth who live on-reserve to graduate is 20 percentage points lower, or roughly one-quarter.

Cycle of Poverty: We document that despite multifaceted efforts to narrow the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples with respect to important educational and wellness indicators, disparities continue to persist or have even grown over time, contributing to a perpetual intergenerational cycle of poverty and dependence.

Specifically, we find that although the gap in high school graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has narrowed somewhat since 2008, it remains at a substantial 24 percentage points in 2017, implying that the chances of Indigenous youth graduating from high school were still roughly 28 percent lower than those of their non-Indigenous classmates. Students who lived on-reserve had even lower chances of education success, with a completion rate of less than 52 percent. Gaps in higher education were more pronounced and have in fact widened over time. The results of a multi-variate regression analysis additionally reveal that the serious imbalance in successful completion of secondary education for Indigenous youth, especially those that reside on-reserve, remains when taking into account ("controlling for") variation in time trends, the quality of schools, parental background, primary educational achievement, and other confounding factors. The findings are similar for wellness and health indicators. Indeed, we show that mental health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in B.C. have been growing. At the same time, we find no evidence that the gap in hospitalization rates is closing. First Nations are also over-represented among overdose deaths, and the gap in age-adjusted all-cause mortality has been remarkably stable.

As a last step, we analyze how comparatively worse outcomes in education, health, and poverty contribute to the intergenerational cycle of income dependency for Indigenous peoples in B.C. To document the cycle, we study how the chances of Grade 7 students falling into poverty and state dependency in their early adulthood (i.e., becoming Income Assistance recipients) are related to the failure to graduate from high school, a mental health diagnosis, and to parental dependency on income support. The results indicate all three factors are strong predictors of whether a child will become dependent on income support as a young adult, implying that Indigenous children have significantly higher chances of adult state dependency than their non-Indigenous peers because of a compounding effect of lower graduation rates, poorer mental health, and higher incidence of growing up in poverty. We also find, however, that the linkages between those factors and the outcome of becoming a recipient of Income Assistance are similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Put differently, in a world where the disparities in parental poverty, education, and health for children have been eliminated,

an Indigenous youth who failed to graduate from high school or whose parents receive Income Assistance would not be significantly more likely to experience poverty and state dependency as a non-Indigenous youth in similar circumstances. This finding is important because it also means that tackling critical gaps such as those in child poverty, education, and mental health would not only relieve the plight of the current generation but, in the long term, lower Indigenous poverty and dependency rates substantially, elevating the wellness of future generations in a sustainable way.

Recommendations

Many initiatives and programs of the B.C. government are focused on Indigenous peoples and communities, and increasingly so. Yet, as we document, extensive gaps and barriers remain. In implementing B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy, the government must continue its efforts to provide dedicated support to Indigenous persons and communities and to improve the experience of Indigenous persons in social support programming and their overall well-being as residents of British Columbia, addressing the many disparities we identify throughout the report. The Province must work together with all levels of government, First Nations communities, businesses, leaders, organizations, and advocacy groups.

The multifaceted nature of poverty and its interconnectedness with other factors implies that two levels of action and commitment are needed by governments and other organizations working with Indigenous communities. First, pursuing specific and targeted measures is necessary and paramount to tackling income and other disparities among the Indigenous population. Second, however, and equally critical is an integrated and holistic approach to the policies and programming related to poverty reduction. Sustained change over time necessitates a strategy that spans all levels of government, involving all departments and integrating non-governmental initiatives in a coordinated manner. This also includes comprehensive consultation with title and rights holders. Indeed, any policy development also needs to acknowledge and accommodate ongoing changes to who has jurisdiction over policies; through modern-day treaties and self-government agreements, adopting new land codes, reconnecting with traditional governance regimes, and seeking to secure ten-year block grants. First Nations are increasingly taking charge of their own socio-economic, education, and health priorities.

The recommendations outlined below are derived from our community-engaged research and statistical analysis. They list specific actions and strategies to address gaps and barriers for Indigenous peoples in income support programs and intergenerational poverty and to reduce dependency rates over time. Some of these recommendations are grounded in our data analysis and expertise on various program components. Others are firmly rooted in community members' comments and suggestions; they literally represent the "voices of community".

Community Recommendations

Recommendation: Address and Dismantle Colonization and Systemic Racism in Government Services

- Address the historical and current impacts of colonization
- Address systemic and Indigenous-specific racism

Recommendation: Improve Access to and Navigation of the Support System

- Provide technical assistance through technical support workers
- Create a program for people moving off-reserve to address payment lag periods
- Ensure action plans are on file for clients

Recommendation: Provide Sufficient Benefit Levels and Subsidies

- Provide subsidized transportation
- Subsidize utilities
- Provide cost-of-living subsidies
- Provide food subsidies

Recommendation: Provide Support to Strengthen Local Food Systems and Housing Options

- Strengthen the local food system, including online food banks in urban centres and create more community gardens
- Strengthen the local food system, including more traditional and nutritious food
- Provide affordable and safe housing in communities

Recommendation: Provide Harm Reduction Support and Indigenous-Specific Treatment Options for People with Addictions

- Provide harm reduction support

Recommendation: Remove Obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities (PWD)

- Provide subsidized or free financial counselling services for persons with disabilities

Recommendation: Provide Employment Supports, Training, and Life Skills Development

- Provide online training options so people do not need to leave their community for employment
- Provide student debt relief and subsidies for post-secondary education
- Provide funding for Indigenous-specific training programs that build traditional knowledge
- Provide life skills and financial literacy training
- Provide funding for job readiness and resumé-building training
- Increase access to jobs, trades, skills training

Study Recommendations

Recommendation Area #1: Develop Strategic and Evaluative Approaches

- Develop and implement a comprehensive Indigenous-specific poverty reduction plan
- Develop and implement a framework for an evaluation of income support programs from an Indigenous perspective and through Indigenous voices

Recommendation Area #2: Address Colonization and Systemic Racism in Government Services

- Seek input from Indigenous peoples on income support policies and programs through a well-being and resilience lens
- Establish partnerships with Indigenous organizations and communities in cities throughout B.C.
- Reduce reporting requirements for federal income support programs

Recommendation Area #3: Increase the Availability of In-Person, Culturally Safe Services Outside First Nations Communities

- Expand program delivery through Community Integration Specialist workers (ongoing)
- Equalize availability and quality of service across SDPR offices and Service BC offices (ongoing)
- Client files need to be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that change of circumstances and eligibility for new or additional supports is up to date

Recommendation Area #4: Integrate Provincial and Federal Income Support Programs

- Integrate in-community and outside-community support programs by negotiating a formal agreement between the provincial and the federal governments (long term)
- Mutually recognize application, approval, and appeals processes for Income Assistance (with reviews as appropriate), harmonize application forms
- Build and strengthen community capacity to increase scope and quality of service in communities to align with provincial programs
- Increase investment in pre-employment and case management support

Recommendation Area #5: Remove Obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities

- Review PWD application and appeal process
- Improve access to culturally safe health care professionals who can support the PWD application process
- Understand and account for hidden disabilities and provide support for trauma and mental health

Recommendation Area #6: Improve Adequacy of Basic Needs Benefits

- Increase Temporary Assistance benefit payments and reduce claw back rates to better meet basic needs
- Account for the differential cost of living
- Adopt official poverty measures in First Nations communities
- Include First Nations communities in annual income surveys

Recommendation Area #7: Increase the Stock and Availability of Affordable, Accessible and Safe Housing Options for Indigenous Peoples

- Simplify housing support in the Income Assistance program
- Examine and implement outstanding recommendations
- Review housing supports and the expansion of supply-side initiatives for Indigenous peoples in B.C.
- Expand programs for transitional and supportive housing
- Encourage municipalities to incorporate Indigenous housing needs and strategies in their municipal planning

Recommendation Area #8: Develop and Implement a Shared, System-wide Strategy to Close Education Gaps

- Examine and improve educational support for Indigenous children and youth
- Conduct a thorough review of the educational experiences for Indigenous children and youth
- Examine the B.C. regional college and university system to improve access for Indigenous peoples
- Review the budgets of B.C. school districts from the lens of supporting Indigenous children and youth

Recommendation Area #9: Broaden Demand-side Income Support Policies to Encourage Indigenous Youth to Pursue Post-secondary Education and Training

- Create an Indigenous-specific Learning Bond to support Indigenous student post-secondary education
- Increase services to Indigenous children and youth with respect to understanding education required to pursue opportunities
- Increase resources for Indigenous-specific high school counselling

Income Support Program Categories and Terms

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION
Income Assistance (IA)	Income and social support system, providing a mix of cash-transfer and basic service supports to eligible B.C. residents with the purpose of helping people move from Income Assistance to employment, and providing assistance to those who are unable to fully participate in the workforce. Income assistance, also commonly known as "welfare", can be grouped into two main components: • temporary benefits for persons expected to work, or temporarily excused from work • disability benefits for persons with persistent conditions that seriously impede their ability to work.[1] The B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction administers IA through the BC Employment and Assistance program to residents who do not live on-reserve. For B.C. residents who live on-reserve, Income Assistance is administered by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). The federal program largely mirrors the provincial program in eligibility, components, and benefits.
Temporary Assistance (TA)	Temporary benefits component of Income Assistance. The recipients of Temporary Assistance in B.C. fall into three categories: expected to work (ETW), not expected to work for a qualifying reason (for example, having a dependent child under three years of age), and not expected to work for temporary medical reasons.
Expected to work (ETW)	Recipients of Temporary Assistance who are deemed to have no impediment that prevents them from working, and who must undertake a mandatory work-search period prior to qualifying for benefits and are required to develop and comply with an employment plan.
Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers to Employment (PPMB)	Income Assistance program for adults who are eligible for temporary assistance (or hardship assistance) but are exempt from employment obligations because they have a persistent medical condition as well as at least one other barrier to employment that seriously impedes their ability to work.
Disability Assistance (DA)	Provides Income Assistance and in-kind benefits to persons who have been designated as a Person with Disabilities (PWD), i.e., who have a disability that prevents them from working or going about their daily activities.

[2] For persons ineligible for regular temporary or disability benefits, the B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction also offers Hardship Assistance which is provided for one month at a time. For more details, see the BC Employment & Assistance Policy & Procedure Manual https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual and the Employment and Assistance Regulations of the Government of B.C. (2021), https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/263_2002 and https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/265_2002. For information on Indigenous Services Canada's On Reserve Income Assistance Program, see https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100035256/1533307528663.

“The dependency built into the system can be heartbreaking. I once even heard a young person on the reserve saying that she could not wait until she was eligible to receive her own welfare cheques. This is how bleak their future is. That is all they had to hope for in life. Their own welfare cheque. That is what colonialism leads to: complete and utter dependency.” (*The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the land, rebuilding the economy,* 2017, p. 71).

The late Arthur Manuel, First Nations political leader

Introduction

Project Scope

As part of the B.C. government's commitment to developing a poverty reduction strategy, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (SDPR) announced the creation of an independent expert committee, the Expert Panel on Basic Income, in 2018. The panel was tasked with undertaking research on whether providing people with a basic income is an effective way to reduce poverty, and to improve health, housing, and employment conditions for British Columbians. The committee was composed of David Green (Committee Chair, Vancouver School of Economics, UBC), Jonathan Rhys Kesselman (School of Public Policy, SFU), and Lindsay Tedds (School of Public Policy, University of Calgary). The panel delivered its final report in December 2020.

In consultation with the First Nations Leadership Council and the panel, a separate study to analyze gaps in income supports for Indigenous peoples in the province was recommended. This separate research project was led by Cheryl Casimer on behalf of the First Nations Leadership Council, in partnership with Dr. Anke Kessler (Department of Economics, SFU), with additional academic support provided by Dr. Jacqueline Quinless (Department of Sociology, University of Victoria). The co-leadership model was chosen to ensure that First Nations leadership would be at the forefront of all aspects of the project and community-based research activities involving the participation of First Nations communities across the province.

Project Mandate

The project mandate was to examine the current system of income supports available to First Nations in British Columbia in order to understand barriers, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. The project objectives were to:

- Provide an overview of the current socio-economic status of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia with respect to various indicators of well-being (health, education, poverty measures, and disposable income).
- Study how the Indigenous population compares to the non-Indigenous population on a number of socio-economic indicators, and examine the role of income support systems in alleviating or amplifying existing differences.
- Examine the current system of public income supports available to Indigenous people in British Columbia.
- Identify gaps in the provision of income supports for people living on- and off-reserve, and in urban, rural, and remote communities.
- Identify the primary reasons that Indigenous people do not participate in specific programs, and develop potential recommendations to reduce or eliminate the gaps.

Project Overview

The research findings for this project are rooted in community-based approaches to generating Indigenous knowledge, and are supplemented with advanced statistical analysis using quantitative data. We have used responsive research and the TRAC method – which uses trans-local relationships, responsibility to partners, accountability mechanisms, and community timeframes (see Appendix A) to weave the findings together and ensure that Indigenous community voices are centred throughout the research. The findings of this project are described in two reports: a summary report and this full report.[3]

The report is presented in four parts.

Part I begins with a contextualization of the historical impacts of colonization as they relate to the beginning of poverty for Indigenous peoples. It then provides a socio-economic overview of Indigenous peoples in B.C., including a description of standard poverty measures and how Indigenous peoples in B.C. are represented in income support programs.

Part II of the report gives detailed information on what we heard from community voices, including Key Knowledge Advisors and Income Assistance recipients. It provides a narrative of Indigenous voices on experiences with the income support systems currently available in B.C., including gaps and barriers. This part of the report also includes the perspectives of front-line income support workers in, and outside of, First Nations communities. The last part of this section highlights forms of resilience and Indigenous resurgence in First Nations communities that generate well-being and confront the gaps and barriers that exist.

Part III of the report shows results from a quantitative analysis of secondary data that help us describe and identify consequences and determinants of poverty and dependency on social assistance, employing standard measures of poverty that are being used by governments to aid in policy formation. The statistical analysis presented in this part of the report is unique in that it was guided by the First Nations Leadership Council. We were able to draw on a novel dataset that contained information on all B.C. residents over a considerable time period, linking data from several British Columbia ministries, notably the Ministries of Education, of Health, and of Social Development and Poverty Reduction.

Part IV of the report concludes with a summary and a list of recommended actions to address the identified barriers and gaps moving forward.

[3] Both reports are available at https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/poverty-reduction-strategy/basic-income-report.

Defining Indigenous

The term "Aboriginal" was initially defined by the Canadian *Constitution Act* of 1982, 35(2) as including the First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada. We acknowledge that there is a great deal of diversity among the three main Aboriginal identity groups, and that the Canadian government has tended to treat each identity group homogeneously with respect to a variety of government policies and programs. We use the term Aboriginal only in connection with data sets where the term is used to enumerate and identify the respective subgroups of the population (such as the census or the B.C. ministry data), which means there are points in this report where we refer to Aboriginal for comparative purposes. Similarly, for consistency purposes we carry over other terms such as "Indian Reserves", "Status Indian", or "Registered Indian" when referring to specific data sources where those terms were used. Otherwise, we use "First Nations" or the subgroup terms "status First Nations" or "non-status First Nations".

Throughout the report, we use the term "Indigenous" to describe First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples inclusively. "Indigenous" refers to all of these groups, either collectively or separately; it is also the term used in international contexts, e.g., the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). We recognize that referring to an Indigenous Nation's preferred community name or language grouping is the most accurate way to speak about particular Indigenous Nations and we have done so wherever possible.

Data Sources and Methodology

This report combined a variety of data sources to help shape our research and the findings. To ensure that the voices of those familiar with income supports are being heard, we prioritized community-based participatory methods in gathering the experiences of income support recipients and social workers, which we supplemented by secondary data from sources such as the Canadian census, data from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), and data from the B.C. government.

Community-Based Data

We collected information through interviews with the following groups:

- Income support recipients and Key Knowledge Advisors in six Indigenous communities around the province: Tsleil-Waututh Nation, Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation, Tseshaht First Nation, Fort Nelson First Nation, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, and Xaxli'p First Nation;
- Band Social Development Workers (BSDW) responsible for program delivery of the On-Reserve Income Assistance Program for Indigenous Services Canada; and,
- Community Integration Specialists (CIS) employed by the SDPR and tasked with assisting B.C.'s most vulnerable population with ministry programs and connecting them to community supports and services.

Multiple family household interviews were conducted by self-administered questionnaires in the six Indigenous communities that agreed to participate. The interview questions were divided into several sections that focused on socio-demographic information and income- and economic-related questions (see Appendix C). The questionnaire also included a section where participants could add additional thoughts, suggestions, or comments through an open question before concluding the interview along with connecting with the community researcher for additional follow-up by phone. It is important to note that the households were selected based on whether they currently receive or previously received income support. These households were identified in consultation meetings with community researchers we hired and First Nation representatives.

In-depth interviews within communities were conducted with Key Knowledge Advisors about the social, economic, and health aspects of community, and about income supports available to community members. The interviewees included members of Chief and Council, addictions-recovery counselors, family-support workers, health directors and health outreach workers, traditional knowledge holders, Band administration workers (specifically, BSDWs), and education and housing coordinators.

We also held interviews with 24 BSDWs during two ISC workshops in Parksville (October 2019) and Richmond, B.C. (November 2019). Finally, we conducted a series of interviews with ten Community Integration Specialists via Zoom during the months of March and April 2021.[4]

Principles of Privacy, Confidentiality, and Data Governance

Individual Interviews

To ensure that individual participants' identity and privacy were protected to the greatest extent possible, we undertook the following measures:

- Personal information was anonymized. Interviewees were not identified by name in any of the material. The only information we kept is how they fit into the context of the study. No personal information was disclosed without explicit informed consent.
- Confidentiality was maintained in accordance with B.C. privacy legislation, and records were stored on secure servers with access restricted to the research team.
- Individual information we collected will be destroyed following the conclusion of the research and submission of the final report and will not be available for further use, including further analysis, research and publications.

[4] The project was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways. The collection of data in-community posed new challenges, as the pandemic caused delays due to travel restrictions and the closure of communities to outsiders, which forced us to adapt our protocols to allow the research process to be conducted remotely (refer to Appendix C for details). As a result, fewer interviews than initially planned were conducted and we had to replace the community conversations (focus groups) with a self-administered household interview. All communications as well as the training of community-based researchers were moved online.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the interview at any time without any explanation required, and with no consequences. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview and make any changes, or even withdraw their participation entirely.

Community Engagement

For the research conducted in community, we applied a responsive research framework approach and the TRAC method as a way to braid social scientific methods and Indigenous methodologies. Responsive research is grounded in the TRAC method (Quinless & Corntassel, 2018) which builds Trans-local relationships, acknowledges Responsibility to partners, includes Accountability mechanisms, and honours Community timeframes. An important part of the TRAC method process was the drafting of a collaborative research ethics agreement for each of the six participating Nations separately. The agreement was then approved through Band Council Resolution. Allowing for community-specific ethics agreements is a practical application of the TRAC method relevant to Indigenous engagement and facilitates compliance with the "Our Data, Our Stories, Our Future" vision that guides the First Nations Information Governance Centre's principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating research data with First Nations communities (2021). OCAP was established to inform the ethical and culturally competent collection of data between researchers and Indigenous Nations. Our approach in creating research collaborative agreements with each First Nations community and through individual informed consent reflects OCAP guidelines.

Each community was actively involved in modifying the interview questions to ensure each question was appropriate for the key informant and community questionnaires. It was important that the questions identified the realities of Income Assistance for the community. Personal information remains private to each individual participant, and information regarding each community was made unidentifiable by providing a de-identified and aggregated data file. Part of the data-sharing arrangement was that the academic researchers are able to use the data for knowledge mobilization purposes at conferences and in academic publications. For each participant community, aggregated data files were provided as a record of the information collected in the community. In addition, the academic researchers retain all intellectual rights (including copyright), as applicable, to the analysis conducted with the data offered under this agreement. The discussion of the results of the study will be shared with all participant communities through an individual community report and the Summary Report (Kessler & Quinless 2022).

Secondary Data

The research team also analyzed several secondary data sources. Our work greatly benefited from access to data from the B.C. Ministry of Health, the B.C. Ministry of Education, and the B.C. SDPR. These data were linked by the B.C. government's Data Innovation Program (DIP) and made available to us in a single, highly informative, dataset, which we accessed through Population Data BC. We are immensely grateful to William and David Warburton for their incredible support in accessing and analyzing the ministry data

through the secure access environment. We also drew on the 2016 Census microdata, which was available to us through the Statistics Canada's Research Data Centre located at Simon Fraser University. A third source of secondary data came from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). Lastly, we collected and eventually drew on a variety of small auxiliary data sources that helped us better understand the specific circumstances and needs related to income supports of Indigenous peoples and communities in B.C. These sources included, among others, secondary data from BC Hydro on average energy consumption on-reserve, and a survey of client satisfaction provided to us by SDPR. All this data was de-identified – that is, no names attached to the data, so it can be used only in ways that do not present observations on individuals or even small groups who might be identified from data patterns.

While the DIP data allowed us to study a range of outcomes, including high school completion, Income Assistance incidence, and health outcomes, the data set did not include income tax data and exit data on income support recipients (either through explicit exit surveys or through data linked to clients' tax records). This data would be crucial to evaluate the benefits and shortcomings of B.C.'s income support systems, both for the general population and for vulnerable subpopulations such as Indigenous peoples. We refer the reader to Recommendations 63 and 64 in the Final Report of the Basic Income Expert Panel.

PART I:
BACKGROUND

1. Colonization and Poverty Creation in Indigenous Communities

CANADA HAS A COLONIAL HISTORY that has had a devastating impact on Indigenous nations and communities across Canada, resulting in long-standing social and economic inequalities, that according to Frohlich et al., "manifested from a long history of oppression, systemic racism, and discrimination, and are inextricably linked to unequal access to resources such as education, training and employment, social and health care facilities and limited access to and control over lands and resources" (2007, p. 136). The issues and challenges facing Indigenous peoples in Canada are at the forefront of public attention and need to be part of government priorities. Recognition, rights, respect, reciprocity, co-operation, meaningful consultation, and partnership are identified pillars of this renewed connection between Indigenous Nations and other governments. The kinds of governance structures (Band Councils) that exist today in Indigenous communities were patriarchal models developed through the *Indian Act* as a mechanism of indirect power through which federal jurisdiction over Indigenous peoples in Canada is exercised. According to Bartlett, the *Indian Act* represents the "manner in which Indian reserves and treaties are administered by the Indian Affairs Department and the limited control exercised by bands and band councils" (1977, p. 581).

In 2015, the Government of Canada publicly announced several commitments to advancing the welfare of Indigenous peoples. The most important of these is reflected in several recent actions aimed at enhancing Indigenous individual and community well-being through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The TRC Calls to Action seek to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which the Government of Canada endorsed in 2016[5] and adopted Bill C-15 December 2020.[6] The 2015 TRC Calls to Action are aimed at helping to create improved health for Indigenous peoples in Canada, including land, economy, culture, health, education, law, and governance. In addition, Newhouse (2004) previously pointed out that within the past several decades in Canada, an invisible infrastructure of urban Indigenous service delivery organizations emerged in Canada in response to urban needs. Today, the landscape of Indigenous organizations extends beyond social service

[5] Canada initially voted against the UNDRIP (along with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States), but reversed its position and removed its permanent objector status in 2016. In doing this, Canada indicated that UNDRIP would be implemented as Canadian law. UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples.

[6] https://www.parl.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Language=E&billId=11007812

needs, and includes political advocacy, language and culture, economic development, education, art, and health, among other sectors. The growth of this infrastructure is the result of community needs and desires, the availability of funding from governments, and local capacity for organizational development and management (Newhouse, 2003). In fact, in the 2015 mandate letters to ministers, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau urged that now is the time for a "renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples [that is] based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership" (Trudeau, 2015, para. 7).

Land Dispossession and the Current Cycle of Poverty Experienced by First Nations in B.C.

The Government of Canada's policy of forced assimilation carried out through the *Indian Act* caused severe harm to Indigenous peoples' health and culture in Canada when the reserve system was created and children were collected and forcibly kept at residential schools. These policies have "influenced Indigenous peoples' efforts to shape and determine their well-being through the regeneration of Indigenous worldviews as a strengths-based response to ongoing colonial practices" (Quinless, 2017, p. 17). The impacts on Indigenous peoples have and continue to be significant, with the loss of culture (outlawing the practice of traditional ceremonies), loss of land, and loss of family child-rearing through residential schools, the disproportionately high number of Indigenous children in foster care (Quinless, 2017), the high incidence of gender-based violence, and the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and gender-diverse people. These effects on Indigenous lives are at critical levels in Canada. The negative consequences of colonialism are ongoing and persist through Canadian systems and policies and are entrenched in the justice, education, health care, and child welfare systems.

The deliberate and forced relocation of First Nations peoples and communities in B.C. through the creation of the reserve system was a military tactic of the Canadian government. Additionally, Indian residential schools, which operated from the 1870s to 1996, were designed to separate Indigenous children from their communities, families, and the land. This policy was to assimilate Indigenous children into the colonial culture, one that aimed at "taking the Indian out of the child" and stripping them of their culture. The intention of these government-sanctioned military tactics was to dispossess First Nations from their traditional homelands, territories, and kinship networks. The *Indian Act* grants the Minister of Indian Affairs extensive authority over much of the activity on reserves.[7] For instance, individual land transactions (certificates of possession, leases, etc.) are subject to federal ministerial approval. Indeed, there is an interplay of dispossession,

[7] A reserve is a tract of land that is set aside for the exclusive use of an Indian Band determined by the government where Band members possess the right to live on reserve lands, with a formal Band administrative and political structures. Reserve lands are held in trust by the Crown "for the use and benefit" of the Bands (*Indian Act*, 1985).

dependence, and oppression which is directly linked to unceded lands in B.C. Today, Canada only recognizes "Indigenous lands as accounting for 0.36 percent of British Columbia territory, which means that the settler share is the remaining 99.64 percent" (Manuel & Derrickson, 2017, p. 25).

The historical context of these issues is critically important to understanding the mechanisms by which colonization, genocide, land dispossession, and forced assimilation policies translate into the conditions of poverty that the Indigenous people experience today in B.C. Conditions on some reserves, especially in more remote areas, are characterized by overcrowded and low-quality housing, limited transportation infrastructure, insufficient sanitary water systems, high levels of food insecurity and gendered violence. Even access to safe drinking water is not guaranteed. As of September 2021, there were still 45 drinking water advisories on First Nations reserves, with some communities, such as Neskantaga in Ontario, being on boil water advisories for over 25 years (Stefanovic & Jones, 2021).

In addition to these hardships and the multitude of challenges that Indigenous peoples face in Canada, the governance of reserve communities suffers from a range of unique limitations originating from the *Indian Act*. Under federal jurisdiction, First Nations communities are the largest "governments" in the world in terms of per-capita spending, combining services which otherwise would be provided through municipalities, school boards, health authorities, and the province.[8] That does not translate to per-capita spending relating to First Nations that is actually felt on the ground on reserves. Much of the funding is retained to maintain the administration of First Nations programs and policies.

Recognition of Indigenous Rights and Rebuilding the Economy

The lack of meaningful recognition of First Nations' self-determination by the Government of Canada and the Government of British Columbia, arising from their inherent and unextinguished title and rights and deep connection to their territories, only perpetuates poverty and social inequality. These linkages are discussed throughout this report, with the conclusion that this cannot be remedied simply by focusing on social assistance programming. Indigenous communities in B.C. and across Canada experience ongoing harm from colonization. The cumulative effects of these traumatic experiences, spanning multiple generations, have created disproportionate socio-economic hardships for Indigenous peoples; they are linked to the creation and maintenance of poverty and have been identified as a determinant of poor health, resulting in lower states of health and well-being for Indigenous peoples.

[8] See Graham (2006). In 2004/2005, the typical per capita spending on-reserve was $17,000 CAD. Canadian municipalities or cities spend, on average, $1,800 CAD per resident: provincial and federal government about $6,000 to $7,000 CAD per citizen.

Meaningful poverty reduction strategies need to consider the full acknowledgement of First Nations' inherent title and rights over their land and waters, because there is a relationship between economics and land title. The 2004 Supreme Court of Canada case of *Haida Nation vs British Columbia (Minister of Forests)* is a case in point. The court not only confirmed that there is an economic component of title, whereby Haida have title and rights to the land, waters, and sea of Haida Gwaii but also led to the payment of royalty fees to the Nation by the province.[9] Knowing the grounds of the current government's approach to poverty reduction to avoid the perpetuation of colonial policy, would make for more meaningful conversations and actions to break state-funded dependency and disrupt the cycle of poverty in many ways, as discussed in this report.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In advancing this important work, with respect to a value-based and ongoing strategy for engaging with Indigenous Nations, organizations, and communities, understanding the constitutional framework and evolving policy context are important in this relationship-building journey. In addition to treaties, which are constitutionally protected and enshrine rights to land, resources, and more, federal law (namely the *Constitution Act*, 1982) also protects Aboriginal rights. Aboriginal rights are inherent and collective rights are based on self-determination regarding governance, land, resources, and culture. However, it is difficult to generalize about definitions of Aboriginal rights because of the diversity among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada.

Through *Indian Act* legislation and other federal policies, Canada sought to diminish and eliminate the rights, governments, culture, resources, lands, languages, and institutions of Indigenous peoples. The goal of these policies was to assimilate Indigenous peoples into "mainstream" European culture against their will. Residential schooling became a central element in this policy. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, which operated from 2008 to 2015, addressed the destructive legacy of residential schools and the genocide that occurred due to the forcible removal of over 150,000 Indigenous children (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) from their families and homelands. In the residential schools, children experienced a wide range of abuse and severe atrocities. The TRC was led by Chair Justice Murray Sinclair, and two commissioners, Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild. The TRC was established in response to demands of residential school survivors as outlined in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which was ratified in May of 2006. The IRSSA included the TRC, as well as the Common Experience Payment (CEP), the Independent Assessment Payment (IAP), health and healing services for survivors and their families, and $20 million for the Commemoration Fund for both national and community commemorative projects.

[9] *Haida Nation v. British Columbia (Minister of Forests)*, [2004] 3 S.C.R. 511, 2004 SCC 73.

Canada's *Indian Act* was based on notions of Indigenous inferiority and facilitated discrimination against Indigenous peoples. These laws and policies resulted in disparities and inequalities between Indigenous peoples and Canadian society. Reconciliation is about addressing these inequalities and working to establish and maintain mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Reconciliation is also about ensuring systemic and cultural change to eliminate racist and discriminatory practices, policies, and approaches in anticipation of a shared future together. Reconciliation requires truth and justice. Governments, communities, and individuals play a central role in establishing and maintaining a respectful relationship with Indigenous peoples and ensuring that these inequalities are addressed at all levels.

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was based on nearly 7,000 statements by survivors and Calls to Action and which includes 94 recommendations, was published in 2015. The TRC final report highlights how the Canadian legal system, in tandem with churches, policymakers, and lawyers, played an active role in forcing Indigenous children into residential schools. The intergenerational impacts of residential schools continue to profoundly impact Indigenous peoples today in terms of health, ability to speak Indigenous languages, connections to family, engagement in ceremonial practices, land-based practices, etc. The intent of federal Bill C-15 and provincial Bill 41 is to implement the TRC's calls to recognize the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a legislative framework at federal and provincial levels. On November 26, 2019, the province of British Columbia's legislators unanimously passed the B.C. *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA). At the federal level, Bill C-15, *An Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, received royal assent on June 21, 2021 (Parliament of Canada). The passage of Bill C-15 requires that the Government of Canada, in consultation with Indigenous peoples, take all measures necessary to align the laws of Canada with UNDRIP, similar to the requirement of Bill 41 to bring provincial laws into harmony with UNDRIP. A federal action plan must be prepared within two years of Bill C-15 coming into force, and a provincial action plan is currently being developed.

The B.C. government's commitment to DRIPA, which was passed into law in November 2019, should result in a meaningful poverty reduction strategy to ensure specific articles are upheld. These include Article 24 (health), Article 14 (education), Article 21 (improvement of economic and social conditions, including housing and employment) and various articles pertaining to the rights of children. The rights articulated in relevant articles are outlined below.

UNDRIP Article 10 states:

1. Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return.

UNDRIP Article 14 states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

UNDRIP Article 21 states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

2. States shall take effective measures and, where appropriate, special measures to ensure continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.

UNDRIP Article 22 states:

1. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities in the implementation of this Declaration.

2. States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.

UNDRIP Article 24 states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.

2. Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of this right.

UNDRIP Article 26 states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.

2. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired.

3. States shall give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories and resources. Such recognition shall be conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned.

In B.C., DRIPA establishes the UN Declaration as the province's framework for reconciliation, as called for by the TRC's Calls to Action, which requires an action plan. The action plan will provide a province-wide, whole-of-government roadmap toward reconciliation and outlines shared long-term goals and outcomes needed for the provincial government to meet the objectives of the UN Declaration over time. This action plan needs to ensure that there is a pathway out of poverty, while upholding Indigenous peoples' inherent right to self-determination, economic freedom, and the right to their title and rights, treaty relations, and relationships to their territories.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the income support system in B.C. and socio-economic overview of Indigenous communities in B.C. as a way to highlight the extent to which targeted efforts to address the structural barriers faced by Indigenous communities need to be addressed.

Income Support in B.C.

THERE IS A MYRIAD OF social assistance programs available to B.C. residents.[10] They broadly fall under two categories: cash-transfer programs (income support programs) that provide assistance payments to cover the cost of food, shelter, clothing, and other daily necessities; and in-kind benefit programs intended to benefit those in need due to limited resources (social supports). The source of the supports available to Indigenous residents depends on whether they live within a First Nations community (on-reserve) or outside a First Nations community (off-reserve). In the latter case, the support is provided by the B.C. government. In First Nations communities, this role is taken over by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). In what follows, we briefly describe both provincial and federal programs. For a more detailed overview, as well as important changes to programs over the years, see Appendix A.

By far, the largest program in terms of expenditure offered by the B.C. government can be categorized as Income Assistance (IA), which includes both Disability Assistance (DA) and Temporary Assistance (TA). This program is administered by SDPR. Individuals can apply for Income Assistance through three channels: online (self-serve portal), over the phone (call-in centre), and in a SDPR or Service BC office (staff-assisted or self-serve). The Income Assistance program is a hybrid of cash transfers and in-kind benefits, which are significantly reduced when other income is earned. Income Assistance consists of a support allowance, intended to cover the cost of food, clothing, and personal and household items of the family, and a shelter allowance, intended to pay for actual shelter costs up to a maximum amount. The support allowance and shelter allowance as well as earnings exemptions (above which there is a 100 percent claw-back of support) vary by family size. For single employable persons, for example, the monthly rates are $560 in income support, an upper limit of $375 shelter allowance, and a $500 earnings exemption.[11] About 30 percent of all clients currently receive Temporary Assistance. To be eligible, applicants must meet income and asset requirements and fit the criteria of one of four groups: Expected to Work (employable individuals), Expected to Work Medical Condition (employable individuals with short-term medical issues), Temporarily Excused (single parents with a child under three and seniors), or Persons with Persistent

[10] The Final Report of the BC Expert Panel on Basic Income (Green et al., 2020) lists over 120 such programs under the jurisdiction of the B.C. government, with an additional 72 programs under federal jurisdiction.

[11] See https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/income-assistance/on-assistance. Temporary COVID-19 top-ups are not included.

Multiple Barriers (PPMBs, individuals with a medical condition that precludes or impedes employment). Persons on Disability Assistance make up the remaining 70 percent of clients; those individuals have severe long-term conditions and are eligible for higher assistance rates, supplementary assistance, and specialized employment supports. Importantly, Disability Assistance also includes a higher annual earnings exemption, currently $15,000. For a detailed description and a history of policy changes, as well as an assessment of the current system of income and social supports provided by the province of British Columbia, we refer the reader to the Final Report of the Expert Panel on Basic Income (Green et al., 2020).

ISC provides the funding for Income Assistance on-reserve.[12] Program delivery is managed by individual First Nations communities or organizations, and often administered by Band Social Development Workers, who also complete the intake for all clients. The financial assistance from ISC takes three forms: basic needs (food, clothing, and shelter), special needs (special needs allowances such as special diets, appliances, etc.), and pre-employment supports (counselling and life skills training in essential skills, etc.).

The rates and eligibility criteria of the federal social assistance program provided by ISC are aimed to align with provincial and the Yukon Income Assistance programs (Government of Canada, 2021). In practice, however, on-reserve Income Assistance is not comparable to off-reserve Income Assistance for several reasons. First, historical, cultural, social, and labour market realities are markedly different on- and off-reserve; we noted earlier that barriers to employment as well as basic needs for food, shelter, and utilities are elevated in First Nations communities, particularly when they are in remote locations. Second, B.C. has a strong and extensive service delivery system in place, which includes active case management and pre-employment services to help clients transition to the workforce. Individual First Nations communities, in contrast, do not have the capacity or the resources to deliver programs to the same extent and with the same quality as the provincial program. Case management is not generally available. Thus, on-reserve Income Assistance does not offer the same suite of services that are as easily accessible as off-reserve, and service delivery varies greatly depending on the community. Disparities between on-reserve and off-reserve services in our interviews with Community Integration Specialists and Band Social Development Workers will be discussed further in this report.[13]

[12] For a description of the program and current guidelines, see https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100035256/1533307528663.

[13] See also Indigenous Services Canada (2018), *Evaluation of the On-Reserve Income Assistance Program*, Evaluation, Performance Measurement and Review Branch.

3. Overview of Indigenous Peoples and Communities in B.C.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS such as health, income, education, and employment contribute to the well-being of all people. Any investigation into poverty and economic needs and what social assistance has or has not achieved must be placed into the larger context of demographic and socio-economic indicators. As part of our mandate, we provide in the following section a socio-economic profile of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia, with a focus on reporting gaps compared to non-Indigenous people. The profile reaffirms that Indigenous peoples in B.C. are poorer, enjoy far fewer social and economic opportunities than the rest of the population, and have less access to basic services. These conditions are determinants and outcomes of poverty at the same time, and thus signify mechanisms that cause continued poverty within and across generations. Importantly, they are intertwined with, and aggravated by, the dispossession of lands and cultural traditions, social inequities, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by Indigenous peoples.

Although this section shows that Indigenous peoples in B.C. experience significant and persistent inequities that affect their health and social and community well-being, one should keep in mind that Indigenous peoples continue to show remarkable resilience and strength. Notably, many First Nations communities have already taken important steps to address the structural origins of inequity through self-government, treaty implementation, land management codes, and traditional governance systems.

Basic Demographics

The most recent comprehensive enumeration of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia is the 2016 Census. Other sources available do not include on-reserve Indigenous peoples.[14] Over 270,500 people were identified as "Aboriginal" in the 2016 Census in B.C.[15] representing roughly 16 percent of the Indigenous population in Canada and 6 percent of the overall population in B.C. Compared to the previous 2011 Census, the number grew by 16.5 percent over the five-year period, partly due to population growth but also due to an increasing willingness to identify as Aboriginal. Of B.C.'s Aboriginal population in 2016,

[14] The DIP data as well as most social surveys in Canada do not cover the on-reserve population. The census is the only major source of data for households and individuals residing on-reserve in B.C.

[15] The Aboriginal identifier in the census is used for any respondent who self-identifies as Aboriginal, and/or is registered under the *Indian Act*, and/or is a member of a First Nation or Indian Band.

172,520 people (64.8 percent) identified as First Nations, 89,405 people (33 percent) as Métis, and 1,615 (0.6 percent) as Inuit. The remaining 1.6 percent identified as multiple Aboriginal identities or Aboriginal identities not included elsewhere. Of all First Nations people in B.C., 125,635 had Registered or Treaty Indian status; this represents 72.8 percent of B.C. First Nations and about half of the Aboriginal population. About 30 percent of First Nations resided in a First Nations community; the rest lived off-reserve.

We will distinguish between three major sub-populations identified in the census. Aboriginal persons "on-reserve" are defined as residing in a census subdivision (CSD) classified as a reserve.[16] These are almost exclusively First Nations, and we will therefore refer to this sub-population as First Nations on-reserve. The second group is Aboriginal persons "off-reserve" who are not living in a First Nations community. This includes people who self-identify as "Aboriginal" in the census but are not identifying as census categories "First Nations only," "Métis only," or "Inuit only". The last group is the non-Aboriginal population.

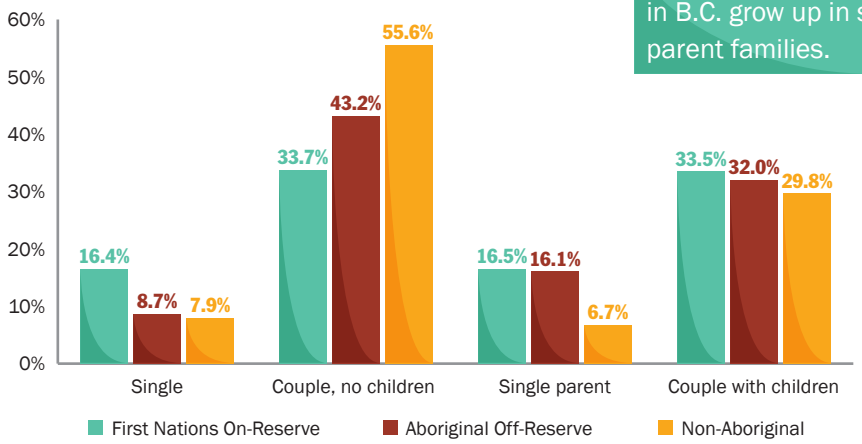
First Nations households on-reserve are larger, on average, than their off-reserve and non-Aboriginal counterparts. While half of all households on-reserve have children, only about 35 percent of non-Aboriginal households do. Because children make up a larger percentage and the elderly a smaller percentage of household members in the Indigenous population, Indigenous households also tend to have a lower average age. Family composition is important, because lone-parent families are often subject to greater income stress than two-parent families. As Figure 1-1 shows, the percentage of households with one parent is more than twice as high among Indigenous families than among non-Indigenous families. Since the former also have more children, this imbalance is compounded when considering the type of family in which a given child is likely to grow up. One in three, or roughly 30,000, Indigenous children grow up with a single parent in British Columbia. For non-Indigenous children, the number is less than one in five.[17]

[16] With the exception of Esquimalt Nation, all B.C. First Nations are enumerated in the census and, unlike in the general population, the long form questionnaire was distributed to every household on-reserve. Unless stated otherwise, the source of all data in this section is the 2016 Census of the Population (long form, 1 percent sample). There were 418 CSDs classified as reserves in the 2016 Census, 63 of which were unpopulated and 136 of which had a population below 40 and were suppressed in the data as a result.

[17] According to the 2016 Census, 29,685 Aboriginal children lived in single-parent households, compared to 117,095 non-Aboriginal children.

Figure 1-1: Family Characteristics by Subpopulation

1 in 3 Aboriginal children in B.C. grow up in single-parent families.



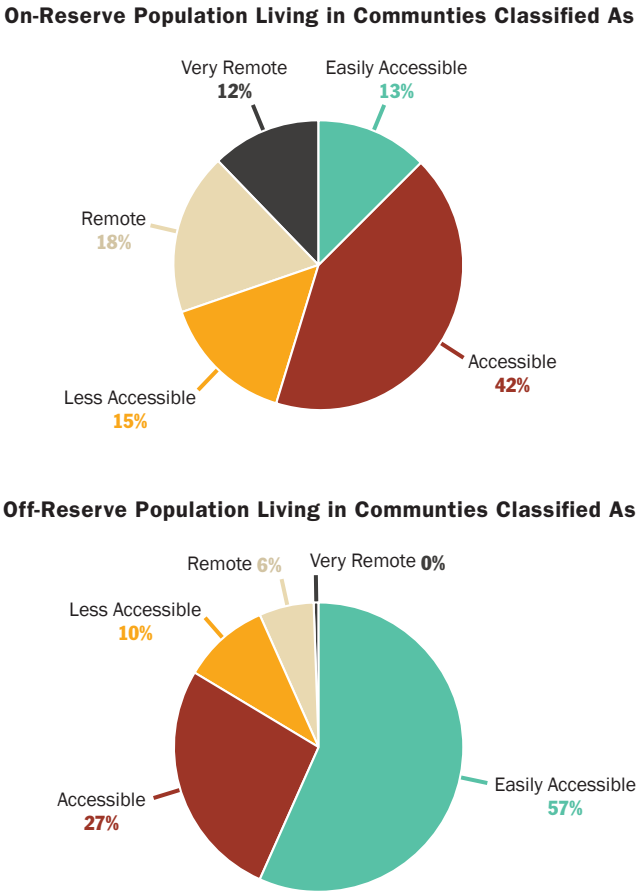
Geographic Location

Although rural and remote communities are not homogeneous and each has a unique set of factors contributing to the social and emotional well-being of its members, they do face common challenges that distinguish them from urban centres, such as fewer employment opportunities, limited or no access to specific public services and health care, among others. The cost of living, transportation costs, and the cost of accessing services or health care also tend to be disproportionately higher in those communities. Approximately 30 percent of Indigenous peoples in B.C. lived in rural and remote communities in 2016, a much higher proportion than the overall population. Two out of five status First Nations people lived on-reserve, and 74 percent of those households lived in rural or remote areas, with only 14 percent living in urban population centres. The opposite is true for non-Indigenous families, with 13 percent living in rural areas and 67 percent living in urban centres.

In our context, the concept of "remoteness" is relevant because socio-economic characteristics and population health status depend on location. Rural and remote populations experience poorer health, higher mortality, lower life expectancy, and higher unmet health care needs, all of which co-determine poverty. To measure remoteness, Statistics Canada developed an index for communities that is determined by a populated community's distance to population centres and their population size. Figure 1-2 shows the proportion of the population living in communities classified by the degree of remoteness for two subcategories, First Nations communities and all other communities. We see that in 2016, more than one in ten households on-reserve lived in a community classified as a very remote location.[18] However, no households living off-reserve did. Similarly, while 57 percent of off-reserve households lived in communities that are easily accessible, only 13 percent of First Nations on-reserve households did.

[18] Statistics Canada defines a community as very remote if it is a region where none of the region's employed residents commutes to work in any census metropolitan area (CMA) or census agglomeration (CA), where region refers to a census subdivision. This category also contains very sparsely populated regions with fewer than 40 persons in their resident employed labour force. See https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/17-26-0001/172600012020001-eng.htm for further information on the index.

Figure 1-2: Proportion of Subpopulation, by Subcategory of Communities



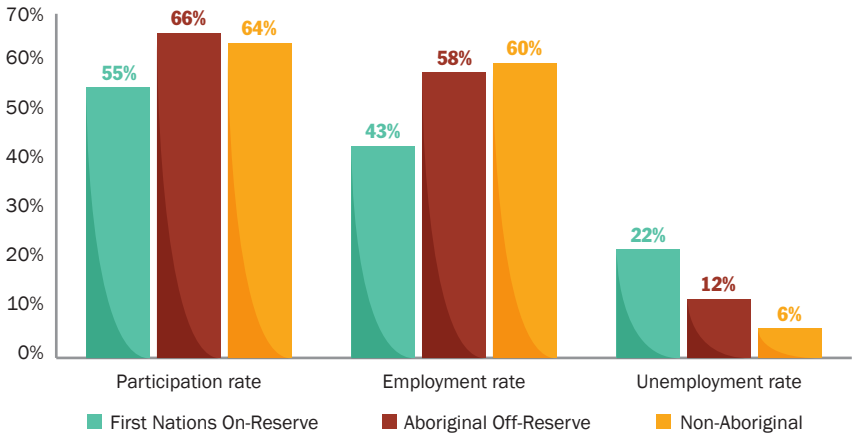
Labour Force Participation and Employment

Employment and working conditions are key determinants of physical and mental health as well as other social outcomes for both individuals and the community. Employment is directly related to household income, and people who are unemployed or underemployed are at an increased risk of homelessness and food insecurity. Indigenous people face a multitude of barriers to employment from lower levels of education, higher levels of poverty, poor housing conditions, lack of transportation, remote locations, structural racism, stereotyping, and discrimination in the workplace.

Despite having the largest household size, families on-reserve had the lowest number of income earners within a household as well as the lowest number of employed household members.[19] Lower employment for this subgroup is also evident at the individual level. Figure 1-3 shows the percentage of people in the labour force (actively looking for work and willing to work) and unemployed, respectively.

[19] This can be partially attributed to Aboriginal economic families on-reserve having the largest number of household members under the age of 18 and the smallest number of household members in the labour force.

Figure 1-3: Employment Statistics, by Subpopulation



Labour force participation and employment was highest for Aboriginal persons living off-reserve. However, this observation should not imply that barriers to employment are non-existent for this subgroup. Although barriers are arguably higher on-reserve, the main difference between households that live outside their First Nations community and those that do not is that many individuals or families moved away to seek or start employment and for that reason alone are more likely to be employed.[20]

Income and Income Poverty

Income

In 2015, the average First Nations family on-reserve had a before-tax total annual income, defined as market income plus government transfers, of $62,357.[21] This compares to $91,727 for an Aboriginal family living off-reserve and $110,091 for non-Aboriginal families. First Nations families on-reserve thus earned almost $50,000 less per annum on average than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The income gap is smaller but still sizable at roughly $20,000 for Aboriginal families off-reserve [Figure 1-4, top chart]. The disparity is driven by market income, as both government transfers and income tax play an equalizing role in after-tax total income. While market income for non-Aboriginal families is twice as high as that of First Nations families living on-reserve, government transfers are 1.36 times higher for the latter group as compared to the former group. Government transfers thus aid in equalizing incomes. In after-tax terms, non-Aboriginal families had roughly 1.5 as much income as their First Nations counterparts on-reserve, on average.

[20] Indeed, major migration from reserves to larger towns and cities has taken place over the past decade(s), which plausibly can be attributed to higher employment and education opportunities off-reserve (Richards, 2020).

[21] Unless otherwise noted, all data are from the 2016 Census of the Population. Throughout this section, one should keep in mind that income and poverty on-reserve are difficult to measure and not necessarily comparable to the corresponding statistics off-reserve. On-reserve, income is often supplemented by in-kind transfers and the use of products from hunting, trapping, fishing, and harvesting. Most importantly, First Nations households on-reserve who live in Band housing may not have to spend as much of their income on housing as their peers living off-reserve.

Among Indigenous families, the single largest contributor to income from government sources is child benefit payments [Figure 1-4, bottom chart]. These payments primarily account for the higher amount of transfers received compared to non-Aboriginal families. It is worth noting that the income data are from 2015, and thus do not yet reflect the substantial increase to the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) in 2016. Off-reserve, Old Age Security (OAS) plus Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) payments also play a comparatively large role. Together with Canada Pension Plan, OAS and GIS are the most likely sources of transfers for non-Aboriginal families, suggesting that the primary recipients for this group are largely seniors. Social assistance payments accounted for a smaller portion of total income for the average family, keeping in mind that the numbers on-reserve do not reflect subsidized housing and other assistance provided to First Nation members.

Figure 1-4: Composition of Income and Government Transfers, by Subpopulation

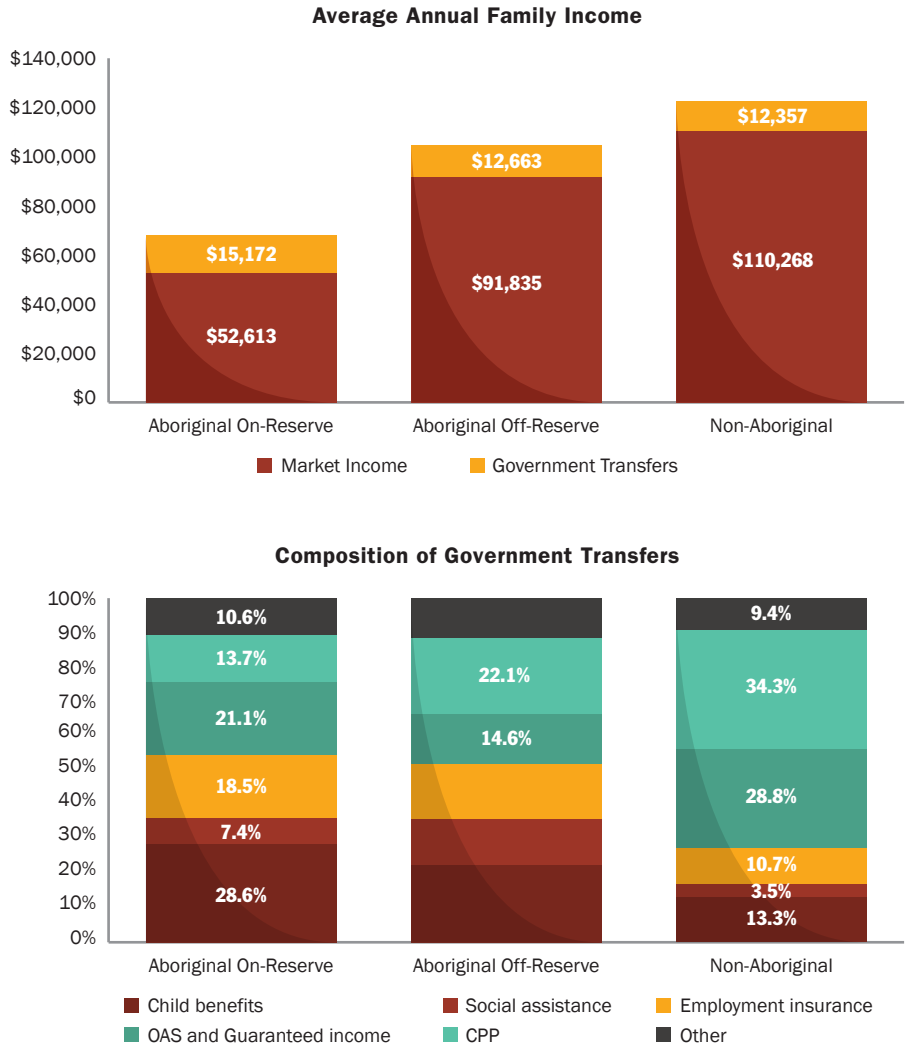
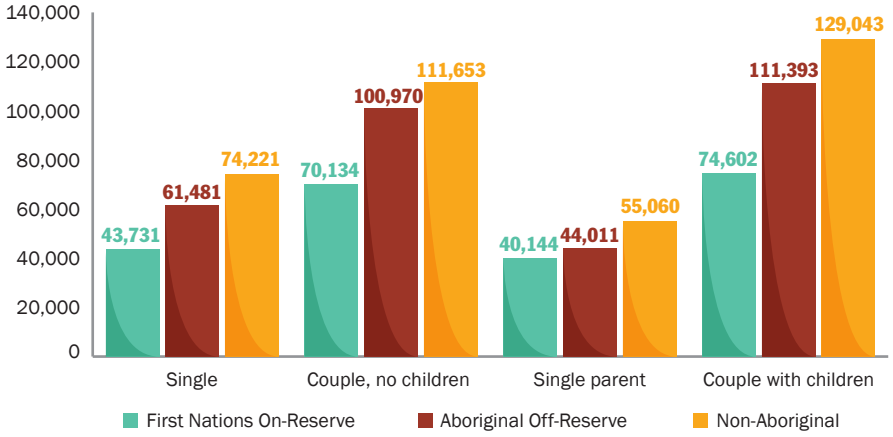


Figure 1-5 shows average incomes by family type. First Nations on-reserve have the lowest incomes in every group, with the largest gaps in the single individual (or single parents without children under 18) category and the couple with children (under 18 years) category. In both cases, average incomes are more than 40 percent lower

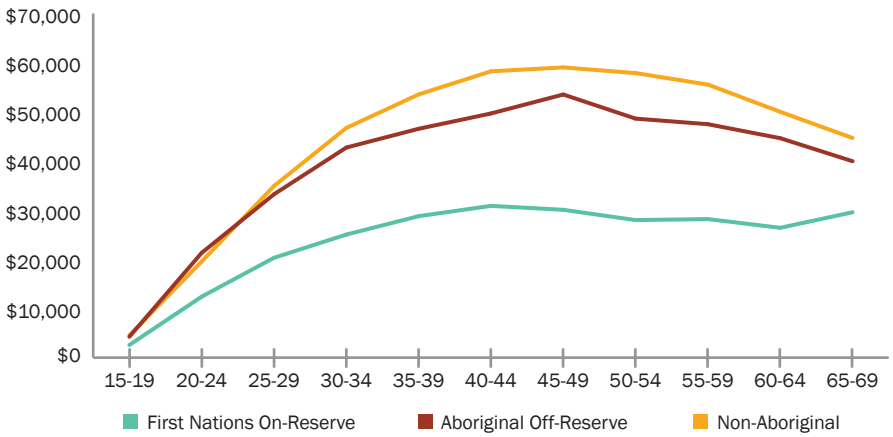
than non-Aboriginal families. For Aboriginal families living off-reserve, the gaps are narrower but still significant. It is worth noting that the largest proportional gap is in the single parent with children category, where the Aboriginal off-reserve population has an income that is 20 percent lower than that of persons with non-Aboriginal ancestry and where, as we saw before, Aboriginal families are severely over-represented.

Figure 1-5: Average Incomes by Family Type and Subpopulation



The picture is similar at the individual level. A closer look at income gaps between Aboriginal people by age group shows two noteworthy points; refer to Figure 1-6. First, income is highest for non-Aboriginal individuals in every age group, except for the age cohort 20-24, where incomes are highest for Aboriginal individuals off-reserve. This likely reflects the fact that non-Aboriginal persons in that age bracket will have a far greater propensity to pursue post-secondary education and, thus, postpone employment. The second observation from the figure below is that the incomes of First Nations individuals on-reserve rise after retirement. This noticeable "anomaly" illustrates once again that total income among First Nations individuals on-reserve is so low that, contrary to the general population, the combined OAS and GIS payments raises their standard of living at age 65.

Figure 1-6: Average Individual Income, by Age Group



Income Poverty

In 2016, B.C. had one of the highest rates of poverty in Canada, with over 557,000 British Columbians living below the official poverty line.

British Columbia's Poverty Reduction Strategy, introduced in 2017, aims to reduce overall poverty in B.C. by 25 percent and child poverty by 50 percent by 2024.[22]

Defining poverty is not easy, even if one confines the concept to a strictly economic dimension of comparing income to a certain (absolute or relative) threshold.[23] In 2018, the Market Basket Measure (MBM) was adopted as Canada's official poverty line. It is computed annually by Statistics Canada based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a "modest, basic standard of living" for different locations and family configurations. A family with income below the MBM threshold can be said to have insufficient income to afford a basket of goods and services deemed necessary to take part in the community where they live. The MBM includes the costs of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter, and other expenses, and is adjusted for region and family type (single, adults with and without children, single parents). Importantly, and unlike other commonly used measures, the MBM accounts for the regional variations in the cost of living, e.g., in different provinces and between urban and rural areas, albeit in a general way. The MBM is therefore more sensitive than other low-income measures to geographical variations in typical living expenses, which is a desirable feature in the context of examining the extent of poverty among Indigenous peoples.

Measuring Poverty

Poverty has many dimensions: low income, material deprivation, lack of education, poor health, unemployment, and social inclusion, all of which limit opportunities and choices, and threaten the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Our approach to measuring poverty for Indigenous peoples is based on a specific definition of (monetary) income or expenditures. It therefore does not allow for a multifaceted understanding of poverty and its elimination. In Part III, we identify other dimensions (specifically, education and health) that are critical to the multi-generational nature of poverty and its elimination. Still, the limited scope of this report precludes an in-depth recognition of other factors that are inextricably linked to poverty, from rates of incarceration and child apprehensions to long-standing colonial practices, structural racism, the dispossession of traditional territories, and the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schools and the Sixties Scoop that perpetuate the experience of poverty by Indigenous peoples.

We also need to understand that the Indigenous perception of poverty is often radically different from a Western colonized world view. Many First Nations across Canada possess no word for "poverty" in their own language and communities do not conceive of themselves as "poor" at all, even though incomes would warrant such a label (Poverty Action Research Project, 2018) in the Western context.

[22] For the full strategy, please refer to: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/poverty-reduction-strategy.

[23] This concept sidesteps the complex nature of poverty, which encompasses an inability to meet basic needs because food, clean drinking water, proper sanitation, shelter conditions, education, health care, and other social services are inaccessible. Broader measures of poverty may also take into account the extent of dependence, oppression, social exclusion, and exploitation.

Nevertheless, there are drawbacks with using the MBM for Indigenous peoples in general and on-reserve in particular. Specifically, although it accounts for the regional cost of living, it is not based on a reserve-specific price index. It thus does not incorporate reserve-specific circumstances such as remoteness or lack of accessibility, which can dramatically increase the cost of transportation, food, and other necessities, elevated energy (heating) costs due to substandard housing, and subsidized Band housing. The measure does not account for subsidized housing, the barter system, or hunting and gathering activities. While some of these factors would imply that using the MBM cannot accurately measure poverty on-reserve, others would lead us to overestimate poverty on-reserve. Due to the lack of data to identify the measurement error, we proceed with the caveat that the MBM threshold is not as clear a measure of poverty for Indigenous peoples as it is for non-Indigenous peoples, in particular when looking at Indigenous people living on-reserve. As there is no evidence or presumption that the measure has a systematic bias, we opted to use it as our primary point of comparison. The main argument is that alternative measures have their own shortcomings, most importantly, they do not account for the differential costs of living. Throughout this section, it is important to keep in mind that all poverty thresholds are established using off-reserve communities.[24]

The following terms are used to discuss poverty.

- The **poverty rate** is the proportion of households whose disposable income falls below the poverty line as measured by the appropriate MBM.
- The **poverty gap**, or depth of poverty, is the average gap between the disposable income of those in poverty and the MBM.
- The **poverty gap ratio** is the poverty gap in percentage terms of the poverty line rather than measured in absolute dollar value.

In 2016, First Nations people on-reserve were almost three times more likely than the general population to live in poverty, and Indigenous people off-reserve were almost twice as likely, using the MBM measure. Poverty rates were 31 percent, 18 percent, and 11 percent, respectively.[25] At the same time, the average dollar amount needed to eliminate poverty for these groups with a (perfectly) targeted annual cash transfer would

[24] See https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2019009-eng.htm. The two other commonly used poverty measures are the Low-Income Cut-Offs (LICO) and the Low-Income Measures (LIM). The LIM is a relative measure of poverty and therefore would remain unchanged if real incomes grew but the income distribution remained constant. The LICO is an absolute poverty measure reflecting the fraction of families that fall below an absolute income threshold. For example, if everyone's income were to double, the LIM would remain unchanged and the LICO would decrease assuming some people's income was lifted above the pre-defined threshold. See the Final Report of the BC Expert Basic Income Panel (Green et al., 2020) for an overview and more details.

We replicated our analysis with the LIM measure for comparison. The conclusions are very similar, and if anything, the poverty rates we found were higher for the LIM than the MBM measure.

[25] The overall poverty rate in B.C. has since fallen to 8.9 percent in 2018, mirroring a nation-wide decrease. One of the main drivers of this trend has been the introduction of the Canada Child Benefit in 2016, which together with rising market incomes has lifted many families out of poverty. Unfortunately, Statistics Canada does not provide recent statistics for the Indigenous population; the 2016 Census is the most recent source of that information.

be $4,209, $1,910, and $1,402, illustrating that the depth of poverty follows a similar pattern to the breadth: First Nations on-reserve have the most profound needs, followed by Indigenous peoples off-reserve. Figure 1-7 depicts poverty rates and poverty gaps for the three groups (at the individual level), as well as a breakdown by employment status (at the economic family level). The latter documents that poverty among families with at least one parent who worked full time all year is still substantial. One in five such families in a First Nations community live in poverty, and one in ten among off-reserve Indigenous peoples, and even for non-Indigenous peoples, the poverty rate for families with a working parent is 8 percent. Notwithstanding these numbers, the figures also show that unemployment is a primary driver of poverty. Not having at least one family member working full-time means that a First Nations family on-reserve has a more than 50 percent chance of falling below the poverty line, and the average dollar amount needed to fill the gap would be over $8,000 annually.

Figure 1-7: Poverty Rates and Gaps by Subpopulation, Overall (Individual) and Employment Status (Economic Family)

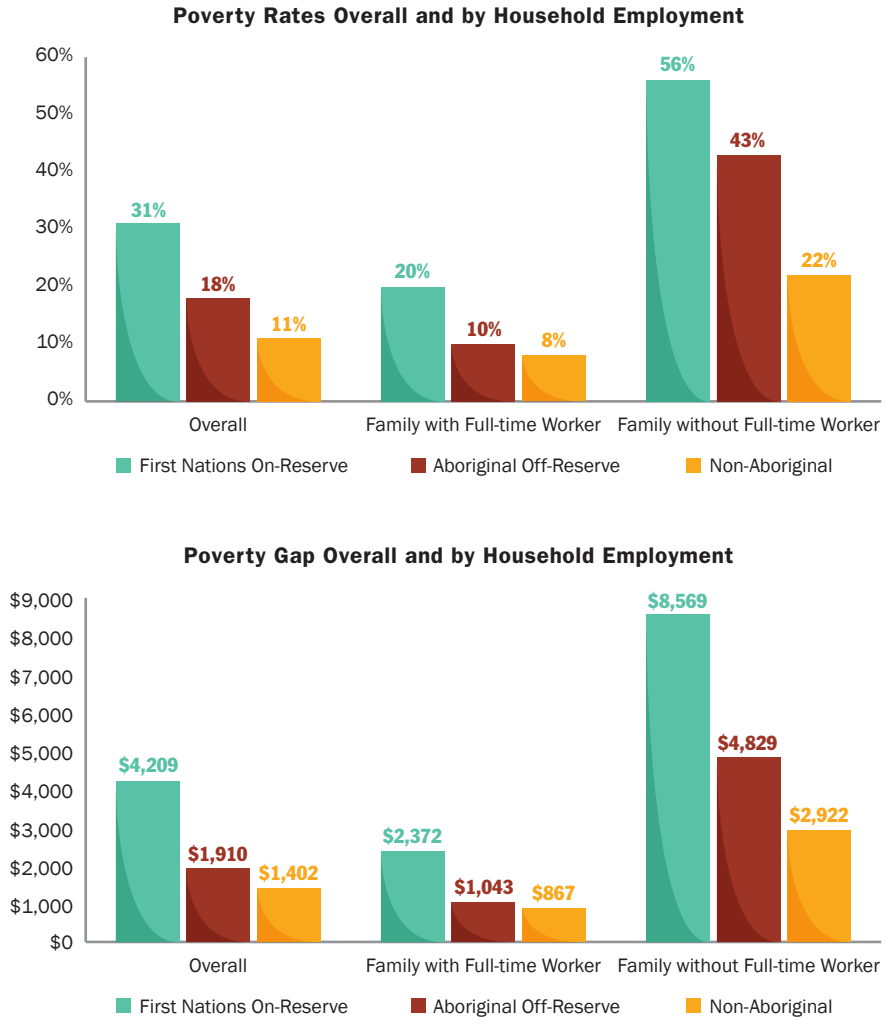
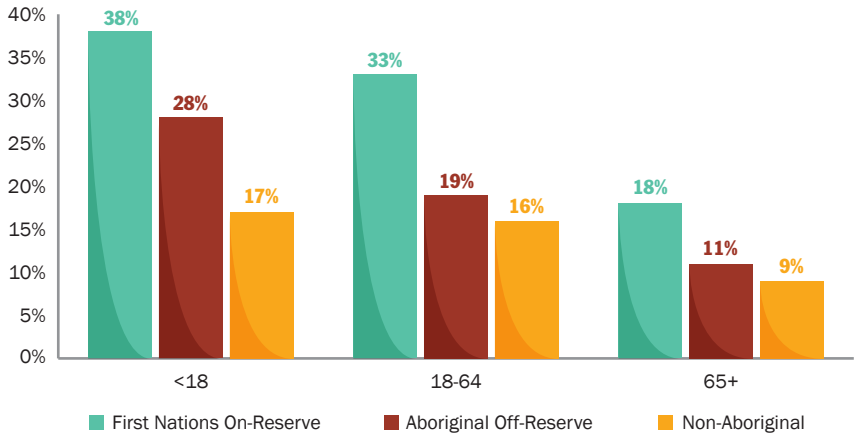


Figure 1-8 provides a poverty rate broken down by age group. Regardless of the group (First Nations on-reserve, Aboriginal off-reserve and non-Aboriginal), poverty rates among children are highest and among seniors are lowest. The poverty rate for First Nations on-reserve was over two times the rate of non-Aboriginal households for all age groups, but the gap is largest for children and for seniors (many of whom will receive OAS and GIS). For self-declared Aboriginal households off-reserve, the poverty rate of children was still 60 percent higher and that of working-age adults was 24 percent higher than for the rest of the population. For seniors only, that gap falls (just) below 20 percent. The figures for children are especially harrowing, and they are even worse if one considers alternative measures of poverty. In a recent report by Beedie et al (2019), *Towards Justice; Tackling Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada,* based on consecutive census waves the Low-Income Measure of Poverty shows that child poverty on First Nations reserves in 2016 was 47 percent and the off-reserve rate was 41 percent. What is more, those numbers remained almost unchanged for a decade.

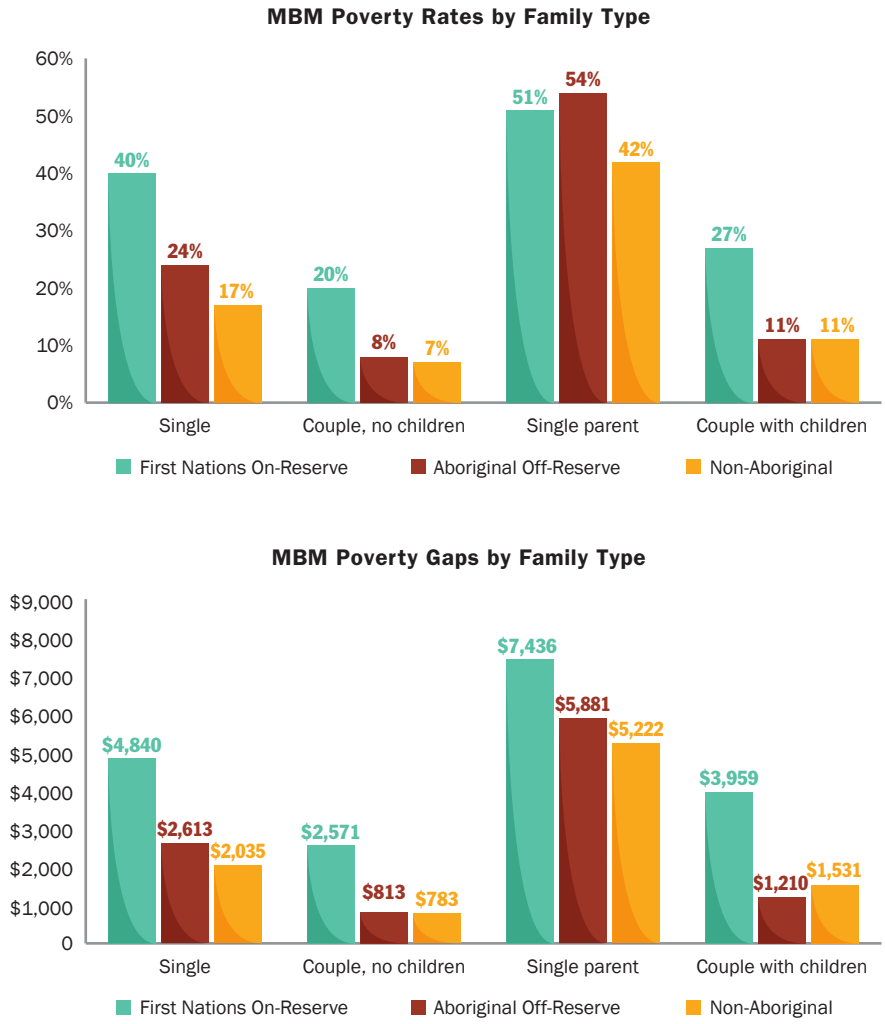
Figure 1-8: Poverty Rates by Age Group and Subpopulation



Looking at family types, Figure 1-9 compares subpopulation poverty rates for single individuals, couples with no children, single parents, and couples with children. Couples (with or without children) have the lowest poverty rates; poverty is most prevalent among single parents in each subpopulation.[26] Poverty among single individuals is also comparatively high, likely driven by working-age adults whose overall poverty rate was over 30 percent in 2016 and has not been trending significantly downward since (Green et al., 2020, p. 75).

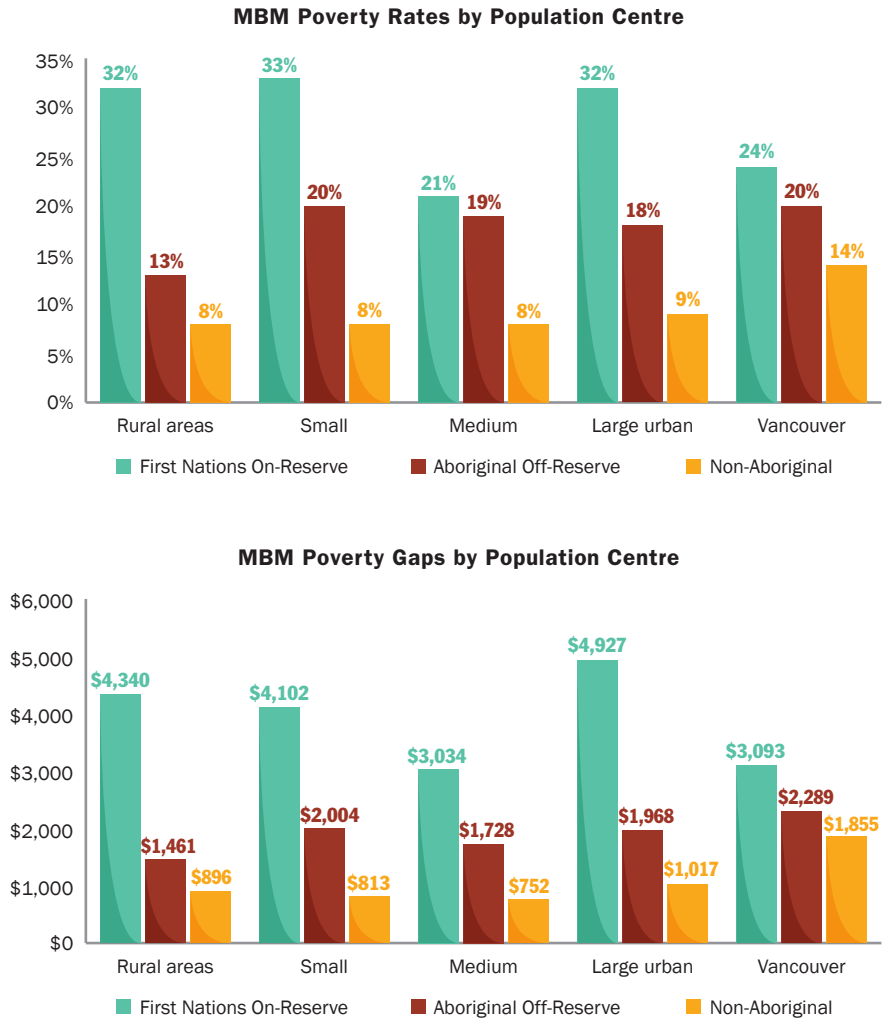
[26] With the introduction of the federal Canada Child Benefit and some provincial measures, the overall rate for single parents has since fallen to 18.6 percent in 2018. See Final Report of the BC Expert Basic Income Panel, 2020 (p. 74).

Figure 1-9: Poverty Rates and Gaps by Family Type and Subpopulation



To study whether poverty was more prevalent in rural areas versus urban centres and whether there were differences in the subpopulations, we disaggregated poverty rates by location. Figure 1-10 documents the breadth and depth of poverty by the type of population centre in which a person resides. We treated Vancouver as a separate location of interest, given its comparatively large urban Indigenous population and cost of housing. The other large urban population centres are cities with over 100,000 residents. Medium-sized cities are classified as having at least 30,000 residents, while small towns have 1,000 residents or more. Residing in any other location would classify the person as living in a rural area. Perhaps the most surprising observation from the numbers is the fact that there is no sizable rural-urban disparity in poverty rates or gaps for any of the subpopulations. The one exception is Vancouver, where the poverty rate and the poverty gap for non-Indigenous residents are notably higher than elsewhere. Otherwise, no consistent pattern emerges regarding location, indicating that rents and affordability of housing (which is included in the MBM measure) are equally problematic across locations. For example, there seems to be no suggestion that the relative gap between the income necessary to maintain a modest standard of living and actual incomes is significantly lower in rural areas than in cities.

Figure 1-10: MBM Poverty Rates and Gaps by Population Centre and Subpopulation



To provide a final complementary perspective, we conducted a regression analysis to better understand whether ancestry or other factors correlated with ancestry are driving Indigenous income poverty in B.C. We found that even when compared to their *same-characteristic* non-Indigenous counterparts, First Nations households on-reserve are still an estimated 11 percentage points more likely to fall below the poverty line, i.e., the gap was still considerable even when compared to non-Indigenous households of the same size, family type, age, and education of the household head, who live in the same region (census area) and share a number of other observable characteristics. The corresponding estimate for off-reserve Indigenous households was much smaller, only 2 percentage points, but still highly statistically significant.[27]

[27] See Appendix D for a primer on regression analysis. The corresponding regression can be found in Table C1.

Income Assistance for Indigenous Peoples in B.C.

ACCORDING TO THE 2016 CENSUS, the average dependency rate for social assistance was almost four times higher among Indigenous families than among non-Indigenous families. While only 4 percent of the latter group received social assistance as part of their declared income, the corresponding figures were 14 percent (off-reserve) and 15 percent (on-reserve) for Indigenous families.

Indigenous peoples are over three times more likely to receive Income Assistance than the rest of B.C.'s population.

Although the census data are suitable to compare on- and off-reserve populations, it is limited in that it contains only income data for the year 2015. To consider longer-term time trends, we analyzed data on Income Assistance from the provincial DIP dataset, which is more detailed than the census and covers a longer period, from 1989 to 2017. The drawback of the DIP data is that we lose information from on-reserve income support recipients.[28] The "Aboriginal" indicator in the DIP data is broadly defined as persons who either self-identified as Aboriginal in the education system or identified as Aboriginal in the births or deaths file or have their MSP premiums paid by Health Canada because they are Registered Indians [Appendix D provides further details].

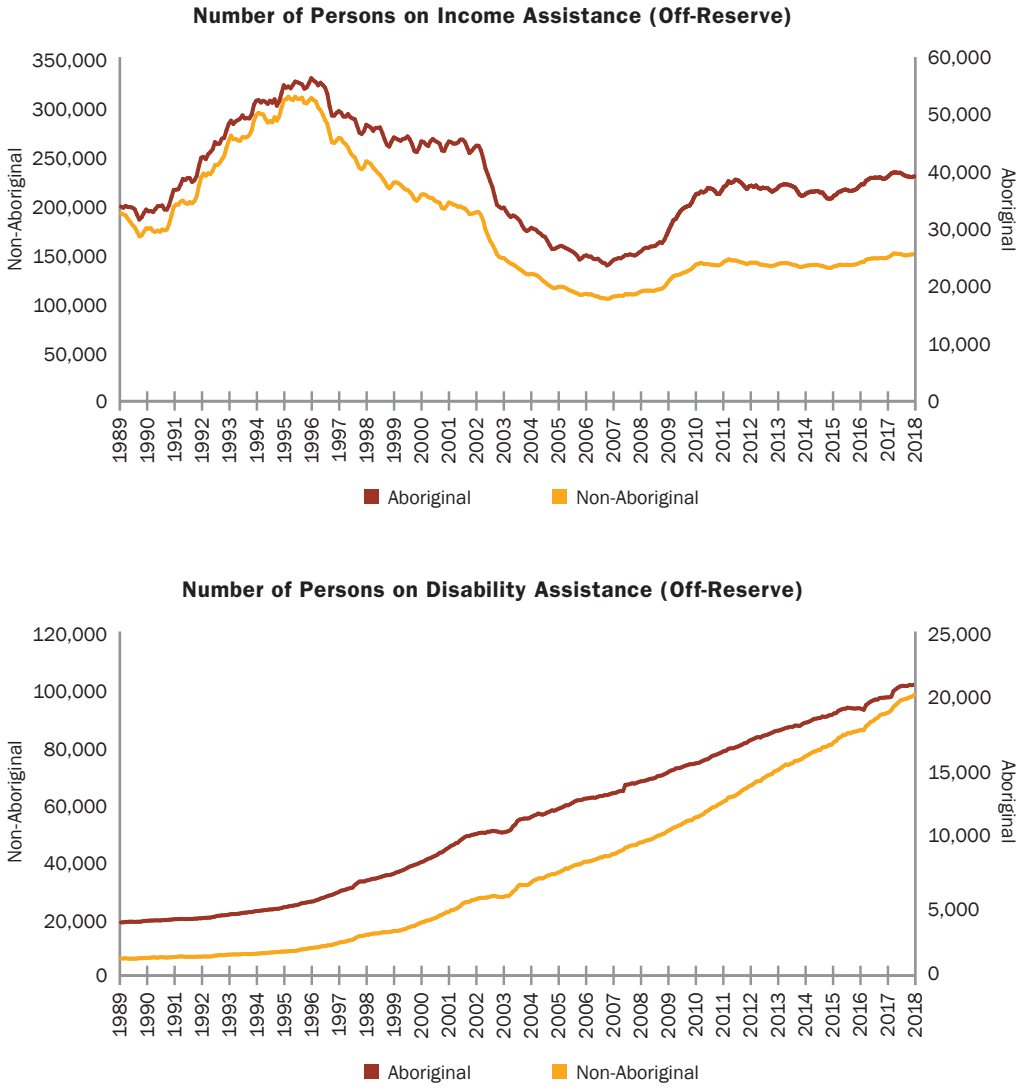
We begin by looking at total provincial caseloads. Indigenous peoples make up a disproportionately large share of provincial Income Assistance recipients. The latest numbers we have available (2017) show that one out of five recipients of Income Assistance payments (or 20 percent) had Indigenous ancestry, significantly more than Indigenous peoples' relative share of the population. Similarly, 16 percent of Disability Assistance recipients were identified as Indigenous in our data. Figure 1-11 illustrates the time trends and reports the number of individuals who received Income Assistance and Disability Assistance by month, broken down by subpopulation. The graph shows that provincial caseloads have changed considerably over time and that the trends for Indigenous peoples (bottom scale) mirror those of non-Indigenous peoples (top scale). Over the first half of the 1990s, caseloads increased rapidly but started to fall sharply in 1996. The decline lasted until 2007 and can be attributed to a series of policy changes in 1996 and 2002, which tightened eligibility criteria and increased requirements to seek work (Green et al., 2020).[29] One key factor for the rise in caseloads after 2007 is a significant and steady rise in Disability Assistance over the entire period. As a fraction of

[28] We were able to obtain some data from ISC; however, the data collected from communities by ISC are so limited in scope that they provide very little useful information beyond the census.

[29] See Appendix A for a list of changes.

cases, Disability Assistance went from 10 percent in 1994 to over 70 percent in 2019, primarily due to a natural accumulation of the cases over time (Disability Assistance requires recipients to have a long-term condition), an aging population, and the expansion of eligibility criteria (specifically, the inclusion of mental health conditions) over that period (2020). Notably, Indigenous Income Assistance clients experienced a much sharper increase in disabilities. While the Disability Assistance caseload quadrupled for non-Indigenous peoples, the increase was 15-fold for Indigenous peoples.

Figure 1-11: Income Assistance and Disability Assistance Recipients (Clients and Dependents) by Subpopulation

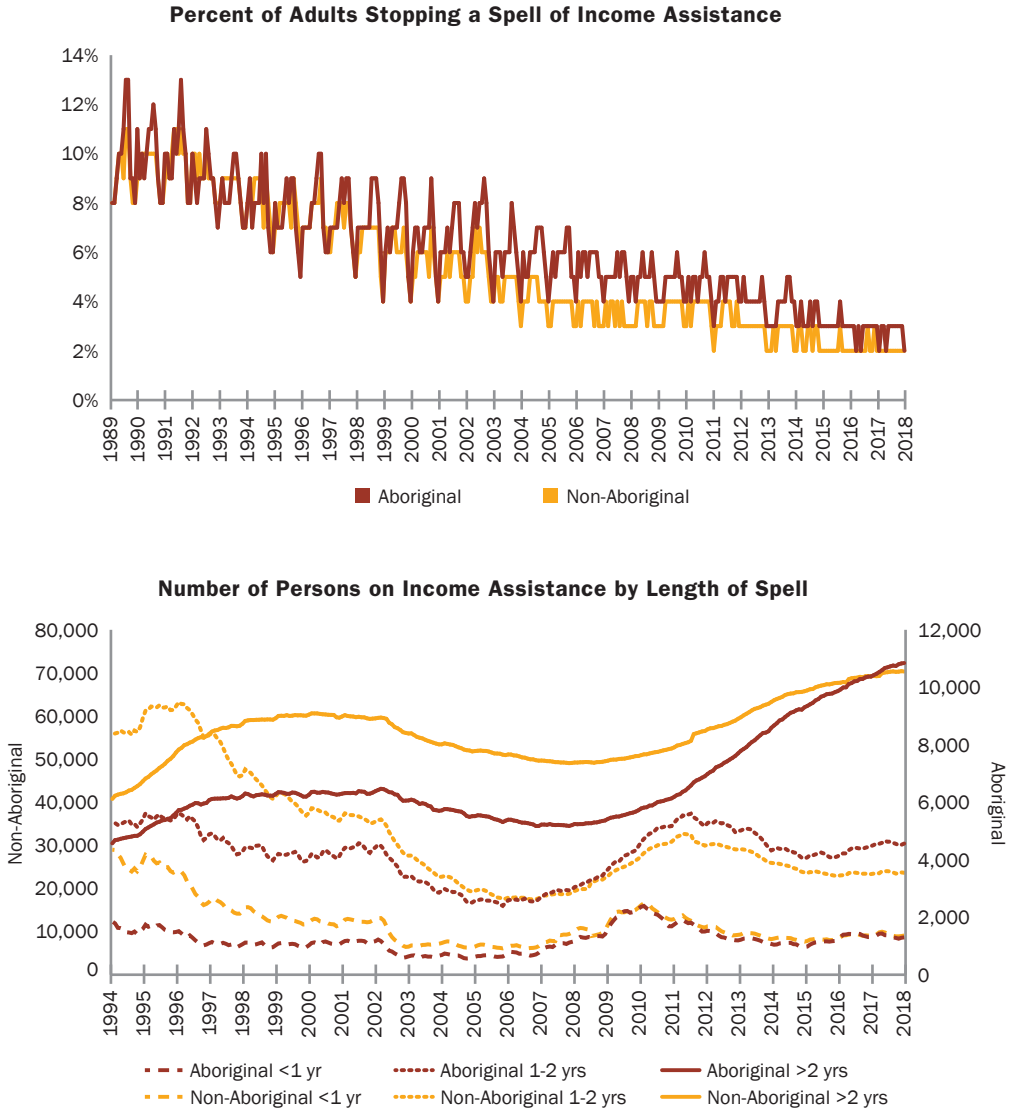


There are other important differences in income support experiences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Figure 1-12 (top chart) shows the proportion of ongoing spells on Income Assistance that end in the month for each month from 1989 to 2017. We see a general downward trend, indicating that long-term Income Assistance spells have become more frequent over time[30] as well as a sharp up-and-down pattern

[30] As Green et al. indicate, among the general population, the percentage of spells that exceed two years nearly tripled over that time period (2020, p. 16).

that reflects seasonal changes in usage. The seasonality is noticeably larger among Aboriginal clients, suggesting a comparatively higher incidence of seasonal work, possibly augmented by transitions to and from reserve for this subpopulation. The bottom chart shows that the provincial Income Assistance system has shifted toward long-term users in general, but that Indigenous peoples have experienced a sharper rise in long-term spells than the rest of clients.

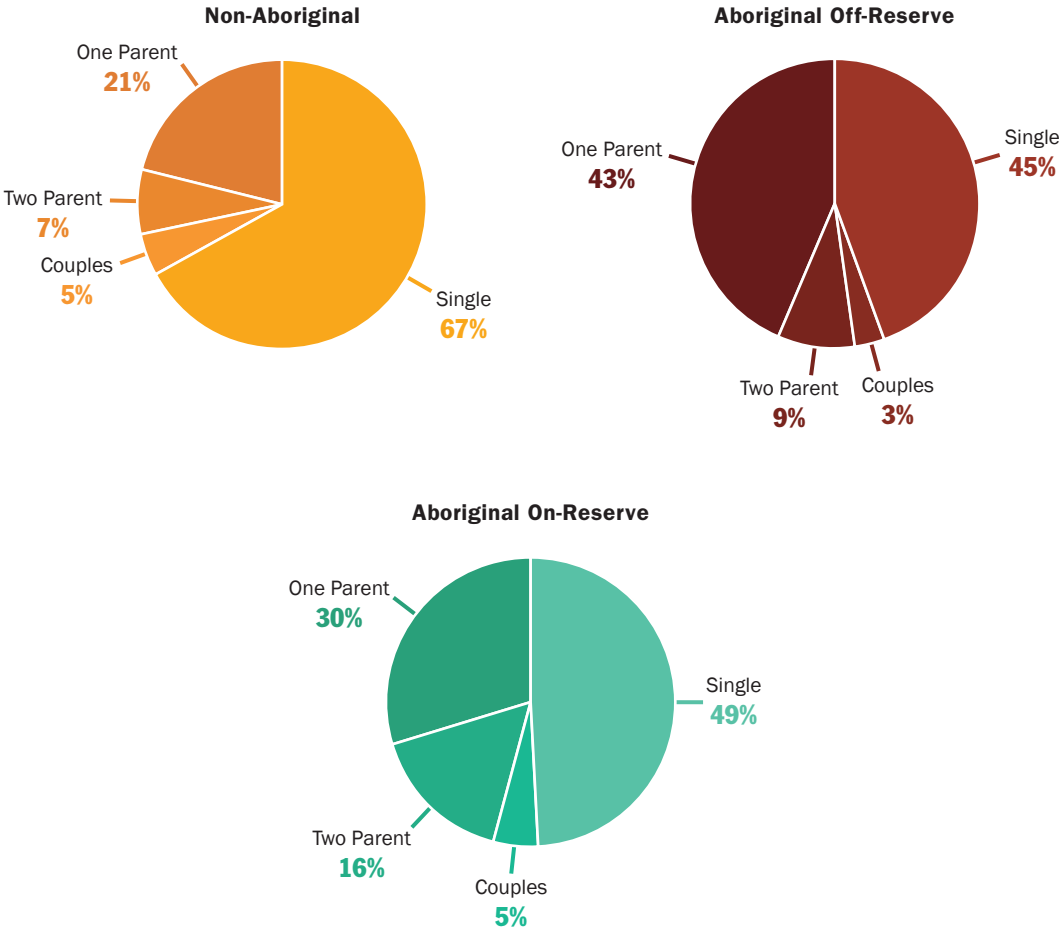
Figure 1-12: Adult Applicants and Spouses (25 and older) Ending an Income Assistance Spell and Receiving Income Assistance by length of spell (in years), by Subpopulation



Another noteworthy difference between subpopulations concerns the family composition of Income Assistance clients, which is illustrated in Figure 1-13 (2017 data, from the DIP dataset and ISC). While two-thirds of non-Indigenous recipients are single persons, less than half of Indigenous recipients on-reserve and off-reserve are single persons. Instead, a larger percentage of Income Assistance recipients are in one-parent families; off-reserve, this share is two times larger than in the non-Indigenous recipient group and

growing faster. The fact that one-parent families are over-represented among Indigenous income support recipients relative to single persons is important because, by definition, the one-parent family includes young and more vulnerable dependents.[31] The pattern is also consistent with a concern expressed by one of our key informants, a Community Integration Specialist who noted that child support orders appear to be disproportionately rare among Indigenous single parents. Although child support is exempt from income calculations to determine eligibility for assistance, it is often paid alongside spousal support which is not exempt and thus affects dependency rates. The SDPR worker stated further that the disproportionate lack of child support orders among Indigenous single parents on welfare seems to have originated in a 2015 policy change of the ministry's Family Maintenance Enforcement Program. While the new policy no longer deducted child support from Income Assistance payments, the worker worried that it inadvertently affected Indigenous single parents negatively because the requirement to sign over the rights to pursue child and spousal support claims to the ministry was dropped, resulting in fewer legal actions to obtain support.[32]

Figure 1-13: Composition of Income Assistance Recipients, by Subpopulation



[31] Over the period 2007 to 2017, the number of single parents grew by 29 percent among non-Indigenous clients and 35 percent among Indigenous clients.

[32] The B.C. government offers several services for Income Assistance clients to help with obtaining or defending a maintenance order or written agreement; further details are provided here: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual/general-supplements-and-programs/family-maintenance-services.

Summary Remarks

The section has illustrated how Indigenous peoples in B.C. are disproportionately and negatively affected by poverty. The underlying reasons for the ongoing and disproportionate income vulnerability that impacts Indigenous peoples and communities in B.C. are manifold: socio-economic factors, such as barriers to education and lack of access to medical service providers (see Part III); remote locations where employment and educational opportunities are not readily available; *Indian Act*-imposed obstacles to good governance and functional capital markets;[33] ongoing land dispossession; political, social, and cultural oppression and marginalization; intergenerational trauma; and systemic racism. Together, these elements form the larger context within which the experiences of Indigenous residents of B.C. need to be considered. We saw that income poverty permeates all age groups and family types, though one-parent families and single working-age adults are especially affected. Being employed is no shield from poverty either – one in five families on-reserve and one in ten families off-reserve with at least one full-time working adult fall below the poverty line. The gaps are large. The average family on-reserve would require $4,000 annually to reach the poverty line. Outside First Nations communities, to close the average gap would still require an additional $2,000 annually.

One consequence of the over-representation of Indigenous peoples among the B.C. population experiencing poverty is that this group is disproportionately represented among the users of both provincial and federal income support systems. It is therefore paramount to pay particular attention to what First Nations and Indigenous peoples have to say when it comes to their experiences with, and their perceptions of, those systems. Any discussions or decisions designed to reform the Income Assistance program must not only ensure that they would be preceded by deep consultation with Indigenous Income Assistance recipients, Indigenous leadership, and organizations, but also that those voices are placed front and centre in guiding concrete actions and next steps in policy formation and implementation.

In the next section, we report on the voices we heard from Indigenous peoples and communities. The community-based research process is focused on understanding the current system of income supports from an Indigenous perspective, learning from the Indigenous community about issues and gaps, and highlighting opportunities for improvement and alignment with community needs and aspirations.

[33] It is with some regret that we have to leave out the very important question of institutions and their effect on sustainable well-being from this report. Some scholars have argued that good institutions and state capacity are the most critical factors determining economic prosperity and well-being (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Graham (2006) provides an overview over the peculiar characteristics of First Nations community governance and the embedded pitfalls under the *Indian Act*. See also Aragon and Kessler (2020) for an analysis of the effects of (private) property rights on-reserve and Aragon and Kessler (2021) for a study on electoral codes and well-being in First Nations communities.

PART II:
WHAT WE HEARD FROM COMMUNITY VOICES

What We Heard from Community Voices

IT WAS IMPORTANT TO THE research team that this study was community driven and sought the voices of income support recipients and community knowledge holders within communities, along with the perspectives of front-line Band Social Development Workers (BSDW) and Community Integration Specialists (CIS). During the spring, summer, and fall of 2020, we engaged with six First Nations communities across the province – Tsleil-Waututh, Nak'azdli, Lower Similkameen, Fort Nelson, Tseshaht, and Xaxli'p – and created space for each community to share their voices and perspectives with us. Our work in the communities was based in responsive research and the TRAC method (Quinless & Corntassel, 2018), which braids together Indigenous knowledge with community-based research practices, while using western scientific research methods. The TRAC method ensures that the research approach is safe for participants, respectful, trauma-informed, and rooted in Indigenous cultural values.

The findings in this section are grouped into two main areas: barriers to service, and gaps in service. Along these two dimensions, we report on the main themes and sub-themes that were expressed through the voices of Income Assistance recipients and Key Knowledge Advisors in these communities. How these themes are further supported by empirical information from secondary data analysis is detailed in Part III. In total, we gathered the thoughts and perspectives of 174 people through different qualitative methods including self-administered surveys and in-depth interviews. The voices that contributed to our findings and the total response for each data-gathering method are outlined in Table 2-1. A detailed description of our approach for the community-based research as well as how we overcame the challenges that COVID-19 presented can be found in Appendix C.

Table 2-1: Primary Data Collection Overview

DATA-GATHERING METHOD	TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Interviews with Band Social Development Workers	24
Interviews with Key Knowledge Advisors	36
Household Self-Administered Interviews (representing 277 household members)	104
Community Integration Specialist Interviews	10
Overall Total Study Participants	**174**

Band Social Development Workers

We held 24 interviews with a diverse group of Band Social Development Workers across British Columbia. Our overarching goal was to listen and learn more about the Income Assistance process on-reserve, barriers experienced when applying for assistance, potential gaps in support, and other information deemed to be an important issue or challenge with respect to on-reserve Income Assistance. Band Social Development Workers administer Income Assistance on-reserve for B.C. First Nations communities. Band Social Development Workers play an important role within the Income Assistance program and provide training, policy clarification, and guidance for income support recipients. Given that Band Social Development Workers provide front-line services within Indigenous communities, we centred our initial conversations with these workers as an important part of the research shaping process. We welcomed the opportunity provided by ISC to talk with Band Social Development Workers during the regional Income Assistance training workshops. Our research team provided a meeting table during the Income Assistance in-person training workshops in Parksville, B.C. (October 22-24, 2019) and Richmond, B.C. (November 5-7, 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic).

First Nation Income Support Recipients (Households)

A total of 104 family household interviews were conducted by self-administered questionnaires in the six First Nations communities across the province, covering a total of 277 individuals within these households. To ensure that we gathered knowledge from income support recipients, households were selected according to purposeful sampling. This means that only those households who currently receive or previously received income support were identified in consultation meetings with the community researchers and First Nations representatives. All but one of our interviewed households were currently receiving some form of social assistance, either through their Nation or through the government. Roughly 60 percent of households indicated that they receive Income Assistance (Temporary Assistance or Disability Assistance) from ISC at the moment. The questions were divided into several sections that focused on socio-demographic information, income, and economic-related questions. The questionnaire also included a section where participants could add additional thoughts, suggestions, or comments through an open question before concluding the interview. A demographic profile of the households we interviewed can be found in Appendix C.

Key Knowledge Advisors

We conducted 36 in-depth interviews with Key Knowledge Advisors in the six participating communities who were familiar with the social, economic, and health aspects of community social and economic life. The interviews included individuals from the following groups: Chief and Council, addictions recovery counsellors, family support workers, health directors or health outreach staff, Band administration staff, education staff and traditional knowledge holders. See Appendix A for a sample of questions asked during these interviews.

Community Integration Specialists

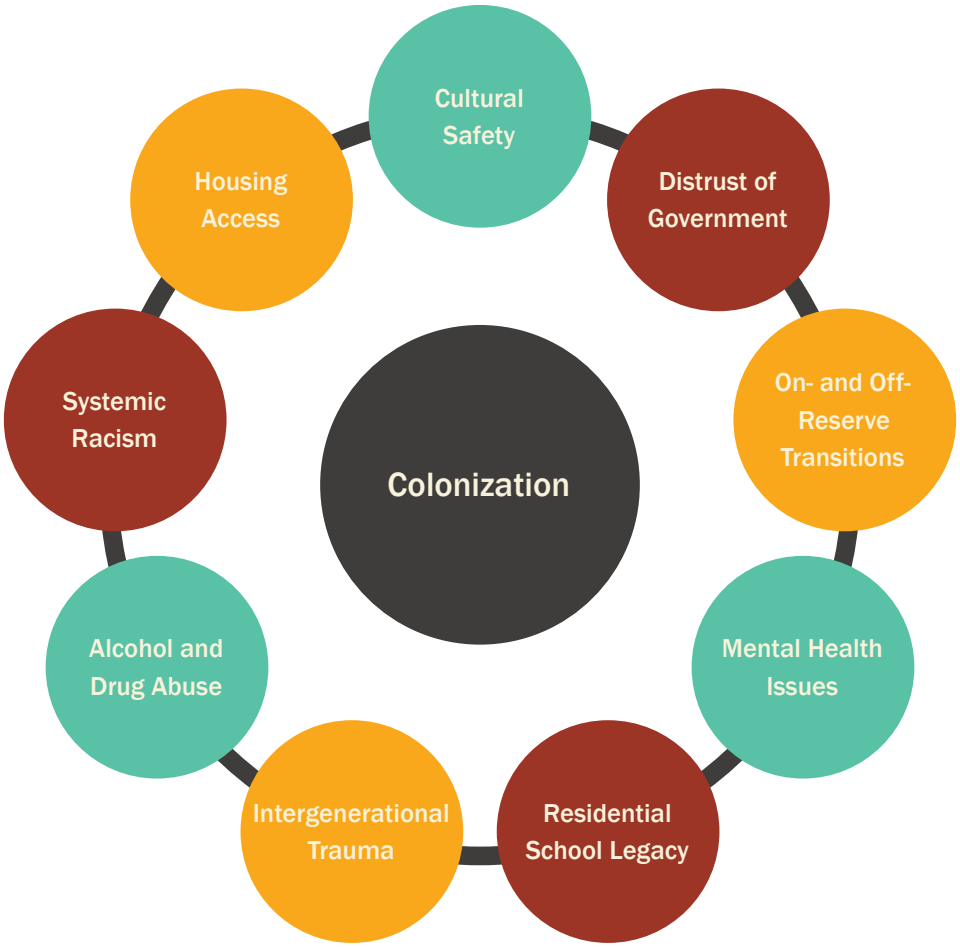
We conducted ten in-depth interviews with Community Integration Specialists from all regions of the province of B.C.[34] Community Integration Specialists are SDPR staff who focus on connecting B.C.'s most vulnerable citizens with financial assistance and community supports. These staff work collaboratively with other government and community agencies to create positive outcomes for clients in their communities. Other ministry staff, such as Employment and Assistance Workers, continue to provide ministry services to vulnerable citizens who are able to navigate within the existing service options, such as through My Self Serve (online access to services), over the phone, and/or by accessing in-person offices. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. They were semi-structured and designed to elicit information about barriers to accessibility and gaps in service faced by Indigenous Income Assistance clients, as well as the unique role that Community Integration Specialists play to ensure that barriers and gaps are reduced for the most vulnerable clients.

[34] Theoretical saturation was reached after the sixth interview, employing the method of assessing saturation outlined in Guest et al. (2020) and applying the most conservative parameters in the assessment.

Barriers to Income Assistance Services

DURING THE RESEARCH PROCESS, PARTICIPANTS, including Band Social Development Workers, Community Integration Specialists, Key Knowledge Advisors, and community members, explained that there are several barriers to accessing Income Assistance services that are directly related to the impacts of colonization. Figure 2-1 provides a visual display of the themes and sub-themes of barriers to Income Assistance services that emerged through our interviews.

Figure 2-1: Impacts of Colonization Related to Barriers to Income Assistance Services



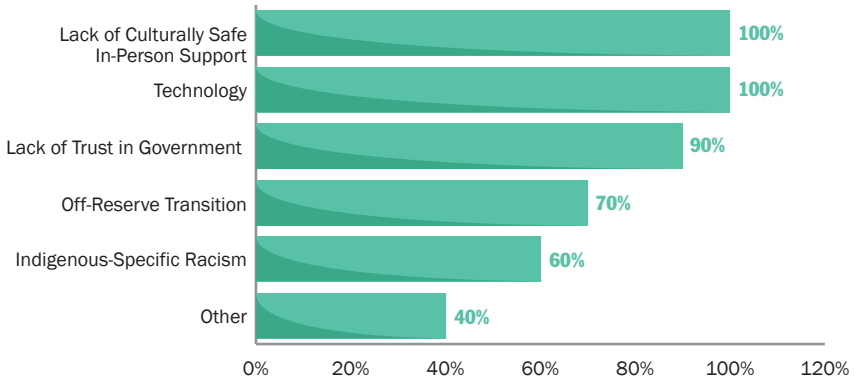
Barrier I: Colonization and Systemic Racism in Government Services

"Systemic and institutional racism create barriers for Income Assistance recipients to improve their quality of life" – Knowledge Advisor Tsleil-Waututh

Ongoing colonization has created discriminating processes and racist beliefs which have been embedded in social policies and practices. These policies and practices have negatively impacted the experience of Indigenous peoples when they connect with the government to access Income Assistance services. Article 24 of UNDRIP states that "Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services," yet our research participants explained that Indigenous people continue to be exposed to deeply disrespectful and racist procedures, policies, and individual attitudes. This in turn creates tension between government service providers and Income Assistance recipients, perpetuating a culture of mistrust held by Indigenous peoples towards government, and generates apathy toward publicly funded services.

In addition, we learned from our interviews with Community Integration Specialists that "a lack of culturally safe in-person support," " barriers to technology," and "a lack of trust in government" were described as the main barriers to services outside First Nations communities. The numbers are presented in Figure 2-2, which identifies barriers to services, including Indigenous specific-racism, a lack of trust in government, a lack of cultural safety, technology barriers, and the transition from on-reserve to off-reserve, as the main barriers to income support services outside First Nations communities.

Figure 2-2: Main Barriers to Service (Community Integration Specialist Interviews)



When passing the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, the B.C. government committed itself to the objectives of the Declaration, including taking "effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the Indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among Indigenous peoples and all other segments of society" (2019, Article 15). However, according to our interviews with Key Knowledge Advisors, Band Social Development Workers and Community Integration Specialists,

clients do not feel comfortable making their circumstances known to government workers, divulging the multitude of challenges they face in their daily lives, and making themselves vulnerable, which is required when one applies for Income Assistance. These factors pose considerable barriers to accessing Income Assistance services and are a direct result of a historical relationship based on colonization.

Need for Culturally Safe Services Off-Reserve

Indigenous peoples move off-reserve to urban centres for a variety of reasons (most notably employment and educational opportunities) that are largely unrelated to the support and services they receive in their communities. As noted in Part I, Section 2, there may be some advantages for potential Income Assistance recipients to apply for, or receive, social support through the B.C. government's Income Assistance program, rather than the federal program from ISC. At the same time, however, residing outside a First Nations community and then having to apply for provincial Income Assistance presents its own unique set of challenges. The underlying reasons for most of those challenges are the absence of a dedicated, culturally safe, and face-to-face channel such as Band Social Development Workers, through which potential clients can connect with services that are offered. When asked about barriers for eligible Indigenous individuals and families to apply for and eventually obtain financial support through the SDPR's programs, the Community Integration Specialists overwhelmingly identified obstacles that are rooted in the lack of a culturally safe environment.

Barrier 2: Accessing and Navigating the Support System

Aside from the need for a culturally safe environment in which government services can be accessed and utilized without discrimination, stigma, or fear of mistreatment, we heard about several barriers that are directly related to accessing and navigating the system of income supports. Table 2-2 provides a list of sub-themes related to these challenges:

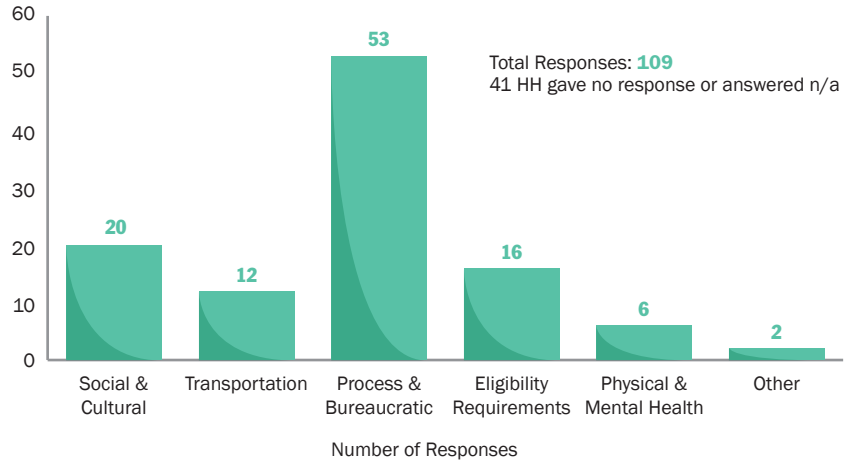
Table 2-2: Sub-Themes Related to Barriers to Accessing and Navigating Income Assistance

SUB-THEMES
Difficulties People Face Navigating a Complex System
Lack of Access to Phones, Computers, and the Internet
Need for Face-to-Face Interactions

Difficulties People Face Navigating the System

An important barrier identified by participants is related to challenges that people experience when applying for Income Assistance because of the difficulty navigating the system and the need to have all the required documentation. In the household interviews, we asked participants about the barriers they faced when trying to get on income support. Overall, Key Knowledge Advisors named barriers that could be placed into five categories, summarized in Figure 2-3 below. From the graph, we can identify the most prominent challenges related to the process and bureaucratic requirements. Within this category, households identified the complexity of paperwork, the requirement of documentation that is often lacking, and delays in the approval process as the most challenging hurdles. Difficulties filling out and understanding the paperwork was listed equally as often as missing documents such as ID, bank statements, and tax forms. Qualifying for assistance was mentioned as a further problem. About 25 percent of households said that they did not meet the eligibility requirements, e.g., because they had a small part-time job they did not want to give up or because they had an asset such as a farm they did not want to sell. Households also identified cultural and social barriers to receiving income support. Those primarily referred to the stigma of relying on government support, as well as racism in government (off-reserve). The most often named financial barrier was the lack of money for transportation, which creates considerable challenges to meeting with income support officers in order to obtain help with the application process.

Figure 2-3: Main Barriers to Receiving Income Support (Household Interviews, up to 3 responses allowed)



Key Knowledge Advisors expressed a general concern that the process for accessing services is not as clear as it could be and that procedures were inconsistent, making filling out applications and eventually receiving Income Assistance significantly more difficult. One Key Knowledge Advisor explained that:

> *"The application online for the ministry... most clients can't do it alone. It is very complicated, and most people don't have the computer skills necessary to do it alone. It is not a direct shift over. If they don't apply a month ahead before they move then they will miss a payment, which*

> *is problematic. Ministry workers are not helpful, saying that it's not their job to help with technology/application issues."* – Fort Nelson Key Knowledge Advisor

Moreover, the paperwork presents a significant barrier, as it is difficult to complete. These issues can make navigating the system too bureaucratic and challenging, which in turn deters people from pursuing the process.

Lack of Access to Phones, Computers, and Internet

Many people living below the poverty line lack a computer, internet connectivity, and even use of a cell phone. For those who are unable to access an online computer or cannot afford internet, online technology acts as a significant barrier. The need to phone a call centre can also be an issue. For example, one Key Knowledge Advisor explained that:

> *"... it used to always be in-person applications, and now some are online. Toll phones are also an issue because people can't afford long waiting queues on their phone plans."* – Key Knowledge Advisor Lower Similkameen

Some participants reported extremely long wait times and being on-hold sometimes for over an hour to talk to Employment and Assistance Workers.[35]

The Income Assistance program delivered on-reserve does not rely on call centres or internet connectivity. Off reserve, however, the provincial government has increasingly been relying on clients' use of online self-serve portals to apply for assistance and submit the required initial documentation and monthly reports. In the process, it has closed the majority of its dedicated SDPR offices and replaced them with Service BC offices [see also Part III, Section 1]. This change in delivery of the service disadvantages Indigenous clients in several ways. First, Indigenous clients normally depend more on face-to-face interactions that allow for conversations to take place and relationships to develop. One Community Integration Specialist explained that *"Indigenous culture is based around relationships, so just logging into [online] systems is not conducive to their way of being"*. Second, online access can be a barrier among households whose monthly earnings preclude them from purchasing cellular data or home internet. Also, many households live in remote areas where little or no connectivity exists and public-use computer terminals are limited or far away. In both groups, Indigenous peoples are over-represented. Third, the reliance on self-serve portals is even more problematic for clients who come from the most vulnerable segments of society, which again disproportionately affects Indigenous peoples. Our interview data outlined the lack of a cell phone (with data) or access to a computer as a major issue for this group. The use of technology serves to further marginalize clients who may be uncomfortable, or even be barred

[35] The chronically long wait times for the ministry's centralized telephone line have been documented in a 2018 Ombudsperson report "Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance." The 2020 update to the report documents that the ministry has since adopted most of the recommendations, and call times have decreased overall, although they can still exceed one hour in the weeks when cheques are issued.

from, accessing computer terminals in libraries or ministry or Service BC offices. Even in the best of circumstances, many clients may not have the knowledge or the capacity to interact in the required way and will miss submission deadlines as a result.

Need for Face-to-Face Interactions

Face-to-face conversations allow for contextual discussions that can overcome otherwise debilitating hurdles in the application process and can establish trust relationships that are so important to break a multitude of barriers. For reasons of mistrust and fear, Indigenous clients are often reluctant to talk to an anonymous Employment and Assistance Worker in a call centre, and even if they do, they often fail to use the correct terminology that might mean the difference between a successful versus a failed application. One Community Integration Specialist described the problem as follows:

> *"Unfortunately, what I find with all my [Indigenous] clients regardless of whether they are going through the call centre or the [online] portal is that their requests are being denied because they are not using the right language. There is simply no way they will state what they need to state and prove their eligibility, either over the phone, because they are nervous about what they can say and what will get them into trouble, or through the portal, where they will fumble because they are not giving enough information. So, they get [mistakenly] denied all the time"* – Community Integration Specialist interview

Indigenous clients may also lack the necessary documents or the information that may be required. For example, many Community Integration Specialists mentioned that clients who have moved away from their First Nations community frequently have no government-issued ID and (erroneously) believe that they require this ID as part of the provincial assistance application. They are also likely to lack other documentation such as bank statements. In the absence of a personal connection, missing information or documents can cause applications to be rejected or cases to be closed prematurely. Lastly, we heard that in the past, Employment and Assistance Workers who were based in a local office and may have personally known the client would, unlike the online system, initiate regular reviews of files to see whether circumstances had changed and whether they qualified for new or additional supports.

Barrier 3: Obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities (PWD)

In March 2021, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) endorsed a resolution outlining that the current Persons with Disabilities (PWD) designation application and appeal process is a "grueling, demoralizing, and colonized experience" for Indigenous applicants (UBCIC Resolution 2021-17 *"Decolonizing the Persons with Disabilities Designation (PWD) Application and Appeal Process,"* p.3). They called on the provincial government to reform the process, removing structural barriers and to be more respectful of the

"A man was legally blind and couldn't get on Disability and didn't know why. We did all the paperwork. It was hereditary, and we couldn't get him on. It's pretty degrading the hoops they have to jump through. Getting denied was really hard on him."
Tseshaht Key Knowledge Advisor

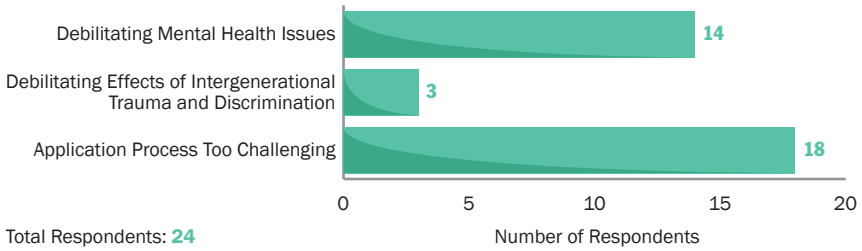
cultural, mental, and physical needs of Indigenous people with disabilities. These concerns were mirrored in our interviews.

About two-thirds of Key Knowledge Advisors felt that some members of their communities should receive Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) disability support rather than temporary support. Many reported discrimination and historic oppression, the application process itself, and the stigma of being on disability as potentially inhibiting Indigenous peoples from applying for Disability Assistance. It was also noted by Key Knowledge Advisors that many people suffer from various "invisible" or undiagnosed disabilities and should be receiving additional funding. Similarly, many felt that the definition of what constitutes a disability was too narrow, excluding people who might actually be eligible for such funding.

When we asked the Key Knowledge Advisors about challenges for those seeking disability funding, two out of three advisors stated that in their view, there were members in the communities who should be receiving Disability Assistance support but are instead on temporary Income Assistance support. Of those who identified members who should be eligible, 75 percent named the onerous application process as the cause for not receiving support. Other barriers named were the debilitating effects of historical trauma and discrimination and of mental health issues, as Figure 2-4 illustrates. The process was described to be extremely time-consuming and not intuitive, making it difficult to do alone, not counting the requirement to seek outside help for various parts of the application, which can be even more challenging for some. One Key Knowledge advisor also explained:

> *"Some just stay on social assistance because of the amount of time it takes and how hard it is to get on disability."* – Xa'xlip First Nation

Figure 2-4: Main Barriers to Access Disability Funding (Key Knowledge Advisors, multiple responses allowed)



People reported significant lag times in receiving support payments after they moved off-reserve. Those delays may arise simply because ministry workers can be misinformed and do not accept the ISC letter indicating that a client is a PWD. One of the key knowledge holders explains:

> *"I had a PWD client who transferred to the ministry, they moved off-reserve, and when they first moved off their first month they were put on*

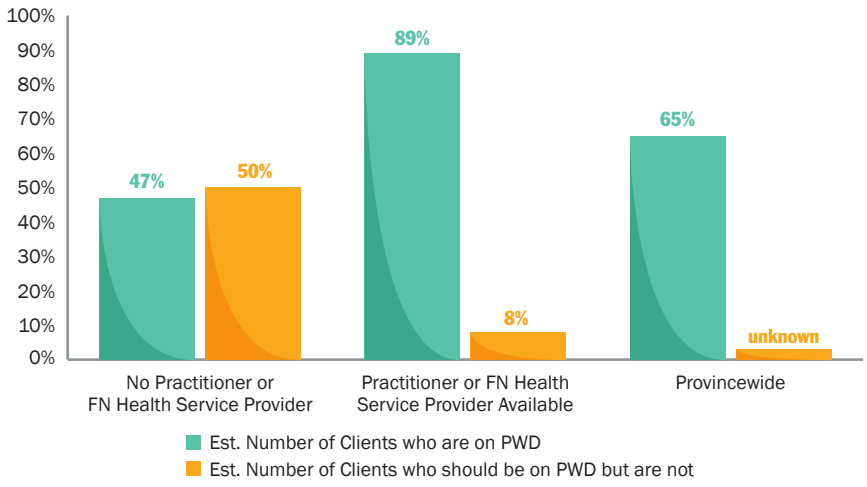
> *the hardship at a regular rate, instead of getting the PWD rate for that first month that they were collecting with the ministry. That was a gap, they didn't accept the ISC letter saying that this was a PWD client, they had to have the whole file sent over and reviewed first before they approved them at the PWD rate."* – Tseshaht Knowledge Advisor

We heard similar concerns expressed by the Band Social Development Workers. When asked about how many of their clients have PWD status, the responses varied considerably, but the average of the numbers that the social workers named was 31 percent, similar to what we found in ISC data (see Part III, Section 1). Although we could not deduct seasonal Income Assistance clients from the total for all 24 Band Social Development Workers we interviewed, it is plausible to assume that only a small portion of the discrepancy to the province-wide average of 65 percent could be explained by a comparatively higher percentage of seasonal work on-reserve. In our community household interviews, the proportion of clients who received Disability Assistance as a fraction of all Income Assistance recipients was under 48 percent, also well below the provincial average. Band Social Development Workers mentioned the lack of access to a medical practitioner, stigma, and mental health issues, as well as lack of information on the PWD program as access barriers for their clients. One should note that the PWD application is neither assessed nor managed by Band Social Development Workers. Rather, the federal government has contracted with the BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS) to provide adjudication services relating to all PWD applications for individuals residing in First Nations communities. For privacy reasons, Band Social Development Workers are not involved in the process at all. Having all applications adjudicated by the same organization ensures consistency in the application process. However, it also removes the opportunity for the clients to receive in-person information on program requirements, or to have their application explained, and they do not have the chance to discuss challenges in the application process in a face-to-face interaction with a social worker. BCANDS is located in Victoria, B.C., which means that all correspondence regarding individual applications has to be conducted over the phone or through email – modes of communication that present challenges for many Indigenous clients.

Many community voices expressed explicit concern about several systemic obstacles preventing Indigenous peoples from successfully completing applications for a PWD designation. Access to a care provider such as a family doctor is necessary for potential applicants to complete Section 2 of the PWD form, the "Physician's Report." It is well-known that there is a lack of primary health providers in B.C., particularly in rural and remote areas. This problem is even more severe for Indigenous peoples seeking health care. They are over-represented in rural and remote regions, and they face additional barriers due to systemic racism in the health care system and the absence of culturally safe health care facilities and medical practitioners. In the latest 2017 FNHA Regional Health Survey, 47 percent of adults and 37 percent of children reported that a lack of access was a barrier to receiving primary care in the past year. As a result, the proportion of Disability Assistance clients is lower than it should be.

Discrepancies also exist outside Indigenous communities. When asked to estimate how many clients (out of ten) are currently on Disability Assistance, and how many should be on Disability Assistance, most Community Integration Specialists noted huge differences, meaning more of their clients should receive Disability Assistance. Clients who had access to either nurse practitioners (who were reported to be flexible and willing to go above and beyond when assisting with their clients' applications) or to a First Nations health facility were more likely to receive the appropriate support, i.e., Disability Assistance as opposed to Temporary Assistance. Figure 2-5 shows the reported numbers and a comparison to provincial PWD rates. Keeping in mind that the Indigenous clientele is considered vulnerable and at risk, all interview participants stated that most of their clients should actually be receiving Disability Assistance, a much larger proportion than the province-wide average of 65 percent PWD clients. What is most striking in these findings is that when we compare the province-wide figure to the actual number of clients who receive Disability Assistance, it is much lower in those areas where the specialists reported that clients do not have access to a nurse practitioner or First Nation health service provider. In other words, even though those clients are more marginalized, comparatively fewer of them – namely only an estimated 47 percent – are on Disability Assistance despite the fact that they almost all should be eligible.

Figure 2-5: Average Estimates on the Number of Clients (Who Should Be) on PWD (Community Integration Specialists Interviews)



There are systemic barriers embedded in the PWD application process. Not only are challenges caused by reduced access to medical practitioners, but the process also requires multiple professionals to fill out different segments of the application. This is very complex and often frustrating to complete correctly. One of the Community Integration Specialists said that:

> *"I would be starting the process, then take [my client] to the Friendship Centre helping them find a life-skills worker who will fill out the next section, then find a social worker to sign that, then a nurse practitioner from [the local health facility] to fill out the medical part of the application.*

> *I have been working with one man for an entire year to fill out the PWD application, because the barriers are so huge. What the ministry is asking for, and what they send back if it is not done right, is a huge barrier. I definitely feel for my clients because I despair trying to fill this out with them and seeing the setbacks because something was not signed by the right person."* – Community Integration Specialist Interview

We also heard from Community Integration Specialists that doctors and other health care staff may be unwilling to complete the form if they believe the client's condition is temporary or can be managed and overcome with certain interventions. We also heard that medical professionals expressed frustration about the length of time and the information required to fill out the document, i.e., ambiguities on what information to include and how much detail is required.

These challenges are further documented in Part III, Section 1. Over the past 20 years, the fraction of PWD recipients in the Indigenous Income Assistance client base for the province of B.C., has been consistently 10 to 15 percentage points, or 23 percent, lower than the corresponding fraction of Disability Assistance recipients among non-Indigenous Income Assistance clients. For ISC clients, we were unable to obtain exact numbers on Disability Assistance clients, but a simple calculation using the number of "expected to work" clients resulted in an estimate that was below roughly 30 percent of the client base. Those statistics substantiate the voices we heard from community and cannot easily be reconciled with the fact that the mental and physical health among Indigenous peoples living in B.C. is generally worse than that of the population as a whole. The most plausible explanation for these findings is that Indigenous clients are systematically disadvantaged through barriers in the Disability Assistance application process, both at the provincial and federal level.

Gaps in Income Assistance Services

GAP I: Insufficient Benefit Levels

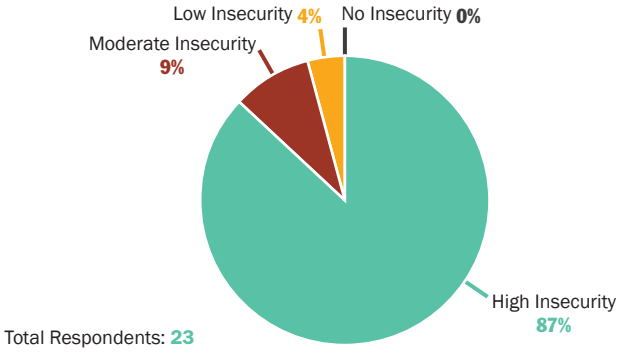
An important question that emerged from our interviews centred on whether the Income Assistance monthly payment amount provides enough money on which an individual and a household can live. A universal complaint among Income Assistance recipients was that the support they received was insufficient and often fell short of their monthly expenses for basic needs. Similarly, all Community Integration Specialists and Band Social Development Workers noted that their clients struggle to cover their expenses and that the level of assistance provided is not enough. The Band Social Development Workers identified a primary reason for why social assistance levels are too low, stating that they do not account for regional variances and the significantly higher cost of living in First Nations communities (notably transportation and hydro expenses (see Part III, Section 1 for further data analysis)).

As a result of insufficient support, people on Income Assistance experience high economic insecurity. One key knowledge holder explained that:

> *"By the time rent and other bills are paid, they only have $100 or $200 for groceries, which is insufficient."* – Knowledge Advisor Tseshaht

The amounts received are not enough for people to live on.

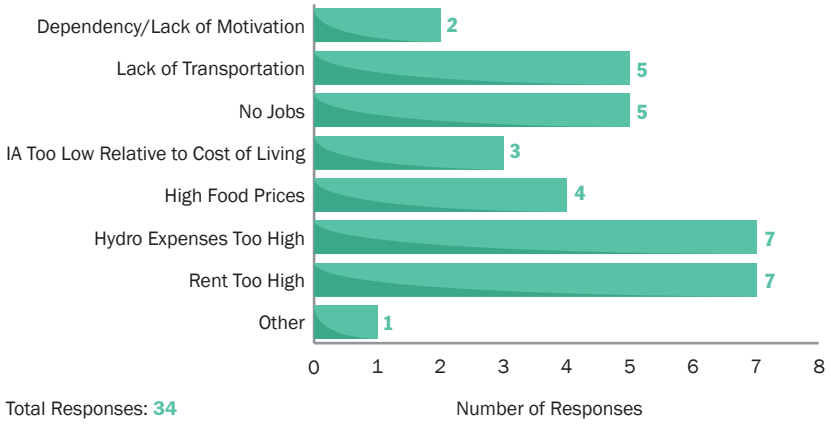
Figure 2-6: Economic Security of Income Assistance clients (Band Social Development Workers Interviews)



When we asked Band Social Development Workers whether they thought clients lived in economic insecurity, 87 percent believed this was a valid assessment of the general economic situation [Figure 2-6].

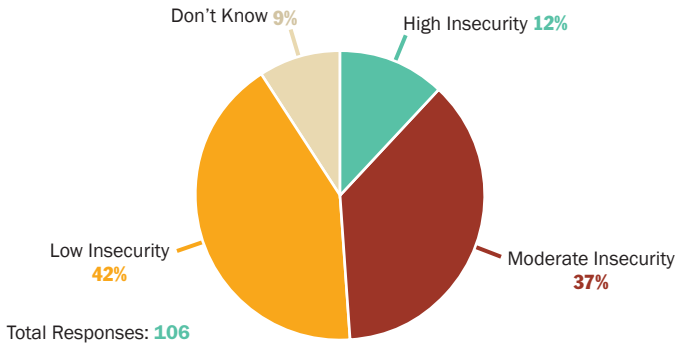
The Band Social Development Workers also identified the primary reasons for why residents in their community would experience economic insecurity in general: high cost of rent, high cost of utilities (hydro), the lack of jobs, and limited or costly transportation.

Figure 2-7: Why is Economic Security an Issue? (Band Social Development Workers' Interviews, multiple responses allowed)



Since the Income Assistance program is specifically designed to "meet basic needs", we also asked the participants from our household interviews whether the income support they received (from ISC and other sources, including their community) provided their household with food security, and their responses are shown in the table below. Only 12 percent of households indicated that Income Assistance provided them with high levels of food security, while roughly 80 percent of families felt that they were experiencing moderate to low levels of food security, despite the support they received.

Figure 2-8: Experienced Level of Food Security (Household Interviews)

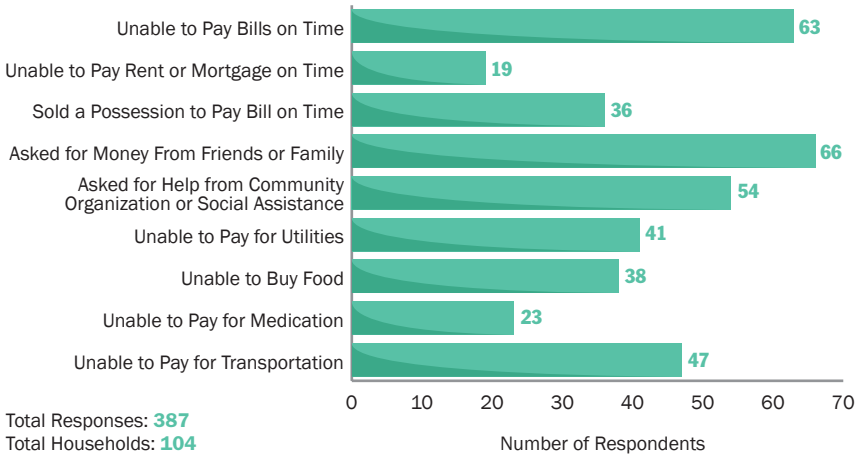


As one household member explained:

> *"[The support] is very limiting as to the quality of food one can afford for the month. I am fortunate my parents pick up the slack/shortfalls of PWD, as you cannot rent a place anywhere for the minuscule $300 per month allowed for rent."* – Household Interview Participant

Key Knowledge Advisors explained that there used to be a program in which individuals could work for several hours per day and receive an extra $100. Unfortunately, this program is no longer available. To supplement their food, households often take advantage of community-based services, in particular, communities may organize berry picking, hunting, and fishing, and then food is distributed to community members. Some communities organize fish days where community members are provided with fish. Sometimes communities create a GoFundMe online fundraiser if an individual is extremely ill and needs to go to the city for treatment. Part II, Section 3 provides a more detailed look at community responses to gaps in service. We asked households how they experience the shortage of monthly income. Over 60 percent of respondents (66 out of 104) stated that they had to ask friends and family for help, and almost as many had to ask for additional funding from community or social assistance. Almost all households had experienced a situation where they had been unable to either pay a bill on time or pay for utilities (or both). One in three households was unable to buy food (38 out of 104), almost one in two (47 out of 104) was unable to pay for transportation, and over one in five could not pay for medication at some point. It seems indisputable that basic needs are not being met for those households.

Figure 2-9: Consequences of Shortage of Money (Household Interviews, multiple responses allowed)



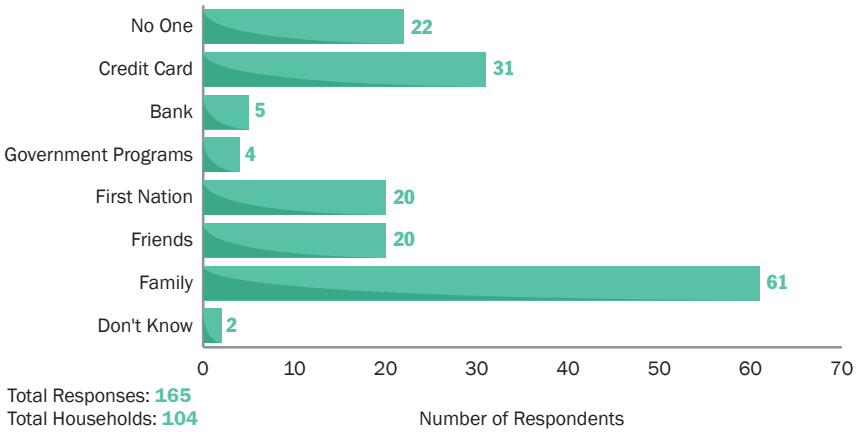
Four out of five interviewed households had no money set aside for emergencies.

Another dimension of chronic deprivation is that almost no one had any money set aside for emergencies. Of the 104 households we interviewed, only six had more than $500 saved to pay for any kind of emergency expense. Ten households had some money for emergencies but less than $500. The vast majority, about 82 percent, had no money at all available to them in case of an emergency.

In addition, the household interviews provided information about how and where people supplement their income gap each month. When we asked participants from whom they received help when they are unable to cover their basic needs or pay their bills, over 60 percent said they turned to family (confirming the data from Figure 2-9), and roughly 30 percent would borrow from a credit card. About one in five households

named their Nation as a source of help, and the same number borrowed from friends. The results are shown in Figure 2-10.

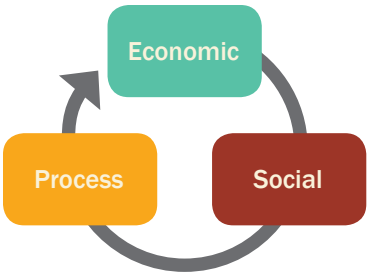
Figure 2-10: Sources of Additional Funds to Cover Expenses (Household Interviews, multiple responses allowed)



Key Knowledge Advisors discussed concerns about being able to survive on the amount provided through social assistance, citing the costs of transportation, cell phones, medication, etc., as important factors that are overlooked in general cost-of-living equations and funding formulas. One of the Key Knowledge Advisors explained that some individuals suffer from health issues, such as obesity or mobility disabilities, which presents a barrier in finding full-time employment, leading to judgement by others that affects their dignity and confidence.

Gap 2: Transitions from On-Reserve to Off-Reserve

Key Knowledge Advisors identified a variety of gaps that exist for people moving off-reserve. These were consolidated into the following categories: economic gaps, social gaps, and process gaps as illustrated below.



1. **Economic gaps** are related to situations where finances hindered the ability for a successful transition out of the community. Examples are higher housing costs off-reserve, additional financial support provided by the Band, waiting periods to get payments when transitioning to provincial Income Assistance, etc.

2. **Social gaps** involved situations where a person's status and/or social class in society may be compromised during the transition off-reserve. These may include a lack of support from family and friends, social isolation, and the separation from on-reserve life, as well as fear of racism and discrimination.

3. **Process gaps** involved situations where the procedures and/or bureaucracy involved in a transition to another community reduced the successfully transition. Examples would be a challenging application process, the loss of in-person Income Assistance support, or incomplete knowledge of the provincial Income Assistance program.

Key Knowledge Advisors expressed a general concern with respect to the challenges for community members transitioning off-reserve. The process for accessing services is not always clear and the procedures vary, making accessing Income Assistance difficult. For example, participants explained that access to First Nations support services decreases or is lost when people move from living on-reserve to urban cities and towns. This is because many services received on-reserve are not portable. Key Knowledge Advisors discussed the frustration experienced by an individual associated with the time gap between signing up for assistance and receiving payment. There is no policy to help with a move from on-reserve to off-reserve, even if the move is to find employment. Without a moving allowance, community members cannot receive the help they require and often spend months without income. Lack of information also presents a problem, as one Key Knowledge Advisor explains:

> *"I know there is a way for transition, to live [on Income Assistance] off-reserve, but policies change so much our social assistance worker doesn't know or understands the process, or it has changed and its costs are not covered anymore."* – Key Knowledge Advisor Tsleil-Waututh

In addition, there are unintended impacts that people experience when they decide to leave the community in pursuit of better opportunities, especially through stigma and lack of community connection. One of the Key Knowledge Advisors explained that some individuals pick up sporadic jobs, such as collecting cans, handing out flyers, and mowing lawns; however, this is time-consuming and can take away from their ability to access mental health support and take care of themselves in order to secure and retain employment. In our conversations, Key Knowledge Advisors outlined the following four main areas that require further attention:

Table 2-3: Sub-Themes Related to Transitioning for Off-Reserve Members (Key Knowledge Advisors)

SUB-THEMES
Need for a Clearer and More Streamlined Process for Transitioning Off-Reserve
Lack of Urban Support Systems
Lack of Transportation
Urban Racism and Racial Discrimination

Delays for Income Assistance Recipients Transitioning Off-Reserve

Echoing the sentiments in community, the majority of Community Integration Specialists interviewed reported that the transition process for Income Assistance clients who move away from First Nations communities is far from seamless. Since Income Assistance on-reserve is under federal jurisdiction, with ISC as the service provider, support users first have to officially withdraw from the federal Income Assistance program before they can apply for provincial support. Although federal (on-reserve) and provincial (off-reserve) benefit levels and requirements are aligned, the transition process requires the submission of an entirely new application with the SDPR, with different and new forms to be filled out and submitted. This presents a challenge for reasons laid out earlier, including accessing online application systems, lack of information, or missing required paperwork (bank statements, ID, which often presents a problem for former on-reserve residents), mistrust in government, Indigenous-specific racism, and so on. One Community Integration Specialist states:

> *"... the online application process, creating a BCeID [account], providing all the documentation, having it all signed off, explaining your story again – for many [Income Assistance clients previously on-reserve] it is too much, especially if they have other barriers."*

In addition to being required to start a new application, we heard that former Income Assistance recipients also experience unnecessary delays in getting their application approved because the process requires an Employment and Assistance Worker to confirm that they are no longer receiving assistance from ISC. In the absence of a centralized system that maintains records for on-reserve income support, ministry staff must first confirm that the file was actually closed. This means they must connect with the local Band office, which requires contacting the Band Social Development Worker responsible for the client file to ascertain whether the client is eligible for a new application. An intake Employment and Assistance Worker may lack the resources that are necessary to commit time and effort to track down the administrator and to perform the multiple follow-ups that are potentially needed to confirm eligibility. One of the Key Knowledge Advisors explains:

> *"The process is different for off-reserve, maybe a waiting period. A couple of years ago, a family member moved off-reserve and there was a two-month waiting period. They had to depend on family for financial support."*
> – Key knowledge Advisor Tsleil-Waututh

GAP 3: Lack of Affordable, Accessible, and Safe Housing

As part of the provincial poverty reduction strategy, the NDP government conducted comprehensive consultations in 2017-2018. In the engagement process, affordable and safe housing was overwhelmingly named as the highest priority issue, both in the general consultations and in the First Nations and Indigenous-specific engagement process, which included community and small group meetings across the province. Many voices we heard for this report also identified either a lack of housing or the inability to afford housing as the number one gap in service facing families or individuals on Income Assistance. This is partly due to a grossly inadequate shelter allowance. Off-reserve, a lack of housing stock, a tight rental market, and high rents, combined with discrimination in the housing market contribute to elevated levels of homelessness or, if people manage to stay in their accommodations, to food insecurity because they have to spend the funds earmarked for basic needs on shelter instead.

In the interviews, Community Integration Specialists provided a range of rent prices in their area for studios or single-bedroom basement suites. At the low end of the market, rents would range between $700 and $900 a month, more than twice the maximum shelter allowance for a single person, which is currently capped at $375 per month. Even for a family of four, the maximum shelter allowance is capped at $715 per month. All interviewees stated that those clients who succeeded in keeping their existing accommodation did so using the general support to help pay rent, sacrificing other necessities, in particular, food. As some interview participants pointed out, reducing the gap between housing expenses and allowance may not be a simple matter of raising the shelter allowance. In their experience, landlords that routinely rent to persons on Income Assistance will closely watch shelter allowances and any increase would be followed by a matching increase in monthly rents.

For people living in community, we learned from our interviews with Key Knowledge Advisors and Band Social Development Workers that the Band frequently subsidizes housing to narrow the gap between cost of accommodation and shelter allowance. Housing expenses still exceed benefits, however, in part because poor housing quality contributes to excessive utility expenses. The following areas of concern surfaced throughout our conversations with community members:

Table 2-4: Sub-Themes Related to Lack of Affordable Housing (Key Knowledge Advisors, Band Social Development Workers)

SUB-THEMES
High Hydro Costs
Shelter Rates Too Low Relative to Rents, Should Reflect Local Cost of Housing
Social Housing, On-Reserve Development

The majority of the Band Social Development Workers and Key Knowledge Advisors interviewed mentioned hydro expenses as one of the primary reasons for why income support recipients experienced significant economic insecurity in their community. This is confirmed in the data. Using 2019 figures on electricity consumption from BC Hydro, we found that the average consumption in the median First Nations community was 73 percent higher than the median consumption in the province as a whole: for the median First Nations community, the hydro expenditures in a typical month exceeded $164.[36] Thus, a single person or a family of four living in a standard dwelling in that community would spend over 40 percent or 20 percent, respectively, of their shelter allowance on electricity alone.[37] Key Knowledge Advisors informed us that rent relief and social programming with fixed rent is available in communities. Subsidies are provided to maintain rent at standard rates. It was reported that some households have had hydro cut off due to higher costs during the winter season. Reference was made to an emergency fund that is available for "astronomically high" hydro rates.

Band Social Development Workers also stated that policy restrictions on the shelter allowance make their work supporting clients more difficult. For example, in situations where two or more people (families) share a dwelling, which is common on-reserve due to the inadequate supply of housing, the allowable shelter amount is reduced, even though the clients' rent exceeds the maximum shelter allowance.

GAP 4: Lack of Transportation, Employment Supports, Training, and Life Skills Development

Missing access to transportation was identified by Key Knowledge Advisors as a gap in service for off-reserve Income Assistance recipients and as a barrier for on-reserve members seeking employment. Key Knowledge Advisors commonly explained that people may be driving without licences or insurance. When people are caught driving without a licence, their licence/insurance is revoked. The issue is that people continue to drive out of necessity and receive fines even though they are unable to afford the fines. Not having a licence and no access to public transportation makes it difficult to obtain employment, so people turn to loan companies to pay their licence fines, which results in additional debt loads. Two out of three caseworkers also named the lack of reliable transportation as one of the most significant barriers to accessing labour market programming and employment: lack of public transportation, lack of a driver's licence, or prohibitive costs of transportation prevent their clients from seeking jobs outside their communities. Transportation costs are covered in the "basic needs" portion of the income support payments; however, if most of that portion is spent on housing already, people cannot afford to take the bus or ferry to seek out employment opportunities or training, even in those communities where public transportation is available.[38]

[36] The median is the "middle" of a sorted list of numbers (here: average hydro expenditures). For example, the *median* community would be a community with the property that half of the communities in our data had higher average hydro cost, and half of communities had lower average hydro cost.

[37] Refer to Part III, Section 1 for additional data on utility expenses.

[38] An additional transportation allowance is provided to clients with a PWD designation. There is also a "confirmed job" supplement for essential transportation and work-related expenses when clients start a new job.

Transportation is not the only impediment, however. Lack of available jobs, education, and training, as well as health issues, make re-entering employment for Income Assistance clients on-reserve difficult. Exit-to-employment rates are generally very low (see also Part II, Section 3 below). ISC's Income Assistance program provides funding for pre-employment supports to selected communities (in 2019, 44 communities in B.C.). Those funds support activities that include counselling and life skills, training in essential skills, etc. Band Social Development Workers working in communities where a pre-employment program was offered named the training and assistance through the program as a major benefit to their clients, especially for younger participants. Other Band Social Development Workers cited the need to have a dedicated staff person to help people work on their employability, assist them with resumes, find appropriate training and education opportunities, and coach them through initial employment phases. Providing these kinds of assistance also requires training, however. One Band Social Development Worker pointed explicitly to a professional development program she participated in as a "game changer" because it allowed her to take a holistic approach to pre-employment supports, teaching basic life skills, financial skills, and health and wellness skills, and to help develop an individual-specific action plan. A 2016 evaluation of an Enhanced Service Delivery pilot project which provided pre-employment services for Income Assistance clients aged 18 to 24 from 2013 to 2017 found that the support helped identify clients' individual barriers, allowed them to overcome low self-esteem, and helped them exit to either employment or education (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2016).

Key Knowledge Advisors reported that although the job market improves in the summer because of seasonal work available, such as fruit picking, in the past several years foreign workers have increasingly been doing this seasonal work. Several themes emerged in our key knowledge advisor interviews regarding opportunities to close employment support gaps:

Table 2-5: Sub-Themes Related to Alternatives to Close Employment Support Gaps in Community

SUB-THEMES
Short-term Income/Supplementing Income Through Subsidies for Education and Training
Promoting Subsistence Hunting/Fishing
Increasing Drivers Licences and Driving Programs On-Reserve
Promoting Indigenous Specific Small Businesses Related to Traditional Knowledge Skills
Getting Youth Engaged in Community Skills Training
"Traditional" Economy Support
Creating Employment Opportunities Using "Cultural Interns"

GAP 5: Gaps in Eligibility and Supplemental Supports

There are many community members who suffer from trauma related to the intergenerational effects of the Indian residential school system, and participants felt that these issues are not being given adequate attention. That is, there are severe trauma and underlying chronic conditions that still need to be recognized and addressed, and there is a need for culturally safe and appropriate Disability Assistance. Hidden social disabilities need to be addressed as well, such as anxiety, lack of confidence, or difficulty functioning in social settings. Social assistance is too narrowly defined, and disability is too restrictive. In effect, this ignores "invisible" disabilities that do not manifest overtly. Key Knowledge Advisors reported that the standard range of disabilities covered by Disability Assistance is insufficient. In 2019, the Government of British Columbia included addiction as a disabling health issue for the purposes of a PPMD (persons with persistent multiple barriers) designation, which is an important step in this direction. SDPR and ISC need to ensure, however, that information on this change is widely circulated and well understood among clients and Band Social Development Workers.

A majority of Key Knowledge Advisors mentioned that the lack of funding to cover moving costs is a problem because it renders a transition away from community more difficult and sometimes unaffordable. This is an issue for existing Income Assistance clients who are looking for jobs elsewhere, as well as clients who move off-reserve for other reasons. The current policy is too restrictive in that it either requires a "confirmed employment" or very specific circumstances proving that the move is necessary, such as an imminent safety threat or a lower rental payment elsewhere.

In addition to acknowledging "hidden disabilities" to ensure that income support is provided adequately to people who need it, community members suggested several alternatives to bridge the existing gaps. While some of them are aimed at addressing larger social issues, others suggest tangible pathways to improve the overall well-being and connectedness in the community. Several key themes were identified for potential solutions:

Table 2-6: Sub-Themes Related to Solutions for Closing Gaps in Community (Key Knowledge Advisors)

SUB-THEMES
More Funding to Support Culture, Arts, and Recreation
Promote Community Healing
Promote Connection Between Youth and Elders
Address Disproportionate Incarceration Rates
Historical Awareness and Indigenous History Training

Many of the Community Integration Specialists we interviewed also stated that additional supports could be particularly useful to their (off-reserve) Indigenous clients. Suggestions ranged from life skills training and basic financial literacy training to mental health and substance use support. One recurring theme that mirrored what Key Knowledge Advisors had been emphasizing was that Indigenous Income Assistance users would benefit from a more flexible approach to financial or in-kind support of culturally important activities. As one participant noted:

> *"The concept of 'culture saves lives' comes to mind, [that is,] help people to connect back to their community."* – Community Integration Specialist Interview

3. How Communities View and Respond to the Income Assistance Program

IN OUR HOUSEHOLD INTERVIEWS, WE asked participants about the sources of their income support, listed in Figure 2-11 below. Recalling that we specifically targeted households identified as current or past recipients of support in our interviews, all but one indicated that they received some kind of support, and one in three households stated that they received support from multiple sources. About 60 percent of households in our survey (64 out of 104) named ISC as one of the sources from which they received income support. Almost the same fraction of respondents, namely about 50 percent, stated that they were supported by their community. Those who named other sources of support referred primarily to EI and OAS/GIS.

Figure 2-11: Sources of Support (Household Interviews, multiple responses allowed)

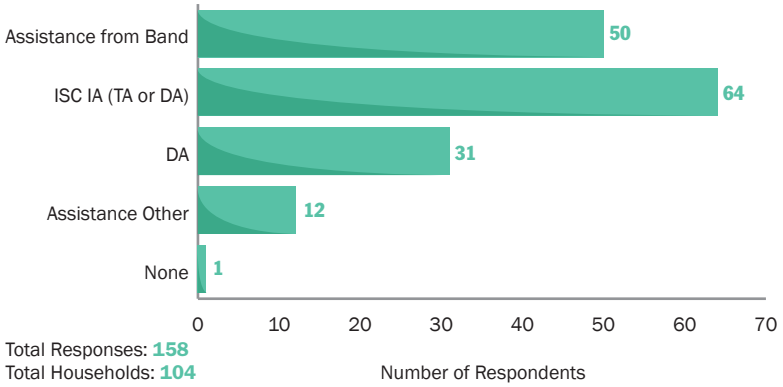
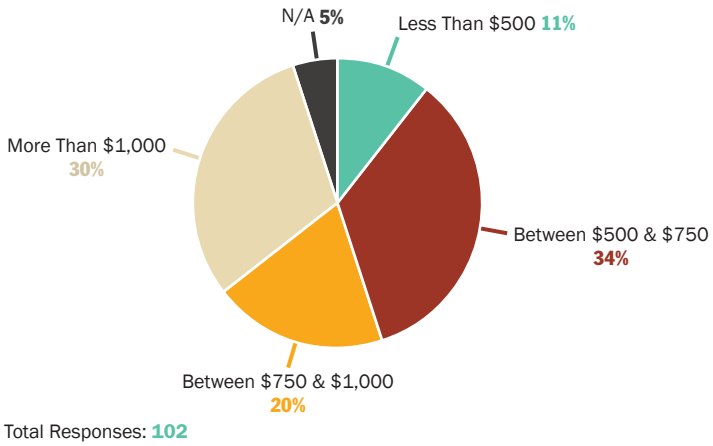


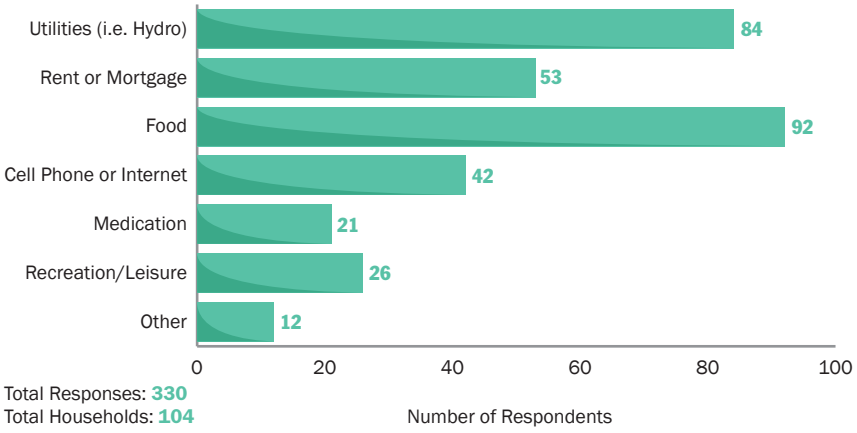
Figure 2-12: Amount of Monthly Income Support Received (Household Interviews)



Those who indicated they receive income support(s) were asked to give information on how much they received each month. The responses are illustrated in Figure 2-12 and show that about two-thirds of households (65 percent) receive less than $1,000 per month, despite often multiple sources of support. This is a nominal amount to live on, which means that most recipients must turn to other sources to fill the "income gaps" in order to meet basic needs.

We asked households how they use monthly support funds [Figure 2-13]. Almost all households buy food for their family. Aside from allocating money to pay for groceries, we noticed that a significant number of households (over 80 percent) also use the funds to pay for utilities, i.e., hydro expenses. This confirms once again that utilities form a critical component of the re-occurring monthly expenses. One should also note that the relatively low number of households who indicated that they use their support to pay for housing (only around 50 percent) is likely driven by the fact that many households reside in Band-provided housing and the Band retains the shelter allowance to pay for their rent.

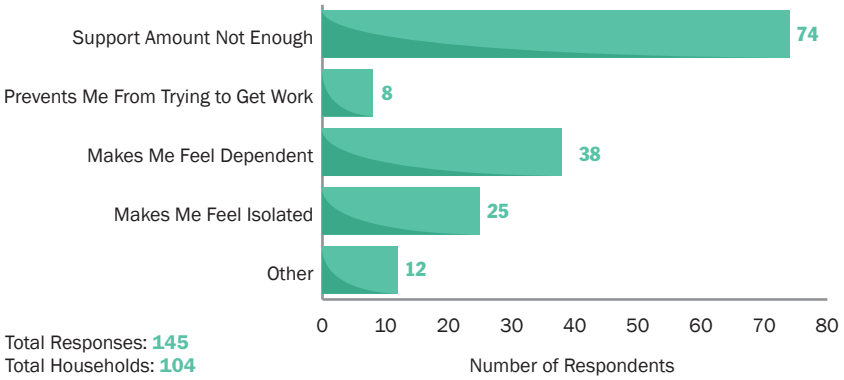
Figure 2-13: Budget Allocation of Income Support (Household Interviews, multiple responses allowed)



When we asked households whether the income supports they received enhanced their well-being, a remarkably large number – more than one in three households – told us that it did not. Many of those who had negative feelings cited the fact that the monthly amount was not enough to buy healthy foods and their medications. Others emphasized that because the support was too low to meet their basic needs, they lived in stress.

We asked participants what the perceived drawbacks were of the income support system, and their responses are listed in Figure 2-14 below. Reiterating the theme that support is insufficient, 74 out of 104 households (about 70 percent), stated that one difficulty was that the monthly amount is not enough to live on. In addition, though, 36 percent of households (38 out of 104) noted that the system makes them feel dependent, 24 percent felt that the support isolates them, and another 8 percent noted that it prevents them from trying to get work. Responses in the "other" category were frequently related to the stigma of receiving support.

Figure 2-14: Drawbacks of Income Support System (Household Interviews, multiple responses allowed)



Dependency

The problem of dependency was also raised in our interviews with Key Knowledge Advisors, who informed us that the system creates a cycle of state dependent welfare. One participant explained:

> *"The current social assistance program is a low-income support program. It really doesn't set people up for success; rather, it maintains a relationship of dependency as it reduces individuals' motivation to seek employment. Consequently, this keeps the community in a perpetual state of poverty as well as reliance on the program."* – Key Knowledge Advisor, Lower Similkameen

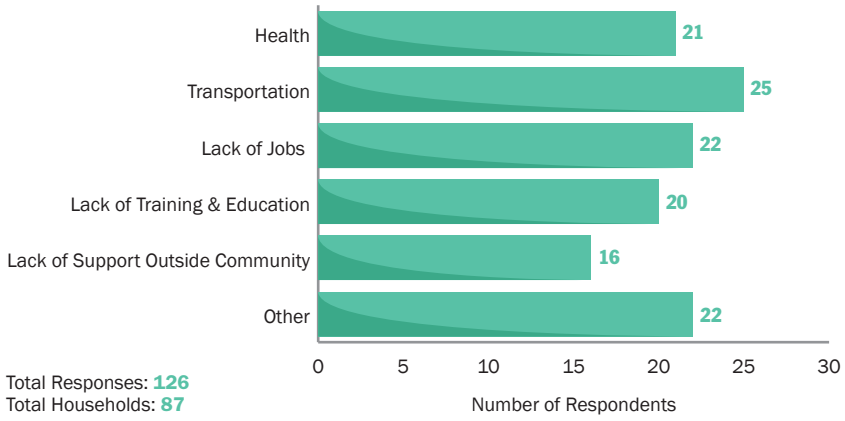
> *"Governments impose this type of lifestyle (dependency) on you, not being able to get back to grassroots of teaching everyone's role in the community. In pre-contact times, everyone had a role. That [purpose] is really missing... Government needs to invest up front so that the people can grow and accept challenges."* – Tsleil-Waututh Key Knowledge Advisor

More generally, Key Knowledge Advisors were critical of policies in the *Indian Act*, which they feel perpetuate a relationship of dependency between the state and First Nations communities. Discussion focused on the need for a complete overhaul of the system and suggested the First Nations Leadership Council work on this.

Dependency is aggravated by the low exit rates in communities. Many of the households we interviewed received temporary assistance, which is not meant to be a permanent replacement of income. Rather, recipients are generally expected to continue seeking employment, yet exit rates are extraordinarily low on-reserve. Data we obtained from ISC for the fiscal year 2016/17 suggest that less than 5 percent of Income Assistance recipients (clients and dependents) residing in a B.C. First Nations community exited support to employment or education during that year. This finding was corroborated by Band Social Development Workers, who overwhelmingly stated that almost none of their clients would be able to find work and get off support.

We asked households what barriers they faced when trying to get off income support. Data are summarized in the Figure 2-15. We see that lack of transportation was the most frequently named barrier, with one out of five respondents citing the lack of a reliable vehicle, a driver's licence, limited public transit, or no money for transportation as an impediment to finding employment. Lack of jobs as well as lack of sufficient education or training (including life skills) and health issues were also identified as barriers. Many people indicated a reluctance to leave the community to search for employment on the basis of missing support elsewhere; they were uncertain about how life outside the community would look and who would help them (particularly with housing needs). They also needed to preserve childcare and other supports provided by family and friends in the community. The "other" category includes responses that named lack of funds to buy appropriate work wear or gear, age, lack of motivation, and a sense of dependency. It also includes conflicts due to the time that is needed to participate in traditional activities and land-based practices for example, community ceremonies and hunting. Note that one-quarter of households did not respond or responded "not applicable" to this question; almost all of those were on Disability Assistance.

Figure 2-15: Barriers to Exit Income Support (Household Interviews, up to 3 responses allowed)



When asked why the Income Assistance program is not achieving the goal of transitioning people off Income Assistance, caseworkers answered very similarly. Interview participants cited lack of jobs (in community) and lack of transportation as major barriers, followed by a lack of education, training, and basic life skills. In addition, many Band Social Development Workers expressed concern that the main barriers to getting off income support are related to clients having physical and mental health issues preventing them from achieving employment readiness, referencing the fact that many clients should be receiving Disability Assistance but are not at the moment. A cycle of dependency was noted as well: as one Band Social Development Worker explained: *"Income assistance becomes a way of life, so people get used it and don't feel insecure because they don't think it will stop."* In addition, the Band Social Development Workers sensed reluctance on the part of Income Assistance recipients to engage in endeavours that may interfere with their support. For example, if people are working, they tend to prefer to be

compensated in cash so they do not have to worry about being cut off Income Assistance. Clearly, a lower claw-back rate for monies earned above the maximum income threshold (currently at 100 percent) or a more generous earning exemption would prevent this behaviour and provide better incentive for people to seek official employment.

Importantly, the majority of First Nations communities in B.C. do not have access to ISC employment support (active employment measures and/or client case management), which is critical to a successful transition to employment.[39] The effectiveness of employment support was shown in a 2013-2017 pilot project, in which ISC (then INAC) and Employment and Social Development Canada collaborated to implement additional services through the First Nations Job Fund, with the goal of addressing barriers to employability for clients aged 18 to 24 on-reserve. In the year following implementation, exit rates for this age group increased by over 20 percent, and 51 percent of clients who participated found employment. As we saw above, our community participants saw the cycle of dependency as a major drawback of the income support system. Employment supports are one key element toward helping people regain dignity and self-reliance. As one community member stated:

> *"[Income support] keeps you from being self-sufficient because you're stuck in the system. It is getting much better with programs to help you with training and job readiness now compared to ten or even five years ago."* – Household Interview Participant

Resilience and Community Resurgence

We learned earlier that benefit rates generally fall well short of meeting basic requirements. When asked how Income Assistance recipients would fill the gap between Income Assistance rates and the actual cost of living, the most common response in our household interviews was that they would do this through community financial assistance and community food sharing. Financial assistance was identified as loans, or in some cases, direct supplemental income. Food sharing included hunting, fishing, community gardens, berry picking and other foraging, canning, food banks, food hampers, etc.

Key Knowledge Advisors identified some of the other ways community members filled the gap and supplemented their Income Assistance amounts, such as clients taking on odd jobs, bartering goods or services, and selling artwork. More specifically, Key Knowledge Advisors explained that support recipients are participating in a variety of informal income-generating activities that includes selling artwork, trading for Indigenous medicines, and selling traditional foods. For example, people who have been harvesting and hunting traditional foods and who are looking at creating sustainable food systems are being supported by their Nations, and these activities have become more permanent ways of filling the gaps. Permanent positions are now created in many communities, such

[39] In 2018/2019, roughly 720 persons in 41 First Nations communities had access to ISC's case management Pre-Employment Supports (PES) program or an Aboriginal Skills Employment and Training Strategy (ASETS) program.

as “cultural interns” as jobs that focus on the resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Community members are using social media to expand awareness about complex issues across Coast Salish communities, including those related to creating sustainable food networks, beading circles, drum making, and language revitalization.

Similar to the Key Knowledge Advisors’ comments, the Band Social Development Workers revealed to us that people have been selling artwork off-reserve, as well as providing cleaning and child care services to fill income gaps. People who have been hunting and fishing have been sharing goods and encouraging more youth to get involved as a way to create sustainable food systems. Many Nations have developed policies to create more employment opportunities in this direction.

We learned that there are many ways in which the entire community comes together to provide additional supports for members in need. Indigenous community perspectives of “no one gets left behind” and communal sharing are ever present among the participating communities. As a way to understand the specific supports made available for community Income Assistance recipients, we asked Key Knowledge Advisors about how their communities assist members. We grouped the responses to the questions about the types of community-based supports into three main categories: distribution of food and medicine, additional cash transfers, and community services or donations.

1. **Food Distribution and Indigenous Food Sovereignty:** All six participating communities distribute additional food or medicine for members in need, children, or Elders in a variety of ways. The average community provides over six different free food services, ranging from community gardens, regularly distributed food boxes and community kitchens, to Christmas hampers and meals-on-wheels for Elders. Many school-aged children receive lunches while at school and some Elders are regularly provided lunch twice a week. Community gardens with vegetables and fresh food are available for community members, and community breakfasts or dinners are provided for members on social assistance. One Key Knowledge Advisor noted that some community members are pursuing their own initiatives, explaining how a Facebook group was created to redistribute excess food to other community members. Traditional foods and medicine are distributed through canning programs, seasonal sharing of fish catches, community freezers, or community berry picking and harvesting. One community organizes a Bingo game with dinners as prizes.

2. **Cash Payments:** All six communities also provide additional monetary support for Income Assistance recipients and/or Elders. Key Knowledge Advisors named monetary top-ups for individuals and families on Income Assistance, Christmas bonus money, or one-time payments as examples of how the Band would assist members in need with cash. COVID-related support payments were also available in every community. Importantly, these cash transfers are above and beyond the assistance that all communities would provide to help pay for utilities, as well as any regular rental assistance/relief provided by the Band or subsidized housing.

3. **Donations and Community Services:** Key Knowledge Advisors identified a number of ways in which people received supplemental free items and services. Gift cards for groceries and gas were mentioned frequently – a participant in one community noted that local businesses would occasionally reach out to donate food items to people in need and ensure that food deliveries are provided for Elders. Delivery of free firewood was also commonly listed. A Key Knowledge Advisor in one community named free workshops offered by the Band, including ones where participants would go berry picking, gather medicine, or harvest moose together. Finally, during the COVID epidemic, we heard that communities would provide residents with free sanitizing and cleaning supplies.

Figure 2-16: Types of Support in Communities (Key Knowledge Advisors, multiple responses allowed)

Summary Remarks

THIS SECTION SHARED OUR FINDINGS of the community-based research component from the six participating Indigenous communities across the province. The community voices of the income recipients and the Key Knowledge Advisors, as well as front-line Band Social Development Workers and Community Integration Specialists, were clear regarding the many barriers and gaps in the coverage of income supports for people living on and off-reserve, and in urban, rural, and remote communities. We learned that communities have developed strategies to overcome gaps and barriers through Indigenous resurgence of cultural and traditional ways of life. Indigenous peoples are strong and vibrant, and Income Assistance recipients are resilient and turn to family and friends regularly as a way to cope with the nominal amount of income support provided. In many instances, even the Band will step in to fill gaps in income support and services, and all community members come together to help each other and make sure that Income Assistance recipients do not fall through the cracks.

In Part III, we turn our attention to what the secondary data have to say. We will examine the datasets from the DIP, the census, and some auxiliary sources with two goals in mind. First, we want to contextualize and further reinforce the voices from the communities around their experiences with the existing income support programming. Second, since any attempts and strategies to alleviate poverty need to be multifaceted, we will broaden our outlook and highlight two key elements in the cycle of poverty, namely education and health. Both factors are critical in maintaining the well-being of Indigenous peoples in the province and have real potential to break the recurring pattern of intergenerational poverty transmission and sustainably reduce the dependency on welfare for Indigenous persons in the longer term.

PART III:
WHAT THE DATA SAY

What the Data Say

THE FOLLOWING SECTION DETAILS THE results from the quantitative analysis of secondary data that help us describe and identify the determinants and consequences of poverty and dependency on social assistance, utilizing standard measures of poverty that have been tracked over time.

The data presented in this section and the accompanying statistical analysis, guided by the First Nations Leadership Council, in many ways reflect the socio-economic deficits we outlined in Part I (Section 3) and acknowledges the harsh social and economic realities that continue to exist for Indigenous peoples in B.C. While we debated how best to present the data, we agreed that our findings are important and can be used to hold colonial systems and the systems' policies and processes accountable when it comes to addressing Income Assistance for Indigenous peoples.

In Section 1, we demonstrate to what extent the programs help to alleviate poverty for Indigenous people and how the barriers and gaps in income support play out in the data, lending support to, and amplifying the community voices. The analysis in Section 2 will show how the effects of living in poverty are indeed intergenerational and how the likelihood of receiving Income Assistance in the future is directly linked to a lack of education, poor mental health, and growing up in poverty.

Income Support and Poverty in B.C.

FROM 2007 ONWARDS, INCOME ASSISTANCE benefit rates in B.C. were frozen for about a decade, until 2016-2017. In 2017, 2019 and 2021, the government raised Temporary Assistance rates ,while Disability Assistance rates increased each year from 2016 to 2021.[40] We can gauge the adequacy of benefit levels by comparing them to official poverty lines. In 2019, a single Temporary Assistance ("expected to work") recipient would receive 44 percent, and a single PWD client would receive 69 percent of the corresponding MBM threshold, leaving a considerable shortfall to the amount the federal government considers necessary to "meet basic needs and achieve a modest standard of living."[41, 42] Of course, many households have access to additional income support through a variety of government programs, especially when children are present and they are eligible for Child Benefit payments.

To better understand pre-transfer gaps between the poverty threshold and disposable income and to what extent cash-transfer programs from all levels of government alleviate these gaps, we return to the census data which contain income information on the 2015 tax year. Figure 3-1 compares pre-transfer disposable incomes to the MBM poverty lines (which vary with family composition and location) and calculates the poverty gap and the poverty rate, while selectively dropping social assistance and child benefit payments.[43] It also replicates the actual gaps and rates from Figure 1-7, which include all government transfers for comparability. Two findings stand out. First, government transfers are critical to reducing the depth of poverty for all subpopulations. In a counterfactual situation with no government transfers, the poverty gap would be 2.5 times wider for families in First Nations communities and over 3.2 times wider for Aboriginal families off-reserve. Transfers are also important for poverty elimination, but less so. Without government aid, poverty rates would be between 1.7 times higher for families in First Nations communities and 2.1 times higher for non-Indigenous families, indicating once again that welfare payments are not sufficient to lift a large fraction of families out of poverty. Second, child benefits play a larger role in alleviating poverty than social assistance, particularly

[40] The reader should recall that ISC adjusts rates on-reserve to align with provincial rates.

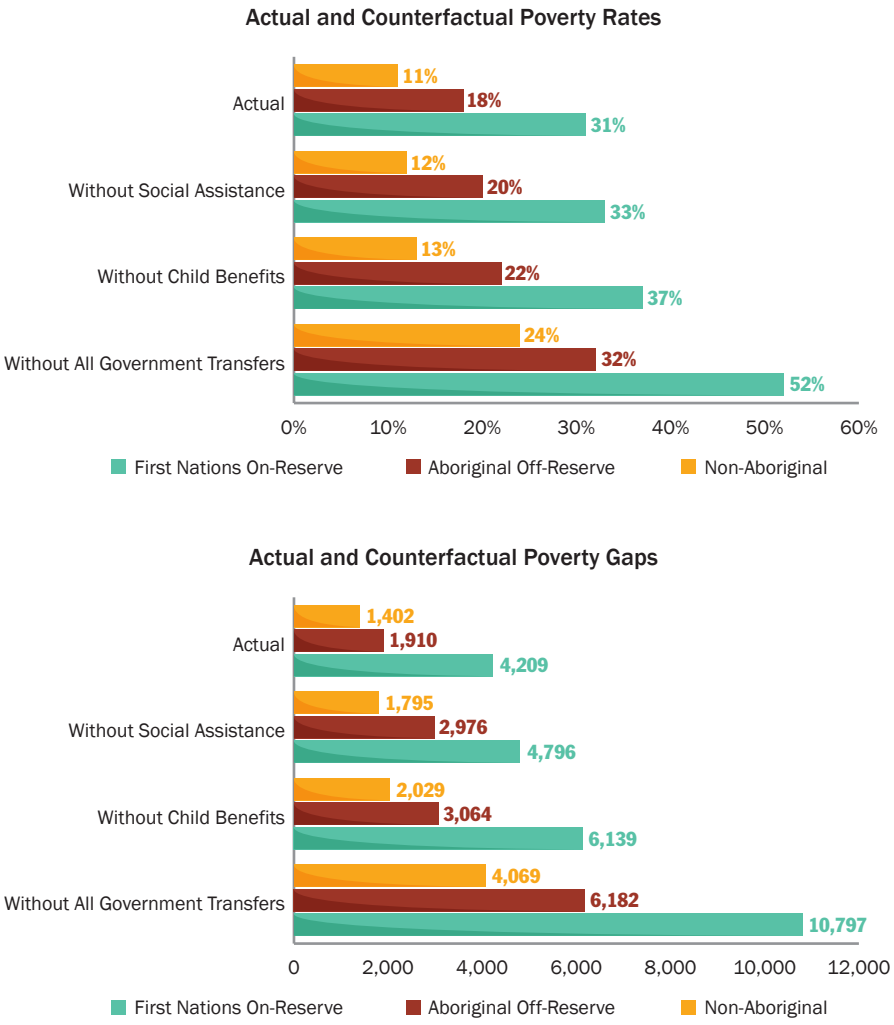
[41] MBM thresholds for Vancouver are from Statistics Canada, Table 11-10-0006-01. Provincial rates from SDPR. 2019 is the most recent year for which MBM thresholds are available.

[42] Refer to Opportunity for All – Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy, Government of Canada.

[43] 2016 Census data. The counterfactuals are obtained by recalculating poverty indicators after subtracting selected government transfers from disposable income. These numbers do not consider behavioural responses or general-equilibrium effects.

on-reserve. Eliminating child benefits would raise the poverty gap on-reserve by over 45 percent, from $4,200 to $6,140, whereas eliminating social assistance would only result in a corresponding increase of 14 percent.[44]

Figure 3-1: Contribution to Poverty Reduction, by Subpopulation



As we saw earlier, the theme of inadequacy was strongly echoed by our community voices; benefit levels were universally viewed as being insufficient to meet basic needs. The housing allowance in particular, was named to be far below actual expenses by almost every participant in our interviews and surveys [see Part II, Section 2 and Section 3].

[44] The reader should keep in mind that these data underestimate the current impact of child benefit payments because they predate the 2016 introduction of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) which substantially increased benefit levels for poorer families. In 2015, federal child benefits programs consisted of the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), and the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCB). Our 2015 data reflect the substantial expansion of the UCCB in 2015, however. Baker et al. (2021) estimate that relative to single women, annual transfers for single mothers increased by roughly $2,300 in 2015 (UCCB expansion) and by an additional $2,500 in 2016-2017 (UCCB introduction). British Columbia introduced the Early Childhood Tax Benefit in April 2015, but the level of assistance provided is small compared to federal payments.

Housing Support

Low-quality housing or the lack of housing is both a consequence and a co-determinant of poverty. Poor housing conditions such as mould, lack of safe drinking water, and overcrowding have been associated with increased risk of morbidity from infectious disease, chronic illness, injuries, poor nutrition, and mental disorders (Hwang, 2001; Krieger & Higgins, 2002). Similarly, a lack of affordable housing, homelessness, and the use of temporary shelters contribute to poor health outcomes as well as significantly lower education and employment opportunities. The lack of affordable housing was identified as the biggest barrier to poverty reduction in the public consultations held in 2017-2018 prior to formulating B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy, both among the general respondents and among Indigenous peoples (Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, 2018). The issue of high rents relative to income (support) and the absence of suitable housing was also raised in our interviews with Community Integration Specialists, and affordable housing emerged as the single largest unmet basic needs gap for their vulnerable Indigenous clients across the province, irrespective of location.

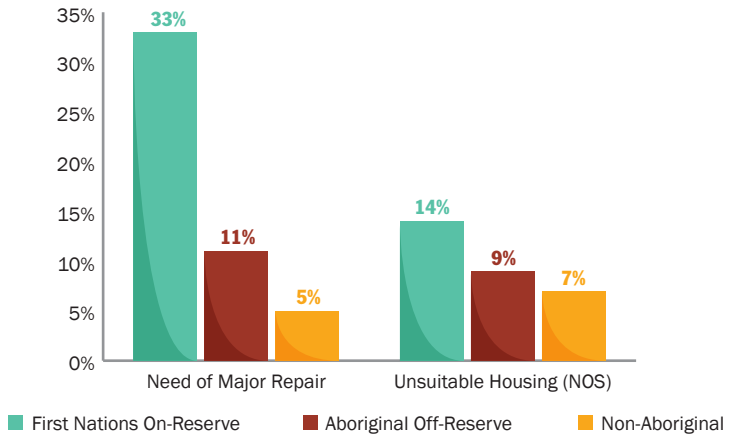
In B.C., Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by the lack of housing. In a 2018 homeless count report prepared for BC Housing, Indigenous peoples are over-represented. Although Indigenous peoples account for only six percent of B.C. population, 38 percent of all respondents self-identified as Indigenous, and their proportion was higher for unsheltered (42 percent) than sheltered respondents (32 percent) (Homelessness Services Association of BC et al.). The fraction of Indigenous respondents varied greatly by community, ranging from 8 percent in Parksville to 92 percent in Prince Rupert.

For those who are housed, housing and living conditions are often poor. Based on 2016 Census data, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) assessed the housing conditions of off-reserve Indigenous households, using CMHC's measures of acceptable housing and core housing needs[45] and published the findings in a recent report (2019). Overall, that report concludes that housing conditions of Aboriginal households improved at a greater rate than that of non-Aboriginal households between 2011 and 2016. The incidence of core housing needs, however, among the former remained disproportionately high, with over one in five Aboriginal households deemed in core housing need compared to 15 percent non-Aboriginal households. The primary driver of core housing need was not meeting the affordability standard due to high housing costs and comparatively low incomes. The situation in First Nations communities is, if anything, worse. The proportion of First Nations people on-reserve living in a dwelling that needs major repairs went up by 0.8 percentage points nationwide between 2011 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017). According to a 2017 evaluation of on-reserve housing conducted by INAC (now ISC), "issues of overcrowding, poor states of repair, inadequate infrastructure, as well as lack of affordability, are widespread [and] long-term

[45] A household is in Core Housing Need if its housing is below one or more of three housing standards (adequacy, suitability, and affordability); and the household would have to spend 30 percent or more of its before-tax income to access housing elsewhere in the community that meets all three standards. Acceptable housing is adequate in condition, suitable in size, and affordable.

improvements have been limited" (2017, p. iv). On the measure of average proportion of housing deemed "adequate" by First Nation housing managers, B.C. consistently had the lowest score among provinces (under 70 percent in 2014), along with Manitoba (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017, p. 32). These statistics are reflected in our data. One in three households on-reserve live in dwellings in need of major repairs. This compares to about one in ten Indigenous households off-reserve and one in 20 non-Indigenous households [Figure 3-5]. Overcrowding is an issue as well: 14 percent of First Nations households on-reserve live in housing deemed unsuitable according to the National Occupancy Standard (NOS) because the dwelling does not have enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the household. The rate for their non-Indigenous off-reserve counterparts is half that, at 7 percent.

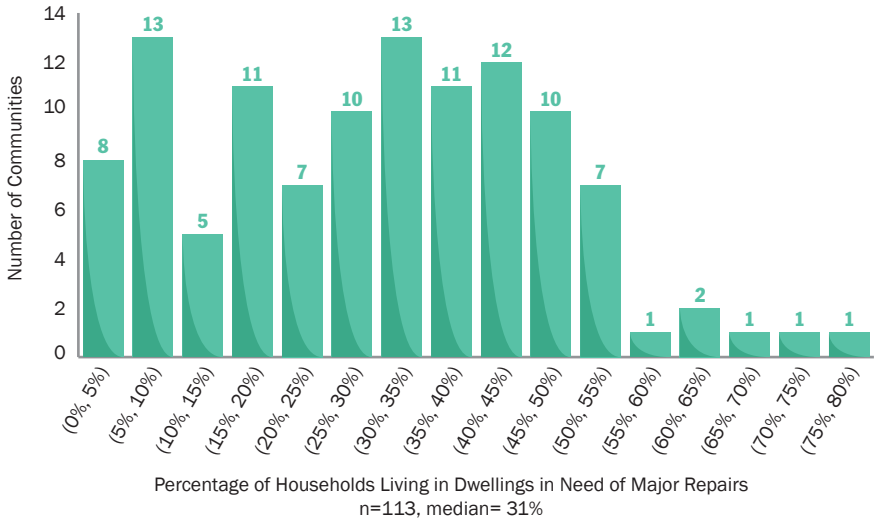
Figure 3-2: Selected Housing Quality Measures, by Subpopulation



While Figure 3-2 shows averages, the extent of the problem differs widely across First Nations communities. We see from Figure 3-3 that more than half of all households' houses need major repair in 13 of the 113 communities from which we have data.[46]

[46] B.C. has a total of 204 First Nations, and over 1,100 distinct reserves. The census data we have at our disposal contain localized information only for Indian reserves or settlements with more than 40 inhabitants. This limits our observations at the reserve level to 113 inhabited reserves with a sufficiently large population. As long as the Nation has at least one such reserve, however, the community would be included in our data, with the exception of Esquimalt, where no census enumeration took place in 2016.

Figure 3-3: Housing Quality across First Nations communities



A typical family in a First Nations community pays 1.5 times more for their electricity than the rest of the population in B.C.

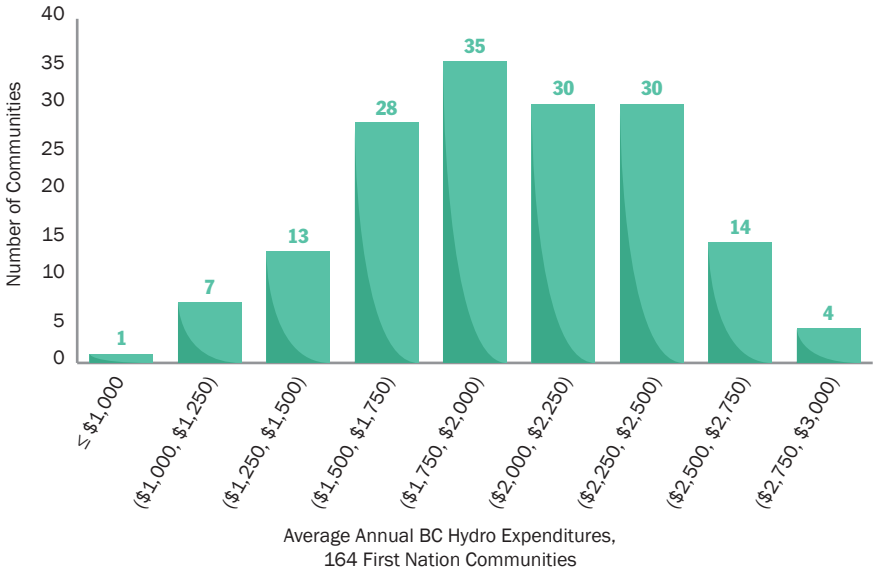
One important aspect of the generally poor quality of housing in First Nations communities is that it impacts heating expenditures, which amplifies housing costs. Families in those communities face disproportionately high costs of electricity associated with poorly insulated dwellings and substandard heating systems. To better grasp the extent of this problem, we can make use of data from the census, which asks respondents about their electricity expenditures. On average, an economic family in a B.C. First Nations community spent $2,001 on electricity consumption in 2015, compared to an average of $1,499 for Indigenous families off-reserve, and $1,363 for non-Indigenous families. This means that the electricity bill of a typical family in a First Nations community is almost 50 percent higher than for the rest of the population.

To study this issue in more detail, we obtained 2019 data from BC Hydro on average electricity consumption per account for 161 First Nations communities and for the province as a whole. Supporting the finding from the census, we found that the average consumption in the median First Nation community was 1.7 times the median consumption of the province as a whole. Again, these numbers mask considerable variation. Figure 3-4 shows the distribution of average annual hydro cost across all communities. The average consumption in more than four out of ten First Nations communities was higher than the top 20 percentile of consumption in accounts province-wide.[47] In 29 communities, the average hydro bill was over $2,400 annually, or $200 per month. Even for the median community, the average expenditures still

[47] According to BC Hydro, the average consumption per account in B.C. in 2019 was 7,790 kilowatt-hour (kwh), averaged over a two month billing period for all billing accounts and housing types. Accounts in the lowest quintile of the distribution had a consumption of 3,683 kwh on average, whereas in the top quintile, the consumption was 14,372 kwh on average.

exceeded $164 per month. For context, the cap on monthly shelter allowance for Income Assistance recipients in B.C. is $375 for a single individual and $715 for a family of four.[48]

Figure 3-4: Annual Electricity Cost in First Nations communities



We can also relate these expenditures to average incomes and the poverty line. Using the 2016 Census, we calculated the fraction of disposable income that households reported spending on electricity consumption each year. On average, households in First Nations communities spent 3.5 percent of their income on their BC Hydro bill, while the corresponding figure for non-Indigenous households – with lower electricity bills and higher disposable incomes – was only 1.5 percent. The percentage values are much higher for households living in poverty of course. The MBM poverty threshold in the 2016 Census for a representative family of four living in a rural area in B.C. was $37,153, with a shelter component of $9,327,[49] implying that a household on-reserve just at the poverty line would be spending 5 percent of its income and over 20 percent of its "expected" shelter cost on electricity alone.

Accessibility and Imperfect Take-up

In its final report, the BC Expert Panel on Basic Income noted several shortcomings of the current provincial Income Assistance and social support system in terms of three desirable properties: simplicity, respectfulness, and low barriers to access (Green et al., 2020). We refer the reader to their report for details of how the system fares based on

[48] Recall that Income Assistance program rates do not significantly differ between First Nations communities (where ISC delivers the program) and the rest of the province. Generally speaking, the eligibility criteria and rates of the basic needs component of on-reserve Income Assistance matches those of the province.

[49] Amounts were pulled from Statistics Canada, Table 11-10-0066-01 and can be found here: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601.

these criteria and will confine ourselves in this report on (largely separate) issues that we deem to be pertinent to Indigenous peoples in B.C. Imperfect take-up of social programs generally can be traced back to several distinct barriers to receiving benefits for otherwise eligible individuals: lack of awareness or erroneous beliefs about eligibility or enrolment requirements, hurdles in the application process itself, and lastly, stigma, racism, or a mistrust in government. In Part II, we heard from the community how Indigenous clients are uniquely affected by all these barriers, ranging from ill-trained and overburdened Band Social Development Workers to missing documentation, technological obstacles, and structural racism Indigenous clients encountered when applying for Income Assistance. This section discusses secondary data that provide additional evidence on accessibility and participation by Indigenous peoples in B.C.

Tax System Gaps

Filing tax returns allows Canadians with low incomes to access a wide range of federal and provincial benefits, either because they claim the benefit directly when they file or because their tax returns flag eligibility for benefits through other processes. The most important federal income supports accessible through the tax system are the Canada Child Benefits (CCB, or formerly CCTB and UCCB), Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS and GIS), Working Income Tax Benefit, and the GST/HST credit.

Administering government benefit programs through the tax system has a number of advantages, including incorporated proof of earnings, ease of registration, and electronic filing. As a result, take-up rates of such programs tend to be significantly higher than registration rates for programs administered outside the tax system. Many people with low incomes, however, do not file tax returns because they face barriers to tax filing. They might file tax returns if they were aware of the benefits accessible through the tax system. Using 2016 Census data linked to CRA records, Green et al. (2019) report that 7.4 percent of British Columbians did not file taxes for the 2015 tax year but were generally present in the CRA system, while a remarkable 3.5 percent of the population were not present in the tax records at all. Not surprisingly, low-income, poorly educated households were over-represented among the non-filers and among those with no CRA record. Their analysis also suggests that social assistance recipients were almost twice as likely to be present in the CRA records but not file their taxes as the rest of the population. Repeating their analysis with an Aboriginal (census-based) identifier reveals that the same is true for Indigenous peoples. Among First Nations, over 15 percent or roughly 18,000 people, did not file a return in 2015, and over 6.8 percent or about 8,500 people had no CRA record at all,[50] indicating that a substantial number of Indigenous peoples miss out on the various supports delivered through the CRA system.

Technological Barriers and Lack of In-Person Services

Inequities related to affordability and poor internet access have profound impacts in a modern-day society that increasingly relies on digital connectivity when it comes to participation in the economy or access to health care, education, and government

[50] We are grateful to David Green, who re-configured the numbers.

services. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need to access the internet, when it has become the only means of tapping into essential services.

Barriers to access and affordability of high-speed internet and cellular data service are more pronounced for Indigenous peoples. According to the Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), 92 percent of households in B.C. with access to target speeds of 50 Mbps are largely in urban areas. According to the provincial government, in rural B.C., only 36 percent of communities and 38 percent of Indigenous communities have access to the recommended broadband internet speeds. The latest information gathered through the Pathways to Technology Project indicates that about half of all First Nations in B.C. that were connected to high-speed internet over the past eight years now require a major upgrade to meet the CRTC standards for acceptable community connectivity (Williams, 2021). Affordability is an equally pressing issue, given that disposable incomes of Indigenous households both on-reserve and off-reserve are lower than for the rest of the population, and families may not be able to shoulder the regular expenses associated with internet or cellular data services; for many, the desired and needed bandwidth may not be affordable or sustainable (2021). Among other things, the lack of a reliable internet inhibits or complicates access to government programs and online applications for financial aid. While Band Social Development Workers will manage paper-based applications for ISC clients on-reserve, the B.C. government has been shifting away from in-person services toward centralized phone or internet platforms, and now relies primarily on a self-serve internet portal or call centres for the application process and administration of its Income Assistance program.[51]

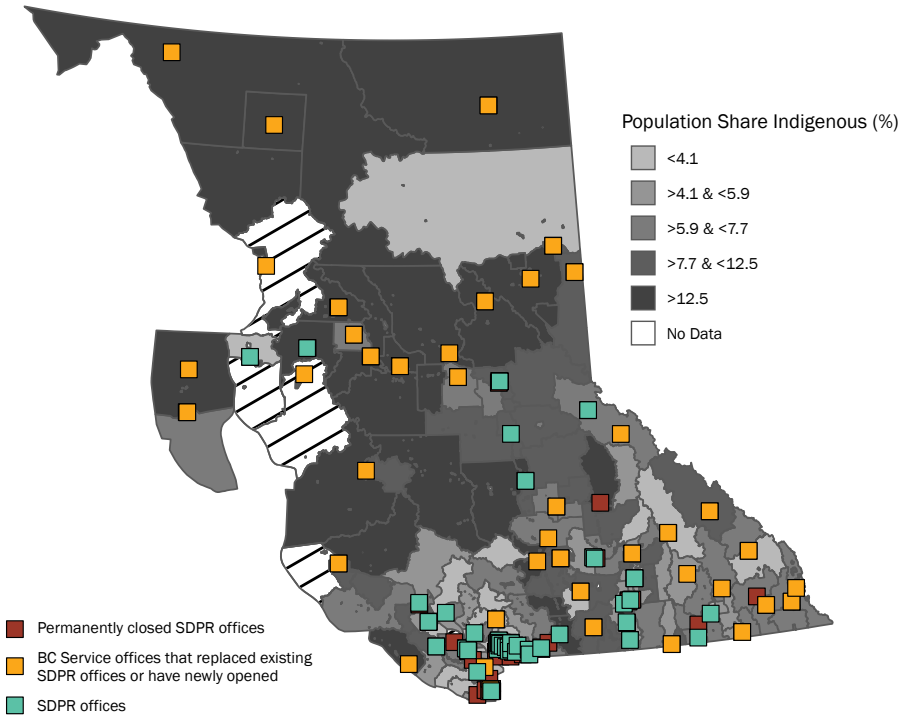
The shift was accompanied by a substantial reduction in the number of SDPR offices. From 1998 to 2014, the number of ministry office locations was reduced in half, from 128 to 64, due to closures and amalgamations, and the number has further declined to 37 open locations.[52] To ensure continued presence in locations that no longer have dedicated Income Assistance/Disability Assistance support, and to expand services to more remote locations, the ministry initiated a partnership with Service BC, and is currently in the process of integrating the Service BC offices to offer the entire range

[51] According to 2018 data we obtained from the SDPR through their Service Satisfaction Survey, 92 percent of respondents reported that they use the online "My Self-Serve (MySS)" client portal, and 95 percent reported using in-person services in a ministry office. The online portal received the highest average satisfaction score, followed by in-person services at a ministry office and telephone service. All scores were up from previous surveys in 2016 and 2014. The responses of Indigenous clients in the survey did not differ significantly from those of non-Indigenous clients, although, as expected, significantly fewer clients with Indigenous ancestry used their home internet to access ministry services (66 percent versus 78 percent). Although informative, the survey is unlikely to be fully representative since it is plausible that clients with internet access were more likely to fill out the survey than those without (responding to the survey was less costly online), biasing the results toward those that used the service portal more heavily. In addition, Indigenous respondents were also significantly younger and thus less likely to face technological barriers when using computers (at home or the library).

[52] We are grateful to Jeffrey Hicks, who painstakingly coded office closures and amalgamations. The exact numbers depend on how amalgamations are coded, however. See Hicks (2020) for a detailed account of the methodology.

of services that would otherwise be available at a ministry office. As of December 15, 2021 the ministry's office location page lists 85 offices, of which 37 are dedicated SDPR offices and 48 are Service BC. Figure 3-5 maps office locations, taking into account regional (census subdivision) differences in Indigenous population shares; the shading indicates quintiles of the distribution (2016 Census data). It shows SDPR offices that were permanently closed from 2014 onwards (just before the first wave of closures) in red, Service BC offices in yellow, and SDPR offices that are currently still open in green.

Figure 3-5: Office Closures and Locations



The data on office closures show that areas with higher numbers of Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately impacted by the shift to Service BC. We heard from our interview participants that Service BC offices in practice do not offer the same level of service as dedicated ministry offices. Until they are fully integrated and staff there are as trained and available as the staff in regular ministry offices, it is quite conceivable that the decline of quality face-to-face support, in combination with a complicated and onerous application process that requires a myriad of documents, especially for PWD designations,[53] has discouraged enrolment and resulted in elevated numbers of Indigenous individuals who are eligible for services but currently do not receive them. This conjecture has been validated in the consultations around B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy, where the "data suggest that the greatest initial, front-end barrier to access is an assumption that all users have access to the requisite phones, computers, printers, and scanners for [Income Assistance] applications" (Hertz et al, 2020, p.15). It goes

[53] A 2009 B.C. Ombudsperson report concluded that the ministry's Income Assistance application process is "unduly complex" and "can discourage people who are in need from obtaining the assistance available to them" (p.31).

without saying that vulnerable subpopulations with multiple barriers, among which Indigenous persons are also generally over-represented, are particularly affected by not having a "human in government." Every Community Integration Specialist worker we interviewed stressed how critical in-person, face-to-face service is when it comes to providing information and guidance, as well as eliminating misconceptions for such applicants and clients of the Income Assistance and social support programs.

Barriers to PWD Applications and Appeal Process

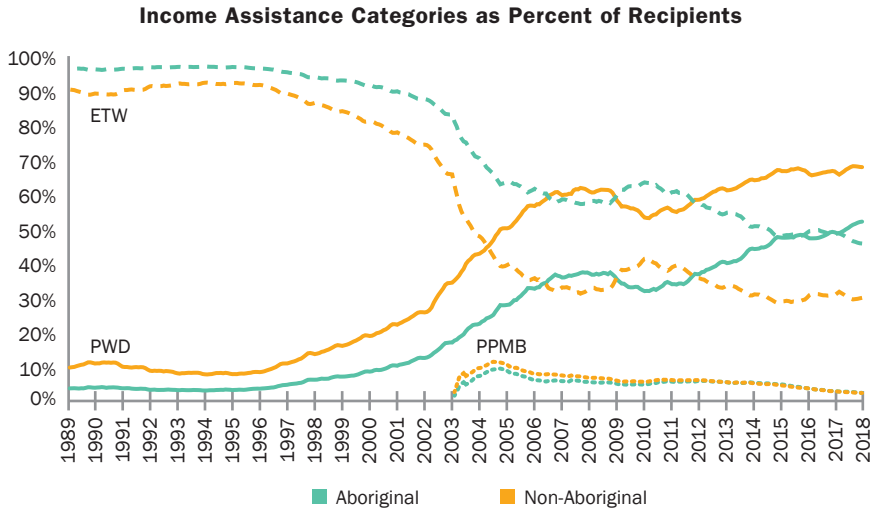
Many community voices we heard expressed explicit concern about systemic barriers for Indigenous peoples to apply for a PWD designation. Two themes in particular emerged in our conversations which prevented Indigenous clients from obtaining Disability Assistance; both themes were related to the challenges Indigenous clients face trying to complete Section 2 of the PWD form, the "Physician's Report". First, the lack of access to primary care providers (general physicians or nurse practitioners) forces applicants to use walk-in clinics instead, which then would require repeated visits that are difficult or impossible to arrange for at-risk populations with multiple existing barriers.[54] Second is systemic racism in the health care system and the paucity of culturally safe medical practitioners. That First Nations face persistent inequities and racism when seeking health services is well established through large-scale data and was most recently documented in Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond's "In Plain Sight'' report. Racism on the part of individual health care providers translates easily into being denied PWD designations, because assessment is often subjective. Although to qualify for PWD, an applicant must meet government definitions of what constitutes "disabled", medical practitioners are free to interpret those definitions through the lens of their own experience and values. As was documented in Hertz et al. (2020) using data, doctors may have "differing opinions on what constitutes a disability" and may refuse to fill out the required form because they "philosophically disagree with the PWD [program]."[55] Hertz et al. also found that "when it comes to mental disabilities [...] the consultation data suggest that there is no consensus among those with the authority to decide how social assistance qualifications ought to be operationalized" (2020, p.10).

To see how these two barriers play out in the data, we look at the relative share of recipients in different Income Assistance program categories: "expected to work" (ETW, where we, for simplicity, also include persons temporarily excused from work), "person with disability" (PWD), and "person with persistent multiple barriers" (PPMB). Figure 3-6 plots the share of recipients in the different categories as a share of total recipients over time, separately for non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples.

[54] In the 2017 FNHA Regional survey, 47% of adults and 37% of children reported that lack of access was a barrier to receiving primary care in the past year.

[55] Community Meetings in Kamloops and Port Alberni, respectively (as cited in Hertz et al., 2020, p.10).

Figure 3-6: Share of Category Cases, by Subpopulation (Provincial Income Assistance)



We see that following an artificial hump in the share of PWD clients, which stems from a drop in ETW recipients due to the already mentioned policy changes in 1996 and 2002, the relative numbers have been rising steadily since 2010. Much of this rise can be attributed to increased longevity, successive broadening of the PWD criteria to include substance use and mental health issues, and the longer duration of PWD cases. These time trends are very similar for both subpopulations. Figure 3-6 also points to persistent gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients: the former has consistently been over-represented in the ETW category and consistently been under-represented in the PWD category. In December 2017, for example, the ETW recipients made up about 45 percent of Indigenous Income Assistance recipients and only 30 percent of non-Indigenous clients. At the same time, the share of Disability Assistance recipients was 52 percent among the former and 68 percent among the latter. Interestingly, the situation is even worse in First Nations communities. Although ISC, somewhat surprisingly, does not gather data directly on PWD status, it does enumerate the number of recipients who are expected to work. From the data we obtained on 2016-17 Income Assistance caseloads, we calculated the share of ETW recipients on-reserve to be a staggeringly high 56 percent. If one excludes recipients under 18, who are very unlikely to be expected to work, that share rises to 60 percent, double the share of ETW recipients among the non-Indigenous population.

Income Assistance recipients in First Nations communities are twice as likely to be "expected to work" as non-Indigenous peoples who receive provincial Income Assistance.

These findings may be puzzling given the comparatively poor health conditions of Indigenous peoples (see also Section 3.2. below) but can be reconciled with our expectations about how difficult it is for Indigenous clients to successfully apply for PWD status. Clearly, the most likely explanation is the existence of systemic barriers preventing this group from obtaining a PWD designation.

Cycle of Poverty

"**RECONCILIATION MUST CREATE A MORE** equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health and economic outcomes that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 16). The prospects of escaping poverty are closely tied to societal inequality, which in turn is rooted in historical discrimination and colonial policies such as forced relocation and assimilation. In addition to reducing and preventing overall poverty, the goal of any broad strategy to address poverty must therefore be to mitigate disparities across subgroups of the population and to put additional resources into breaking the poverty cycle for disadvantaged groups. As we will document in this section, glaring gaps exist between Indigenous peoples and the general population with respect to the critical drivers of the poverty cycle, and some of these gaps have persisted or even increased over time. The province has a stated responsibility to address these gaps in its poverty reduction framework. An increased focus on the support needs of the Indigenous peoples would also dovetail with the province's ongoing efforts to advance reconciliation and its commitment to "creating opportunities for Indigenous peoples to be full partners in our economy" (Horgan, 2020).

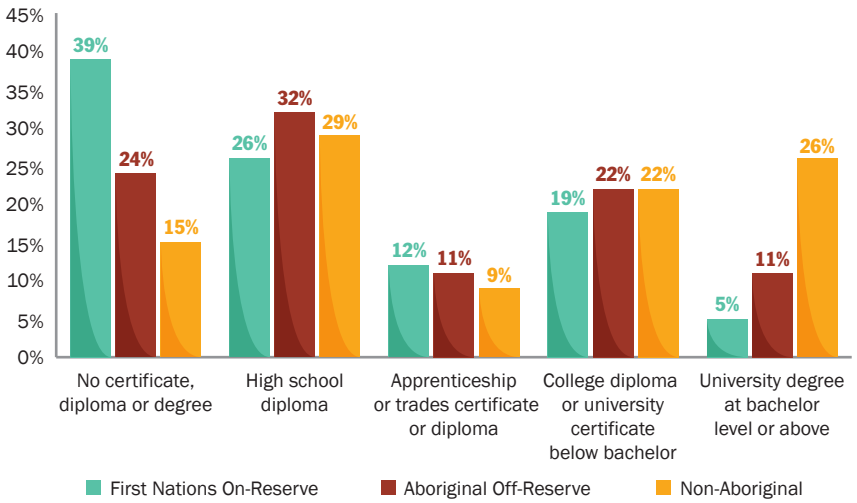
Education

Poverty and education are inextricably linked. Children growing up in low-income families face unique challenges and barriers such as poor nutrition and health, poverty-induced stress, and a lack of parental support, which impede their chances of educational success. At the same time, there is a well-established connection between higher levels of education, lower unemployment rates, and greater earning potential. Education also carries other benefits, including better health outcomes, marriage to a more educated spouse and lower divorce rates.[56] The result is an intergenerational cycle where poverty causes poor education outcomes, and a lack of education causes poverty. While education and skills training are key components of poverty reduction strategies, the educational attainment of Indigenous peoples in B.C. is lagging. This is true for all

[56] For example, one additional year of post-secondary education increases annual earnings in the range of 7 percent to 15 percent, including for marginal students at the time of entry into their program. See Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) for an overview of research on income and other benefits of postsecondary education.

subgroups (family types, locations) and all levels of education, but the disparities are particularly prominent for First Nations communities and at the two extremes of the educational spectrum [Figure 3-7].

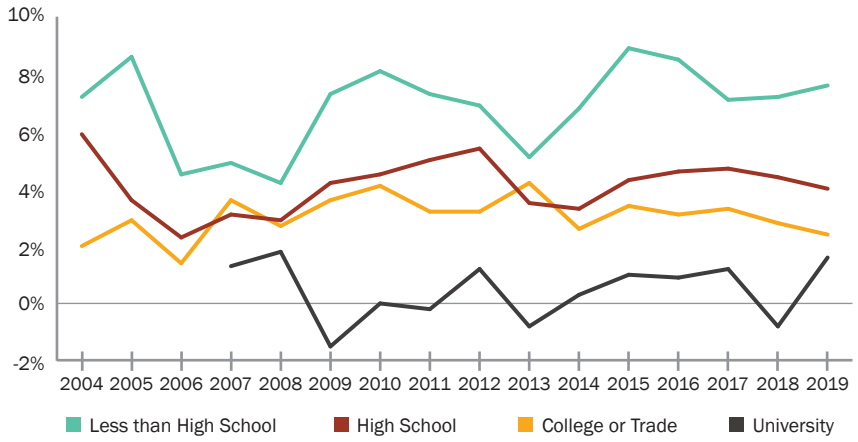
Figure 3-7: Educational Attainment by Subpopulation in B.C. (2016 Census Data)



It is well documented that college-educated adults are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to earn more than their high school-educated peers or high school dropouts and that the difference has been growing over the past few decades. Using 2016 Census data, B.C. working-aged men and women with a bachelor degree earned 38 percent more than their counterparts whose highest level of education was a high-school diploma, and 45 percent more than B.C. residents who had an apprenticeship certificate.[57] Arguably, education matters even more for Indigenous peoples. Figure 3-8 shows the difference in unemployment rates between the Aboriginal (off-reserve) working-age population and the general working-age population over time, broken down by highest level of education. While the gap is close to zero and sometimes even negative for university graduates, it widens as the highest degree attained decreases and is largest – at around 8 percentage points – for individuals with no high school degree or certificate. In 2019 for example, the unemployment rate among the general working age population without a high school degree was 11.2 percent, while the same figure for persons with Aboriginal identity and no high school degree was 18.8 percent. Finally, it should also be noted that none of the gaps in unemployment have narrowed significantly over time, and for the most vulnerable group with the lowest educational attainment, the gap has in fact increased by over 2 percentage points over the period from 2006 onwards.

[57] The median annual earnings of a B.C. resident in 2015 were $45,563 for high-school graduates, $43,327 for persons with an apprenticeship certificate, and $62,985 for bachelor degree holders. Census in Brief, Does education pay? A comparison of earnings by level of education in Canada and its provinces and territories, retrieved from https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016024/98-200-x2016024-eng.cfm.

Figure 3-8: Difference in Unemployment Rates for Individuals with Aboriginal Identity (off-reserve), by Level of Education[58]

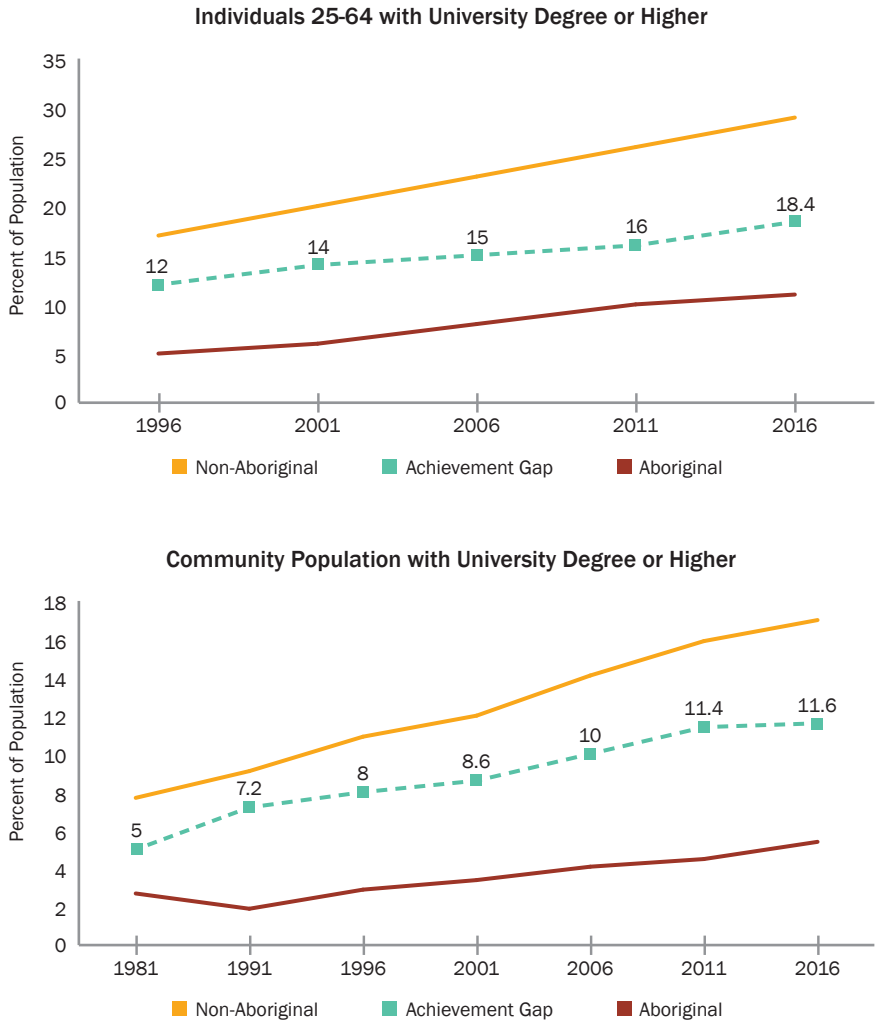


Post-Secondary Education – University Degrees

There is no question that post-secondary education is a chief driver of prosperity for individuals as well as for communities, and one would hope that the Indigenous population would have been catching up with their non-Indigenous counterparts in B.C. over time. As Figure 3-9 documents, unfortunately, the achievement gap has been widening over time. At the community level, the trend is especially troubling. The percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree in First Nations communities has only grown moderately over the past decades, far less than for the corresponding population elsewhere. In the past 30 years, the achievement gap has more than doubled. For individuals, the growth in disparities was less pronounced. The gap increased by 50 percent, suggesting that part of the trend in growing disparities is out-migration: First Nations communities are systematically losing the highest-educated members. This type of "brain drain" is frequently associated with significant negative consequences for communities: stunted economic growth, a shortage of skilled workers, fewer potential entrepreneurs, reduced confidence in the local economy leading to further out-migration, as well as a variety of social costs as a more educated society is generally in better health, has lower crime and substance abuse rates, and increased civic engagement.

[58] Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0361-01 Unemployment rates of population aged 15 and over, total and with Aboriginal identity, by educational attainment, Canada.

Figure 3-9: Individual and Community-level Achievement Gaps in Higher Education[59]



Of course, realizing the potential for post-secondary growth also requires addressing high school completion. Indeed, the potential to break the cycle of poverty is arguably greatest for the subgroup of people at the bottom of the educational attainment pyramid – those without a high school diploma.

High School Completion

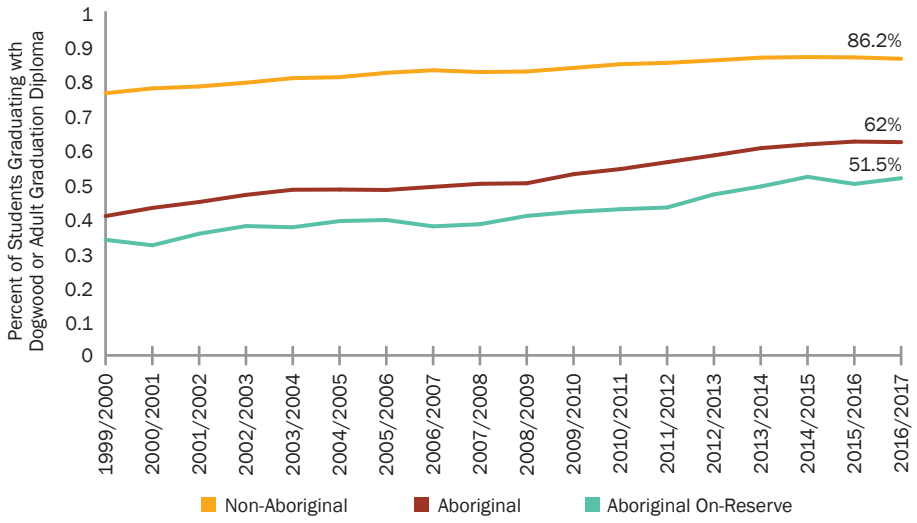
Generally speaking, successfully completing high school has been very important for socio-economic outcomes in Canada. Young adults without a high school diploma have seen their employment rates steadily decreasing over the past decades, while over the same period, the difference between the least educated and the most educated has grown. Canada-wide, the employment rate was 67 percent in 2016 among young males without a high school diploma – the lowest rate since 1994 – compared to a rate of 89 percent for young males with a university education (Uppal, 2017). A recent illuminating study by Frenette (2019) follows two cohorts of young (26- to 35-year-old) Canadians over

[59] Source: CWB Index, ISC. See Appendix D for additional documentation.

a 15-year period to analyze long-term labour market outcomes by educational attainment. The author finds that annual earnings were higher for men who entered the labour market in 2001 than their counterparts a decade earlier among all groups except those without a high school diploma, who in fact registered a decline in annual earnings across cohorts.

Unlike the gap in post-secondary achievement, the gap in high school graduation rates has gradually narrowed over time, both for individuals and communities. Figure 3-10 shows the time trend for six-year completion rates for high school students in B.C. Overall, graduation rates have increased over time for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, though the success rates for non-Indigenous students were persistently higher than for Indigenous students. Starting in 2008, the gap narrowed somewhat but was still at 24 percentage points in 2017, implying that the chances of Indigenous youth graduating from high school were still roughly 28 percent lower than those of their non-Indigenous classmates. As expected, students who reside on-reserve have even lower chances of education success, with a completion rate of less than 52 percent. It should be noted that our numbers on graduation rates are smaller but plausibly more accurate than those published by the B.C. Ministry of Education in its yearly reports, although we base our calculations on the same data. For example, our six-year completion rate for Aboriginal students is 62 percent, which is 4 percentage points less than the officially reported rate of 66 percent that year.[60]

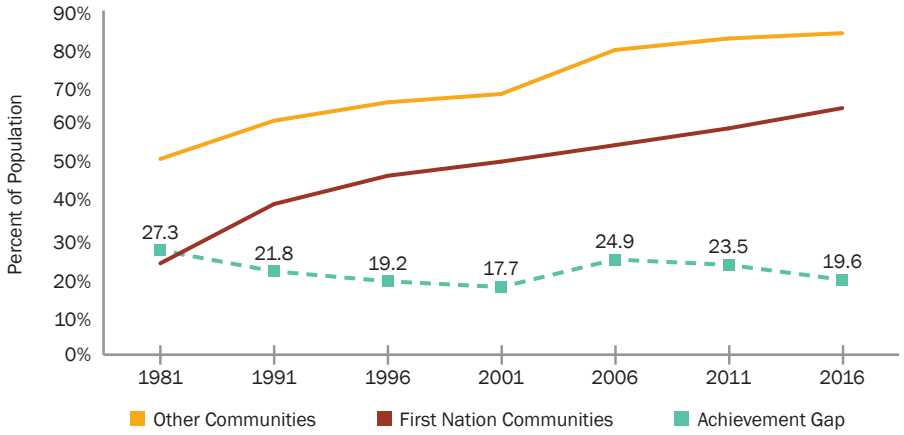
Figure 3-10: B.C. Graduation Rates by (Self-declared) Ancestry



[60] We compared our data to the ministry data using the Six-Year Dogwood Completion Rate 1997/98 to 2019/20 (for residents only) which are publicly available for download at https://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset/1c6256d0-c120-4de1-817b-fb291732f8a4/resource/e8ecf3ac-2cbf-442c-9280-2bbd7e1dcbff/download/completion_rate_residents_only.xlsx. See also, for example, the Provincial K-12 Achievement Report "Aboriginal Students: How are We Doing?" published at https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/reporting-on-k-12/provincial-report. Please refer to Appendix D for further details on the figure and why the ministry overestimates graduation rates in general, and Aboriginal graduation rates in particular.

The Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia recently released a progress audit on the education of Aboriginal students in the B.C. public school system since its 2015 report, confirming that the gaps have narrowed but are still substantial. At the community level, a similar picture emerges, as can be seen in Figure 3-11. The percentage of community members that hold at least a high school diploma or equivalent has steadily increased over time in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, but the growth was more pronounced in the former, which consequently narrowed the gap over time, though in absolute value the disparities are still significant. Once again, there is a sense that the problem is more salient at the community level, possibly caused by out-migration.

Figure 3-11: High School Completion at the Community Level



Compared to their non-Indigenous classmates in the same school and year, with the same parental background, living in the same family type, and with the same provincial skill assessment score in Grade 7, the likelihood of First Nations youth living on-reserve to graduate is over 20 percentage points – or roughly one-quarter – lower.

As we did for income, we undertook a regression analysis to highlight the extent of barriers to educational attainment for Indigenous youth in B.C., in general, and youth residing on-reserve, in particular. Our results lend strong empirical support to the notion that the B.C. school system continues to fail Indigenous students: *There is a serious imbalance in successful completion of secondary education for Indigenous youth, especially those that reside on-reserve, even when taking into account ("controlling for") variation time trends, in the quality of schools, parental background, primary educational achievement, and other confounding factors.*[61]

[61] All results are presented in Table C2 (Appendix D). Our sample consists of over 630,000 youth who attended B.C. secondary schools over the period of 2011 through 2018 and who were in Grade 7 between 1999-2000 and 2011-2012 inclusive.

Health

Along with education, health is the most prominent element in the cycle of poverty. Poverty increases the chance of poor physical and mental health owing to factors such as poor nutrition, overcrowded housing, lack of clean water, lack of access to primary care, and stress, among others. In turn, mental or physical illness diminishes productivity and earning potential in the workplace, shrinks opportunities for educational or professional advancement, and is a leading cause of substance abuse, all of which contribute to ongoing poverty.

Despite greater needs for accessing primary care, First Nations have lower rates than other residents in the province with respect to the use of health services in both rural and urban settings (Turpel-Lafond, 2020a). The most recent (2015/17) Regional Health Survey of the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) documents that First Nations people face persistent inequity when seeking appropriate health services. Almost three-quarters (71 percent) of adult respondents to the survey reported that they had faced a range of barriers in the past year, when they required care from a health professional. Lack of access (47 percent) was the most reported barrier to receiving care (First Nations Health Authority, 2019). Systemic racism in the health care system is also a real concern and will further aggravate the disparities in health and well-being between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in British Columbia. The recent independent report *In Plain Sight, Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in B.C. Health Care* documents widespread anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination in the B.C. health care system, with consistently sub-standard access to care for Indigenous subpopulations, causing poorer health outcomes (Turpel-Lafond, 2020a). As this Report already provides ample and recent data, we confine this section to a few very selective health indicators and mostly focus on time trends, to document the extent to which gaps have changed over time. For a more in-depth view of the other data on disparities in health care, we refer the reader to the above-mentioned report as well as the accompanying data report.[62]

The time trends we present draw on the B.C. Ministry of Health's files (DIP data) and comprise all B.C. residents registered with MSP in July of each year from 1991 to 2016. Due to data limitations, we only considered persons aged 19 to 65. The Indigenous indicators available in the health data is First Nations (Status Indians)[63] registration, and the broader indicators form the educational data, where we have self-declared Aboriginal status. The data include both on-reserve and off-reserve residents. Please refer to Appendix D for a description of the data and methodology for all subsequent charts and figures.

[62] Please refer to In Plain Sight, Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in B.C. Health Care, Data Report (Turpel-Lafond, 2020b), which can be found here: https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/613/2021/02/In-Plain-Sight-Data-Report_Dec2020.pdf1_.pdf

[63] Specifically, we observe whether MSP premiums were paid for by the federal government, which would be the case for registered First Nations. Indian status is the legal status of a person who is registered under the *Indian Act*.

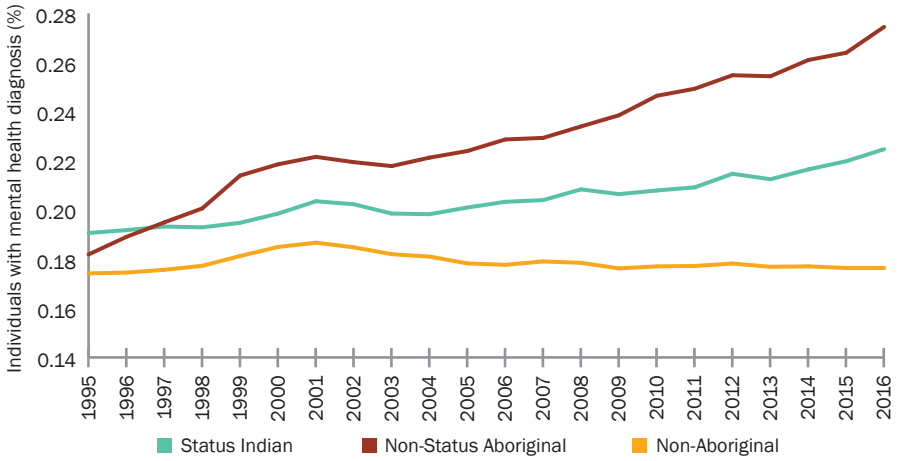
Mental Health

Poor mental health intersects with poverty in a variety of ways. It increases people's vulnerability to poverty through its effect on income, education, employment, and substance abuse; it impacts their ability to access existing support systems made available to them through the public sector or their communities; and it fosters social isolation through stigmatization. Indigenous peoples and First Nations in particular score generally lower on all major mental health indicators than the rest of the population. Prevalence of depression is elevated, as are mental health services usage rates. The rate of deaths attributed to alcohol among First Nations was 14.2 per 10,000 in 2015, a rate that was three times higher than the rate for other Canadians (Turpel-Lafond, 2020b). Among Aboriginal youth attending school in B.C. in 2013, a staggering 13 percent attempted suicide in the past year (Tourand et al., 2016).

Figure 3-12 depicts disparities in mental health between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in B.C. over time, using the fraction of individuals that were treated for a mental-health diagnosis as an outcome variable.[64] We see that the elevated mental health burden of Indigenous peoples in B.C. is not only substantial, but increasing over time. The mental health of non-Indigenous people, in contrast, has largely remained unchanged, with a slight downward trend since the early 2000s. As a result, the disparities in mental wellness are increasing. It is notable and somewhat puzzling that the trend is worse for non-status (self-identified) Aboriginals. Part of this pattern may be attributable to a change in composition of this particular subgroup, and one should also keep in mind that a mental health diagnosis requires a care provider. Note that many residents in First Nations communities (who will predominantly be Status Indians) lack access to such a provider or face other barriers to seeking professional health care services. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, many of our Key Knowledge Advisors noted that in their view, a disproportionately large number of community members had undiagnosed mental health issues.

[64] Thus, the numbers do not capture the likely large population of individuals with poor mental health that remained untreated.

Figure 3-12: Disparities in Mental Health, Time Trends[65]



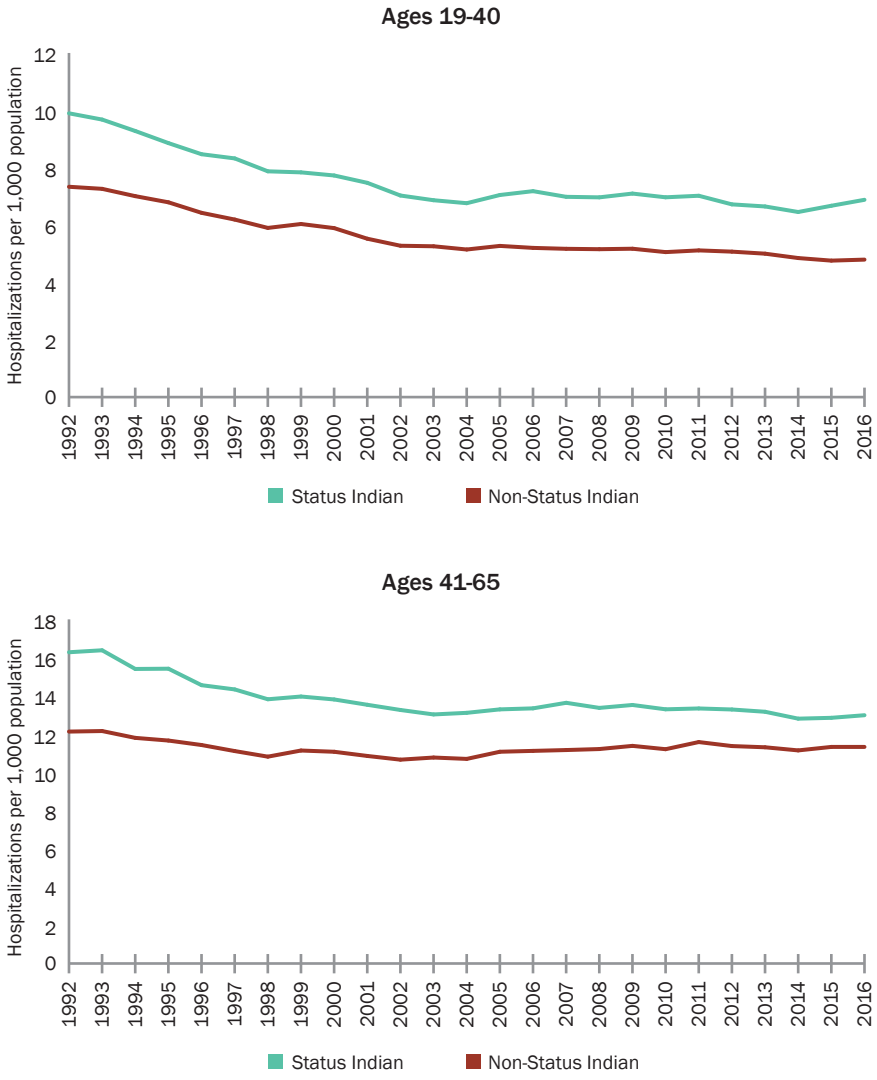
Physical Health

In this section, we illustrate the physical health of persons with First Nations ancestry in B.C. through hospitalization and mortality rates, in order to document time trends and the fact that disparities with the rest of the population have persisted over time.

First Nations had a rate of 15.5 inpatient cases per 1,000 population in 2017-18, which was 80 per cent higher than the rate of the Non-First Nation population (8.8 cases per 100 population) (Turpel-Lafond, 2020b). In the data we obtained from the ministry, hospitalization rates for the Indigenous population (as measured by status) are higher at every age, with the gap particularly high in the early years. Indigenous children aged three, for instance, are almost twice as likely (10 out of 100) as than their non-Indigenous counterparts (5.9 out of 100) to be hospitalized. Looking at time trends shows that hospitalization rates fell for both subgroups through the 1990s, but then stabilized [Figure 3-13]. For older generations aged 41 to 65, the gap narrowed over time. At the most recent datapoint in 2016, First Nations in this age group had hospitalization rates of 1.6 per 100 population, 14 percent higher, on average, than non-registered First Nations (11.3 per 100). For people aged 19 to 40, however, there is no evidence that the gap is closing: in 2016, the hospitalization rate for the former group was about 44 percent higher than that of the latter group.

[65] This figure only includes persons aged 19 to 65. The outcome variable is a mental health diagnosis according to ICD-9 coding, which is an international classification system of diagnosis and procedures associated with hospitalization. See Appendix D for details.

Figure 3-13: Age-adjusted Hospitalization Rates, Time Trends[66]

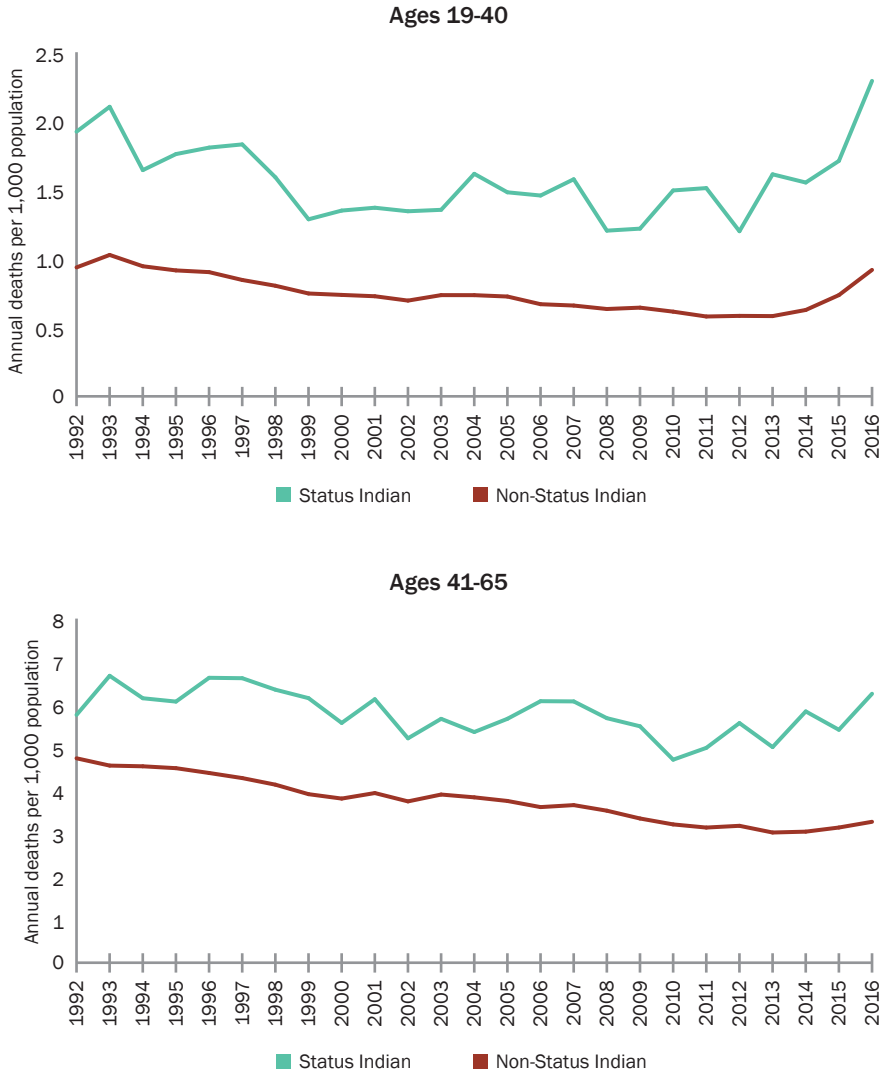


Life expectancy at birth is declining in British Columbia, largely due to the overdose public health crisis (Statistics Canada, 2020). This is true for the general population but particularly so for First Nations people in B.C., whose life expectancy decreased from 75.9 years in 2011, to 73.4 years in 2017, almost nine years lower than that of the B.C. population (82.2 years in 2016-2018) (Turpel-Lafond, 2020a). First Nations are over-represented among overdose deaths, accounting for 16 percent of all overdose deaths in B.C. from January to May 2020 although they make up only 3.3 percent of the province's population (First Nations Health Authority, 2020). This represented an overdose death rate 5.6 times that of other B.C. residents. However, the opioid emergency does not explain the whole picture: looking at the trend in Figure 3-14, we see that for both the

[66] The figure plots the fraction of population appearing in the Discharge Abstract Database, which we use as a measure of hospital inpatient admission, adjusted for age. Our measure also includes patients who died in hospital. To account for different age structures in the subpopulations, the figure reports the coefficients on the year dummies of a regression using dummy variables for age and year, with two separate regressions for registered Indians and the rest of the population. The resulting curves are adjusted so that the predicted is equal to the average in the first year. See Appendix D for a primer on regression analysis.

19-40 and 41-65 age cohorts, the gap in age-adjusted all-cause mortality has been remarkably stable over time. While the recent uptick is very likely driven by overdose deaths, there was no noticeable narrowing of the gap prior to 2013.

Figure 3-14: Age-Adjusted Mortality (all causes), Time Trend[67]



In conclusion, according to a variety of indicators, disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in B.C. have persisted over time. Perhaps most disappointingly, there is no indication that gaps are closing with respect to post-secondary education as well as physical and mental well-being indicators.

We turn next to the question of how poor health and the lack of education can increase the chances of falling into poverty and dependency on income support.

[67] The figure plots the annual deaths per 1,000 in each subgroup adjusted for age, for persons aged 19 to 40 and aged 41 to 65, respectively. To account for different age structures in the subpopulations, the figure reports the coefficients on the year dummies of a regression, using dummy variables for age and year, with two separate regressions for registered First Nations and the rest of the population. The resulting curves are adjusted so that the predicted is equal to the average in the first year. See Appendix D for a primer on regression analysis.

Documenting the Cycle of Poverty and Dependency for the Indigenous Population in B.C.

In this section, we document and quantify to what extent education, health, and intergenerational dependency contribute to the cycle of poverty in B.C. for persons with different ancestry. The DIP data do not contain information on income and poverty, but we can observe whether a person is receiving Income Assistance. Since the level of assistance generally falls short of poverty thresholds (certainly for single individuals), using the incidence of Income Assistance support as an outcome is a very conservative sign for being or becoming poor. It is also a measurable indicator of being dependent on the state.

To document the cycle, we consider how three different factors impact the likelihood that Indigenous youth fall into poverty and state dependence, respectively: high-school graduation, mental health records, and intergenerational dependency, i.e., whether parents were already Income Assistance recipients. The data we look at consists of the grade 7 children who were B.C. residents and for whom we had continuous records in the DIP data until they reached age 22. We then asked, how many of these children will receive Income Assistance in any of the 36 months starting on the month of their 19th birthday of those that did (not) face one of the negative impact factors listed above. Table 3-1 gives answers to this question, separating the effect by (self-declared) ancestry.

Table 3-1: Co-determinants of Receiving Income Assistance as a Young Adult – Frequency Distribution

ILLUSTRATING THE CYCLE - FREQUENCY OF INCOME ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS BY AGE 22 IF GRADE 7 CHILD:						
	Did not Graduate from HS	Graduated from HS	Has mental health record	Has no mental health record	Has parent(s) on IA	Has no parent on IA
Non-Aboriginal	22%	3%	12%	3%	17%	3%
Aboriginal	34%	11%	31%	15%	30%	9%

NOTE: The table displays the fraction of B.C. Grade 7 children in our sample who become an IA recipient at any time within 36 months after their 19th birthday. The mental health indicator records whether the student had a special needs code G, H, M, N, or R (MEd designation) or a doctor's visit with a diagnosis in the mental health range (ICD9 290 to 319). The IA indicator records whether anyone in the family received IA at any point in the ten years prior to them entering Grade 7. More details are provided in Appendix D.

The table confirms our earlier claims that for children in Grade 7, not graduating from high school, experiencing mental health issues, or having parents who are poor are prime determinants of poverty later in early adulthood. All three factors are highly correlated with the chances of receiving Income Assistance by age 22. For non-Indigenous children,

that chance is 3 percent for the average child, if any one of these factors is absent. Failing to graduate from high school increases that chance to 22 percent, while having a mental health issue increases it to 12 percent. Non-Aboriginal children whose parents receive Income Assistance face an average chance of becoming recipients themselves of 17 percent, a finding which firmly establishes the intergenerational nature of dependence on income support. The numbers also show, however, that any one of those factors plays an even bigger role for Indigenous children. Graduation from high school, which we saw earlier is a major hurdle for Indigenous students, even when compared to otherwise similar non-Indigenous peers, lowers the likelihood of receiving Income Assistance before age 22 by an extraordinary 23 percentage points (34 percent – 11 percent) in the data. Similarly, 33 percent of Indigenous children with a mental health record end up receiving income support, up from 15 percent if they do not have any mental health issues. Perhaps most interesting, though, is the correlation that we found on the intergenerational effect. In relative terms and absolute terms, whether parents received Income Assistance themselves makes as big a difference for Indigenous children as high-school graduation. The change in observed frequencies associated with family Income Assistance status is 21 percentage points. Put differently, an Indigenous Grade 7 student present in our data whose parent(s) receive(s) Income Assistance is three times more likely to become themselves dependent on assistance before the age of 22 than an Indigenous student whose parents receive no support.

One may object to these findings by pointing out that there are many characteristics that affect the outcome (Income Assistance recipient in early adulthood) that we do not consider, and that are correlated with our explanatory factors. They will conflate the frequencies. For example, since Indigenous children are more likely to grow up in single-parent families, their chances of graduating from high school are lower, their parents are more likely on Income Assistance, and they are more likely to themselves become Income Assistance dependent. Yet the table above cannot separate the "effect" of family type from the "effect" of parental Income Assistance dependence or failure to graduate from high school. As a final exercise, we therefore use regression analysis to control for other observed co-determinants of becoming dependent on assistance. The question now becomes what the chances of receiving Income Assistance are before age 22, as a function of ancestry and the three factors above, but also given what else we know about the child.[68] Table 3-2 answers that question. It displays the predicted likelihood of receiving assistance in early adulthood as a function of our explanatory variables of interest, keeping the frequency distribution of all auxiliary-observed covariates the same (averaged over all observations in our sample).

[68] Specifically, the covariates we included in our regressions were the following: Aboriginal ancestry (self-declared), whether the child graduated from high school, whether the student had a mental health record, whether their family had received Income Assistance, and additionally, whether the student had a physical disability, whether the student had a learning disability (according to the MEd classification), which type of family the child grew up in (single parent, two parents, unattached minor), a proxy for whether any of the parents was employed, as well as gender, age, and year of observation.

Table 3-2: Co-determinants of Receiving Income Assistance as a Young Adult – Predicted Values from Regression Analysis

ILLUSTRATING THE CYCLE – PREDICTED LIKELIHOOD OF RECEIVING INCOME ASSISTANCE (IA) BY AGE 22 AS A FUNCTION OF:						
	Did not Graduate from HS	Graduated from HS	Has mental health record	Has no mental health record	Has parent(s) on IA	Has no parent on IA
Non-Aboriginal	18%	4%	10%	5%	11%	5%
Aboriginal	20%	6%	13%	7%	19%	5%

NOTE: The table displays the predictive margins fraction of B.C. Grade 7 children in our sample who become an IA recipient at any time within 36 months after their 19th birthday. The mental health indicator records whether the student had a special needs code G, H, M, N, or R (MEd designation) or a doctor's visit with a diagnosis in the mental health range (ICD9 290 to 319). The IA indicator records whether anyone in the family received IA at any point in the 10 years prior to them entering Grade 7. All estimates are statistically significant at the 0.1% level or below. More details are provided in Appendix D.

The numbers can be interpreted as follows. The top-left table entry of 18 percent, for example, indicates that in a hypothetical situation where everyone in our sample was non-Indigenous and did not graduate from high school but the frequency distributions of all other factors we considered remained the same, our model would predict 18 percent of Grade 7 students would receive Income Assistance by the age of 22. If instead, everyone was Indigenous and did not graduate from high school (with the same frequency distribution of the other factors), the predicted frequency of the outcome would be 20 percent (the bottom-left entry), only 2 percentage points higher. Comparing the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Table 3-1 and Table 3-2 shows that controlling for other observables narrows the disparities considerably everywhere, regardless of which factor (graduation, mental health, or inter-generational effect) we are looking at. It also shows, though, that even after taking many other factors into account, our main variables of interest remain highly predictive. One last noteworthy observation from Table 3-2 is that the predicted gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students whose parent(s) do not receive Income Assistance is zero. If parents do receive Income Assistance, on the other hand, the gap is the largest in the table, at 8 percentage points.

Conclusion

THE SECONDARY DATA ON POVERTY amongst Indigenous peoples presented here bring evidence about the reality that current income support programming and other government programs fail to close the gaps that persist between the experiences of Indigenous peoples and the rest of B.C.'s population. With respect to several measures, the disparities are in fact growing. We have also demonstrated that the so-called cycle of poverty (or dependency) is evident in the data and that tackling critical gaps such as those in education and mental health would not only relieve the plight of the current generation, but in the long-term, lower poverty and dependency rates significantly, elevating the wellness of future generations in a sustainable way.

Part IV below will return to the question of how some of these socio-economic gaps could be addressed, notably those in educational achievement. Providing recommendations on closing disparities in health and well-being gaps is beyond the scope of this report; instead, we refer the reader to the aforementioned *In Plain Sight* Report (2020), as well as various reports and evaluations that have been done under the FNHA's mandate.[69] A recent comprehensive five-year *Evaluation of the British Columbia Tripartite Framework Agreement on First Nation Health Governance Report* (2019) concludes that since the FNHA assumed the responsibility for planning, managing, service delivery and funding of health programs for First Nations communities in 2013, a First Nations perspective on health and wellness has been increasingly embedded in the policies and practices of the provincial health system, and strong partnerships and collaborations have been established. Although transformation of health outcomes will take time, as the same report notes, there are also early signs of improvement.

[69] See https://www.fnha.ca/about/governance-and-accountability/audits-and-evaluations and https://www.fnha.ca/about/governance-and-accountability/annual-reports. As part of the British Columbia Tripartite Framework Agreement on First Nation Health Governance (2011) the FNHA assumed the programs, services, and responsibilities formerly handled by Health Canada's First Nations Inuit Health Branch in 2013. In partnership with the federal government, the provincial government, regional health authorities, and First Nations communities and organizations, the FNHA plans, designs, manages, and funds the delivery of First Nations health programs and services in British Columbia.

PART IV:
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

IN 2018, AS PART OF A poverty reduction strategy, the B.C. government created an independent expert panel to research whether giving people a basic income would be an effective way to reduce poverty, and improve health and housing. In consultation with the First Nations Leadership Council, a recommendation was made to undergo a separate study for Indigenous peoples. Our study "Barriers and Gaps in Income Supports for Indigenous peoples in BC" was conducted in collaboration with the First Nations Leadership Council, to ensure that all aspects of the project, including developing the research questions and research methodologies, centre on Indigenous voices. The discussion and research findings are rooted in community-based approaches to the generation of Indigenous knowledge and supplemented with advanced statistical analysis using quantitative data. We used responsive research as a way to weave the findings together incorporating empirically based findings and ensuring that Indigenous community voices remain a focus.

Our findings identified a variety of specific and often insurmountable hurdles that people have to overcome before they receive support. Several barriers are related to stigma and discrimination when accessing any kind of government services. Other obstacles were the difficulty with procedures and bureaucratic processes, a lack of face-to-face support and human connection, as well as a general lack of access to technology, which included internet connectivity and cell phones – barriers that are often compounded by a lack of transportation. We also heard through our knowledge exchanges that there are challenges for people moving off-reserve. In many instances, delays and lack of funding prevented the successful transition out of the community. Similarly, situations arise where a person's sense of position in society would be compromised by racism or discriminatory practices when transitioning off-reserve. These factors coupled with "hidden disabilities" and manifested through substance use and trauma are often not adequately considered in income support programs. Many of our research participants believed that a vast majority of Income Assistance recipients should be receiving disability support, and the data confirm that disproportionately fewer Indigenous people receive disability support, likely as a result of the application process. This is a serious problem because PWD status has a number of important benefits, such as higher monthly payments, a more generous earnings exemption, and additional (often health-related) supports that people can access.

Turning to gaps in service, community members and Key Knowledge Advisors overwhelmingly stated that the current social assistance amounts are insufficient compared to what is required to meet basic needs; social assistance rates were noted as being insufficient to last for the duration of the month. In some cases, not being able to live off what was provided resulted in having no choice but to purchase cheaper food that was not as healthy, or it led to food insecurity. Off-reserve, clients would visit shelters, food banks, and other charitable organizations to make up for the difference and to keep themselves fed, clothed, and sheltered. On-reserve, income support recipients often turned to family, friends and borrowed from credit cards to cover expenses. At the same time, the interviews highlighted that communities as a whole pull together to bridge the gaps to provide people with the in-kind or monetary supports they require to meet their basic needs. Community resilience comes from within the communities where people are taking care of one another to ensure that no person is left behind. There are many barriers to obtaining services, and gaps in services that need to be addressed to support income recipients and their families, and to equip people along their journey of economic well-being, resilience, and self-sufficiency.

Lastly, we saw how persistent gaps in important socio-economic variables (notably educational achievement and health conditions) contribute to the ongoing intergenerational income vulnerability of Indigenous peoples and communities in British Columbia. Any strategy that aims to close gaps in poverty and income among the Indigenous population must also address these disparities as a critical step toward breaking the cycle of poverty, which we documented and quantified in a very concrete way.

Recommendations

THE B.C. GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED A poverty reduction strategy in 2017 and took several other measures (raising the minimum wage, increasing social assistance rates) that over time may contribute to lowering poverty rates across the province. Overall poverty rates have fallen since then, particularly among children where B.C. is meeting its target: the provincial child poverty rate is now below the national average.[70] This trend is encouraging and the fact that targeting a particular subgroup (children) was effective suggests that targeting efforts to other subgroups may be a successful strategy. The evidence presented here points to the Indigenous population as one group that could be prioritized for specific poverty reduction measures with a specific poverty-reduction target.

Many B.C. government initiatives are already focused on Indigenous peoples and communities, and their number is increasing. Yet as we complete this report, extensive gaps and barriers remain. In implementing B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy, the government must continue its efforts to provide dedicated support to Indigenous persons and communities.

Overall, the interconnectedness of poverty with the multitude of other factors implies that two levels of action and commitment are needed by governments and other organizations working with Indigenous communities. First, pursuing specific and targeted measures is paramount to narrowing income and other disparities among the Indigenous population. Second, however, taking an integrated and holistic approach to the policies and programming related to poverty reduction is equally critical. Sustained change over time necessitates a strategy that spans all levels of government, involving multiple departments and integrating non-governmental initiatives. It includes comprehensive consultation with title and rights holders in a coordinated manner. Any policy development also needs to acknowledge and accommodate an ongoing shift in the landscape of who has jurisdiction over policies, through modern-day treaties and self-government agreements, adopting new land codes, reconnecting with traditional governance regimes, and seeking to secure ten-year block grants. First Nations are increasingly taking charge of their own socio-economic, education, and health priorities, and this needs to be supported.

The recommendations outlined below were developed from our community-engaged research and statistical analysis. They list specific actions and strategies to address

[70] Final Report of the BC Expert Basic Income Panel, 2020.

gaps and barriers for Indigenous peoples in income support programs, experiencing intergenerational poverty, and to reduce dependency rates over time. Some of these recommendations are grounded in our data analysis and expertise on various program components. Others are firmly rooted in community members' comments and suggestions; they literally represent the "voices of community". We begin with the latter.

Community Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Recommendation: Address and Dismantle Colonization and Systemic Racism in Government Services		
Address the historical and current impacts of colonization.	Develop cultural awareness as a professional training requirement, including cultural safety, cultural humility, and decolonizing and anti-racist frameworks that focus on policy standards. This should be mandatory training for government officials, employers, social workers, and other professionals working in the field of poverty reduction.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Address systemic and Indigenous-specific racism.	The development of an Indigenous-specific poverty reduction plan should be Indigenous-led within a decolonizing, anti-racist framework with actionable goals, recommendations, and timelines, and with a framework for accountability. Participants described many different situations of experiencing racism and discrimination in the Income Assistance processes. Participants would like to see less judgement and more support and understanding in a culturally safe environment.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Recommendation: Improve Access to and Navigation of the Support System		
Provide technical assistance through technical support workers.	Participants commented that technology is a main barrier to accessing and getting off income support. Income support services need better support with technical challenges, including online services, 1-800 phone lines, and improvements to access to technology (access to a computer, internet, and cell phone).	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Create a moving off-reserve program to address payment lag periods.	Provide support for people who move off-reserve, and address the time gap in receiving funding to prevent people from being without support payments for months.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations

Ensure action plans are on file for clients.	Social assistance programs must have an action plan on file for clients. Some of these files could include pertinent information such as barriers due to mental illness, social challenges, and substance abuse.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Recommendation: Provide Sufficient Benefit Levels and Subsidies		
Provide subsidized transportation.	Participants expressed the need for transportation support as one of the main barriers to searching for employment and ultimately getting off income support. There were suggestions about offering subsidies for transportation (e.g., free bus passes, a local transportation service, or even sufficient bus fare).	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Subsidize utilities.	One of the main reasons why community members struggle to cover costs each month is that hydro rates have increased substantially. There were suggestions about placing limits on hydro amounts or offering subsidies for utilities such as hydro and gas to ensure income receipts can cover basic needs.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Provide "cost of living" subsidies.	New subsidies for food, utilities, and rent could be reviewed.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations and Indigenous organizations
Provide food subsidies.	Initiatives to help reduce food costs, like weekly specials at the grocery store or through coupons during certain times of the month, for Income Assistance recipients could be reviewed.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Recommendation: Provide Support to Strengthen Local Food Systems and Housing Options		
Strengthen the local food system including online food banks in urban centres and create more community gardens.	Many people talked about the challenges that they face accessing food, both in terms of both the cost and the quality.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Strengthen the local food system including more traditional and nutritious food.	More traditional and nutritious foods included in the community food hamper and school lunch programs.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Provide affordable and safe housing in community.	Efforts need to be made by local municipal governments with Band Councils to conduct housing inspections for potential health hazards and to provide further training support to First Nations on housing maintenance.	Federal government (CMHC) and BC Housing, First Nations, and Indigenous organizations

Recommendation: Provide Harm Reduction Support and Indigenous-Specific Treatment Options for People with Addictions		
Provide harm reduction support.	Participants suggested that people with mental health and addictions challenges find it difficult to access services and supports for daily survival. There needs to be a harm reduction approach in Income Assistance services.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (MMHA), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Expand the range of treatment options.	Participants described the need for an expansion in the depth and range of treatment services for people with addictions and mental health challenges, especially when they are in crisis.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (MMHA), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Recommendation: Remove Obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities (PWD)		
Provide subsidized or free financial counselling services for persons with disabilities.	There is a need to offer support for people with disabilities.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (MMHA and/or MOH), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Recommendation: Provide Employment Supports, Training, and Life Skills Development		
Provide online training options so people do not need to leave community for employment.	There are high costs to access training off-reserve. Provide more online training options.	Federal departments (ESDC, ISC), B.C. government (SDPR, AEST), First Nations, Indigenous organizations, post-secondary Institutions, and private industry
Provide student debt relief and subsidies for post-secondary training.	Participants talked about the need for subsidized post-secondary education as well as student loan relief.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, Indigenous organizations, post- secondary Institutions, and private industry
Provide funding for Indigenous-specific training programs that build traditional knowledge.	Provide funding for “on-the-land” training that supports hunting, fishing, and gathering for medicines by Elders and knowledge holders.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Provide life skills and financial literacy training.	Provide funding for life skills and basic financial literacy training that is culturally sensitive.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations

Provide funding for training in job readiness and resumé building.	Provide funding for job readiness and resumé building that is culturally sensitive and led by Indigenous people who have transitioned from Income Assistance or by Band Social Development Workers.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR, AEST), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Increase access to jobs, trades, skills training.	Provide access to jobs, trades, and skills training specifically tailored to supporting people to transition off Income Assistance.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR, AEST), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations

Study Recommendations

Making progress toward implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action means taking meaningful action with Indigenous peoples rather than words and statements of commitment to act. Our first set of recommendations calls for an Indigenous-specific lens when developing or reforming poverty reduction policies in general and Income Assistance programming in particular. The remainder lists specific actions that can be taken to improve how Indigenous B.C. residents experience delivery and service in Income Assistance programming, as well as concrete ways to close educational gaps with the aim of breaking the cycle of poverty. All levels of government must work with First Nations communities, businesses, leaders, organizations, and advocacy groups to improve social support programming for Indigenous persons and to address the many disparities we identified throughout the report.

Recommendation Area #1: Develop Strategic and Evaluative Approaches

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Develop and implement a comprehensive Indigenous-specific poverty reduction plan.	Due to the range of factors impacting poverty reduction and improved economic resilience, a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is critical to sustained change over time. Importantly, this plan also needs to adopt a viewpoint that moves from a deficit-focused perspective for income support to one of investment by governments in the well-being of Indigenous peoples and their communities.	Federal government, B.C. government, First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Develop and implement a framework for an evaluation of income support programs from an Indigenous perspective and through Indigenous voices.	This evaluation would be both a process and an outcome evaluation, including journey mapping for Indigenous income support recipients.	Federal government (ISC), B.C. government, First Nations, and Indigenous organizations

Recommendation Area #2: Address Colonization and Systemic Racism in Government Services

In accordance with the TRC's Calls to Action #57, the government must increase its efforts to address forms of racism, bias, and discrimination within its social service provision, because these directly prevent Indigenous community members from accessing services and supports.

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Seek input from Indigenous peoples on income support policies and programs through a well-being and resilience lens.	Create an Indigenous Reconciliation Group (IRG) to work together with government departments (federal and provincial) and external expertise, with the mandate to undertake a policy and practice review for income support programs.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Establish partnerships with Indigenous organizations and communities in cities throughout B.C.	Expand the scope of the Indigenous Partnership Pilot Program (IPPP) currently in operation in Surrey, establish similar IPPP models in urban centres across the province.	B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, and Indigenous organizations
Reduce reporting requirements for federal income support programs.	Review reporting requirements for on-reserve compliance in collaboration with First Nations communities and other stakeholders.	Federal departments (ISC), First Nations

Recommendation Area #3: Increase the Availability of In-Person, Culturally Safe Services Outside First Nations communities

We heard from communities that there is a significant need for personal connections with culturally safe government workers who are willing and able to take time to help Indigenous clients with their often unique situations. Call centre agents or behind-the-counter workers frequently lack the training or the patience to engage with persons who suffer from mental health issues or substance use problems and even if they do, the clients may be reluctant to contact a government worker for lack of trust and fear of mistreatment. Clients with multiple barriers need to be met "where they are", in both a literal and a figurative sense. Outside communities, we learned that the best way to make these connections is through Community Integration Specialists, whose role and job description specifically accounts for these types of clients. In their own words:

> *"A huge part of it is relationship building. We have the time and the flexibility to meet clients where they are…there are so many people out there who do not want to come into the office, cannot come to the office, and can't use a computer. The struggle that they have been through because they were not able to access the resources they needed, or they were not aware of these resources [is genuine]. As a Community Integration Specialist, I am in [the] community, I talk to service providers and community groups, I can help those people."* – Community Integration Specialist Interview

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Expand program delivery through Community Integration Specialists (ongoing).	Increase the number of Community Integration Specialists (CIS) in the province, ensuring that existing CIS workers' area of responsibility stays with manageable boundaries. Prioritize hiring Indigenous CIS as well as CIS with lived experience in poverty, substance use, or social assistance dependency.	SDPR
Equalize availability and quality of service across SDPR offices and Service BC offices (ongoing).	Ensure Service BC front-counter staff is sufficiently trained to provide the same quality of service as SDPR offices. Ensure workers have undergone customer service training that includes working with racialized and marginalized clients.	SDPR, Service BC
Client files need to be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that change of circumstances and eligibility for new or additional supports are up to date.	Build in a requirement to have Employment and Assistance Workers review files on a regular (bi-annual) basis and check in with clients, to update eligibility. While there appears these processes are in place, clients feel that this is not done as it should be.	SDPR

Recommendation Area #4: Integrate Provincial and Federal Income Support Programs

"The distinction of on and off-reserve is a disadvantage because the [provincial] social workers really understand the program and people on-reserve don't have access to that support. It perpetuates the separation between on and off-reserve." Fort Nelson Key Knowledge Advisor

We heard a lot about gaps and barriers faced by Income Assistance clients who transition off-reserve, many of which are related to the separation of jurisdiction between provincial and federal government, notably having to restart the process with all new paperwork. Delays are caused by the time required to confirm they no longer receive support from their community prior to being eligible for income support in the new location. There was also a sense that in-community Band Social Development Workers struggled with providing the same service quality as SDPR workers for a variety of reasons, from high turnover in the job (due to low wages and stress) to excessive caseloads, lack of training and professional development opportunities, conflicts of interest when relatives or friends apply for Income Assistance, and difficulties with data management and reporting as a result of onerous reporting requirements or local data management systems that were incompatible with ISC data requests.

Giving First Nations communities access to the provincial service delivery system would concurrently address several of these issues. Most importantly, it would eliminate barriers and delays transitioning off-reserve. At the same time, it would build more capacity for pre-employment supports in all communities, increase resources (including training and skill development), improve working conditions and facility reporting, provide more active case management, and ensure a unified, comparable, and more detailed approach to data collection on service delivery throughout the province.[71]

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Integrate in-community and outside-community support programs by negotiating a formal agreement between the province and the federal government (long term)	Consider adopting the Ontario model where Income Assistance on-reserve, including case management and pre-employment services, is delivered through the provincial Ontario Works program, with funding reimbursement from ISC.	ISC, SDPR and First Nations
Mutually recognize application, approval, and appeals processes for Income Assistance (with reviews as appropriate), harmonize application forms.	Similar to what is already in place for PWD designations, persons who move on-reserve or off-reserve should not be required to complete an entirely new application. Rather, they should be able to have all relevant information in their application transferred between B.C. SDPR and ISC, and only update the application as a result of the move.	ISC, SDPR

[71] A unified service delivery may not be feasible for Nations that have opted out of the federal government's mandate. However, it is conceivable that individual arrangements could still be made to ensure that communities can take advantage of the provincial capacity for service delivery.

Build and strengthen community capacity to increase scope and quality of service in community to align with provincial program.	Work with First Nations to develop a strategy to strengthen service delivery capacity, professional development for Income Assistance administrators in community (ongoing).	ISC, First Nations
Increase investment in pre-employment and case management support.	Provide funding to all communities to enable them to implement case management and active employment measures (ongoing).	ISC, First Nations

Recommendation Area #5: Remove Obstacles for Indigenous Persons with Disabilities

The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) recently endorsed a resolution (2021-17) calling for the provincial government to reform the PWD designation application and appeal process to be more inclusive of the cultural, mental, and physical needs of Indigenous people with disabilities. Many voices we heard echoed the UBCIC's concerns with the process, and we recommend that the Province of British Columbia, as part of its commitment and obligations regarding UNDRIP, review the process in light of the recommendations on which the Declaration was based.

One consistent theme that emerged from our interviews was a client's inability to see a doctor or nurse if they required care or if they needed a health care professional to fill out their PWD form. None of the Community Integration Specialist clients had a family physician, for example, and when asked about existing health clinics, many Community Integration Specialists stated that their clients would often be subjected to mistreatment and racism, to the point where they did not receive care unless an advocate was with them. As a result, clients would be unwilling to visit a clinic at the outset, for reasons of mistrust or fear of racism. One solution to this problem, named in conversations with those Community Integration Specialists who had experienced an increase in primary care access for their clients, was newly hired nurse practitioners at their local service provider, who would "go out of their way to seek out clients in need of care".

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Review PWD application and appeal process.	Address critical shortcomings of the PWD process that represent barriers to successful applications or appeals for Indigenous clients.	SDPR
Improve access to culturally safe health care professionals who can support the PWD application process.	Further increase funding for nurse practitioner positions (ongoing). Prioritize Indigenous hires.	B.C. government (Ministry of Health), regional health authorities, FNHA
Understand and account for hidden disabilities, and provide support for trauma and mental health.	Increase (funding for) community based and accessible services for Indigenous people with disabilities in need of specific services and supports related to trauma.	Federal departments (ISC), B.C. government (SDPR), First Nations, FNHA

Recommendation Area #6: Improve Adequacy of Basic Needs Benefits

The voices we heard from communities unequivocally stated that the current level of transfer payments is insufficient to cover the basic needs of clients and is therefore causing considerable income and food insecurity among recipients. As argued in the BC Expert Panel on Basic Income Final Report, there appears to be ample room to increase benefit levels, which currently sit at roughly 45 percent of the poverty line and thus fall considerably short of meeting basic needs, without disincentivizing work. One policy change that was recommended by the panel and that would lead to a more adequate level of benefits, would be to turn the current $300 COVID-19 relief top-up to Income Assistance payments into a permanent benefit increase. For single ETW benefit recipients, for example, this would raise benefits to approximately 63 percent of the poverty line. Similarly, the panel also recommended lowering the rate at which Temporary Assistance benefits are reduced as income increases from 100 percent to 70 percent, while maintaining the earnings exemption at current levels. Together with the $300 increase in the basic benefit amount, single adults with annual earnings up to $24,171 would remain eligible for benefits. Although these policy changes are not Indigenous-specific, Indigenous peoples would benefit to the extent in which they are over-represented in the Income Assistance program.

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Increase Temporary Assistance benefit payments and reduce claw back rates to better meet basic needs.	Make the $300 per month COVID-19 emergency increase in Income Assistance benefits a permanent increase. Lower the rate at which temporary assistance benefits are reduced as income increases, from the current 100% claw back of earned income to 70%.	B.C. government (SDPR)
Account for the differential cost of living.	Reassess provincial comparability directives. Initiate conversations between ISC, the B.C. government, and First Nations to adjust assistance rates to better reflect the costs and living conditions on-reserve.	ISC, B.C. government, First Nations
Adopt official poverty measures in First Nations communities.	Utilize low-income lines, including a (potentially modified) Market Basket Measure (MBM) on-reserves to help compare the depth and breadth of poverty to other communities in the province, and measure trends and progress toward poverty reduction in those communities.	Federal government, B.C. government, Statistics Canada
Include First Nations communities in annual income surveys	Engage with First Nations on the inclusion of reserves in annual income surveys, conditional upon the agreement of First Nations.	Federal government and First Nations

Recommendation Area #7: Increase the Stock and Availability of Affordable, Accessible, and Safe Housing Options for Indigenous Peoples

BC Housing funds several Indigenous-specific programs and initiatives to support Indigenous peoples in their housing needs. Off-reserve, the agency works in partnership with the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) to oversee Indigenous housing and affordable rental housing across the province. As a laudable initiative, B.C. was also the first province to invest in on-reserve housing. In its 30-Point Plan for Housing Affordability in B.C., the Province committed to invest $550 million over ten years to support the building and operation of 1,750 new units of social housing for projects on- and off-nation (2018). These initiatives are important and must be continued, but there are a number of additional steps the government could take to better meet housing needs of Indigenous peoples. The Expert Panel on Basic Income made a series of recommendations regarding shelter and housing policies, and while we refer to their final report for further elaboration on the rationale for the proposed reforms, shortfalls of current policies, and funding considerations, the government should seriously consider implementing the recommendations (Green et al., 2020, p. 390-397). Although they are not Indigenous-specific, Indigenous peoples would directly benefit to the extent that they are disproportionately affected by lack of affordable housing.

In particular, in light of Indigenous over-representation among the homeless and those suffering from mental health and substance use issues (see Parts I and III), the government needs to expand the amount of supportive housing targeting those individuals. All the Community Integration Specialists we interviewed named the lack of sufficient supportive housing options in their communities as a critical roadblock in their efforts to help get clients "back on their feet". To this end, the government should revisit the funding opportunities that BC Housing offers to partners to assist with new builds or renovations of affordable housing projects to ensure that organizations who specifically provide supportive housing and shelter options (for Indigenous residents) are being prioritized. The government can also engage in public-private partnerships to increase the supply of such units, as the SRO Renewal Initiative in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has successfully demonstrated.[72] In addition to a general reform of housing supports and the expansion of supply-side initiatives, Indigenous-specific housing programs should be a major focus. This would include capacity building and increased funding of the Indigenous housing programs managed and operated in partnership with AHMA, expanding the stock of non-profit housing units for urban Indigenous people through partnering with Indigenous service providers, and increasing BC Housing's on-reserve engagement with the goal to build additional housing units and/or improve existing units. Municipalities should be encouraged to specifically acknowledge and address Indigenous housing needs in municipal plans and strategies.

> *"Housing is number one. The majority of the work I am doing is trying to house someone who is already on the street or in danger of losing their shelter."*
> Community Integration Specialist

[72] The SRO Renewal Initiative is a public-private partnership project created to renovate 13 single-room-occupancy (SROs) hotels in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Chinatown, and Gastown areas. The project was completed in 2017 and now provides safe and affordable accommodations for approximately 900 individuals at risk of homelessness.

A 2020 study exploring if and how municipalities in B.C. currently do so found that less than half of the municipalities sampled had an official community plan or housing strategy. Of those who did have such a plan, only about a third acknowledged Indigenous-specific housing needs, although the majority of respondents indicated their belief that urban Indigenous housing needs are distinct from the housing needs of the general population (Aboriginal Housing and Management Association, 2020).

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Simplify housing support in the Income Assistance program.	Combine the support and shelter components of Income Assistance cash benefits into a single payment that is not conditional on shelter costs.	SDPR
Examine and implement outstanding recommendations.	Review recommendations of the Expert Panel on Basic Income regarding shelter and housing policies.	B.C. government, BC Housing, AHMA
Review housing supports and the expansion of supply-side initiatives for Indigenous peoples in B.C.	Increase the variety of housing options for Indigenous peoples, expand Indigenous housing programs managed and operated in partnership with AHMA, increase BC Housing's on-reserve engagement with the goal to build additional housing units and/or improve existing units.	B.C. government, BC Housing, First Nations, AHMA
Expand programs for transitional and supportive housing.	Target funding toward low-barrier shelters, emergency housing, transitional housing, housing with long-term supports for people with mental illness or addictions, single-occupancy rooms, and other safe and affordable housing options for the most vulnerable populations.	B.C. government, BC Housing, First Nations, and AHMA
Encourage municipalities to incorporate Indigenous housing needs and strategies in their municipal planning.	Incentivize municipalities to specifically acknowledge and address Indigenous housing needs in municipal plans and strategies.	Federal government (CMHC) and BC Housing

Recommendation Area #8: Develop and Implement a Shared, System-wide Strategy to Close Education Gaps

Indigenous children and youth continue to fall through the cracks of the public education system at all levels. By providing more opportunities for education and training, self-respect and resilience can be better supported, and the cycle of intergenerational poverty can be broken. While there has been some progress towards closing the gap in high school graduation rates of Indigenous youth from 2000 onwards, the educational chances of success for this subgroup are still extraordinarily low at all levels, and the gap has widened for university level education.

Addressing the educational disparities as part of a strategy to break the cycle of poverty for Indigenous peoples should have the highest priority. Schools that are socially inclusive and build pathways for vulnerable children to succeed are critical for children from disadvantaged families. There is a responsibility on the part of the education system to put structures and resources in place that allow schools to recognize vulnerability and provide additional support for the affected children and youth.

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Examine and improve educational support for Indigenous children and youth.	Review and reassess the current education strategy and build a new integrated plan with all partners.	Federal government (ISC), B.C. government, MEd, FNESC, First Nations communities
Conduct a thorough review of the education experiences of Indigenous children and youth.	Ensure ongoing review of the annual "How are we doing" reports of the B.C. Ministry of Education to scrutinize trends, identify schools that successfully improved on key indicators (completion rates, numeracy, reading scores, writing scores) for Indigenous students, and hold those that fall behind on those measures accountable. Collect data on trends and gaps in Indigenous participation in post-secondary education and consult with Indigenous students and educators (ongoing). Analyze the data to identify barriers and opportunities for improvement.	B.C. government, MEd, FNESC, First Nations

Examine the B.C. regional college and university system to improve access for Indigenous peoples.	Re-examine this system and its funding to make sure that it can deliver on its promise of province-wide access to advanced education, which is also a priority set out in the minister's mandate letter.	B.C. government with IRG, First Nations, and Indigenous peoples
Review the budgets of B.C. school districts from the lens of supporting Indigenous children and youth.	Within existing education budget planning, explore multi-year strategic top-up funding for new structures and programs that specifically support Indigenous children and youth along their pathway towards higher levels of educational attainment.	B.C. government

The recommendations above dovetail with the strategies the B.C. Ministry of Education has pursued to mitigate disparities since the original 2015 Auditor General report. The 2019 progress audit makes further recommendations regarding the structure of broad and targeted funding, accountability measures, and monitoring strategies that would help school districts close the gap. These are largely supply-side policies, however. There is a need to focus on improving the experience and success rates of Indigenous high school students through changes in the school system.

Recommendation Area #9: Broaden Demand-side Income Support Policies to Encourage Indigenous Youth to Pursue Post-secondary Education and Training

Income support systems can help by encouraging families to have their children complete high school and go on to post-secondary education through conditional or unconditional transfers. The premise of such programs is that important barriers to schooling are rooted in the circumstances of the family, for example, income constraints, higher direct and opportunity costs of sending children to school, or lower human capital of the parents. The available evidence points to comparatively large positive effects (Baird et al., 2013). Conditional transfers implemented by the Progresa program in Mexico, for example, appear to have been very successful in eliminating educational gaps for the poorest families.[73] Unconditional cash transfers (basic income) have also been shown to be effective, especially for the poorest households. As Akee et al. (2010) document in a quasi-experimental study, an unconditional cash transfer associated with the opening of a casino for members of the Cherokee Nation of around US $4,000 per year increased child educational attainment by one year at age 21 and increased school attendance for the poorest households with incomes between US $15,000 and US $20,000.

Encouraging youth from low-income backgrounds to access post-secondary education can also be achieved through (conditional) cash programs. Indeed, B.C. already has several such initiatives, for example the B.C. Access Grant or the B.C. Training and Education Savings Grant. However, the support is well below that in other provinces and has built-in barriers.[74] There are several scholarships and bursaries specifically aimed at Indigenous students who attend college.[75] For a list of B.C. initiatives and general recommendations regarding the support of post-secondary education among low-income youth, we refer the reader to the Final Report of the Expert Panel on Basic Income (2020). We note, however, that some of the suggestions of the panel – notably the implementation of a B.C. Learning Bond that is automatically created at birth or one year after immigration – could be targeted specifically to decrease the Indigenous gap in educational achievement by augmenting the designated amount for First Nations children.

Engaging children from low socio-economic circumstances in moving to post-secondary education is about more than just money, though. What is often overlooked, for example, is that navigating through a complex financial aid program may be associated with sufficiently high barriers to deter students from attending college. A recent U.S. experimental study divided low-income families of prospective students who were eligible for financial aid into three groups (Bettinger et al., 2012). One group received help completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form and was given information about financial aid eligibility and tuition prices for nearby colleges. The second group was given information on their eligibility and college tuition and was

[73] The conditional transfers in the Progresa program were quite large, representing an average of 22 percent of the recipient families' income. See Raymond & Sadoulet (2003) "Educational Grants Closing the Gap in Schooling Attainment between Poor and Non-Poor."

[74] For an overview and discussion, see the Final Report of the Expert Panel on Basic Income, (p. 412-413).

[75] See FNHAs resource guide https://www.fnha.ca/Documents/Scholarship-and-Bursary-Resource-Guide.pdf for an overview.

encouraged – but only encouraged – to complete the FAFSA. The control group was simply given a brochure with basic information about college and financial aid. The experiment found that the students who received FAFSA assistance were 25 percent more likely both to enter and to complete their post-graduate education.

RECOMMENDATION	COMMENTS	RESPONSIBILITY
Create an Indigenous-specific Learning Bond to support Indigenous student post-secondary education.	Implement a $1,500 B.C. Learning Bond account that is automatically created for children from Indigenous low-income families at birth, which can be used only for education.	B.C. government, FNESC, and First Nations
Increase services to Indigenous children and youth with respect to understanding education required to pursue opportunities.	Allocate resources to expand existing programs to specifically assist low-income children and youth discover who they are and what occupation they might want to pursue. Follow BC Expert Panel on Basic Income recommendation to implement a version of Manitoba's Career TREK program. Create specific subprograms such as the M-Power Program North targeted to (Indigenous) youth from rural and remote communities or other subgroups.	Federal government, B.C. government, MEd, FNESC, First Nations
Increase resources for Indigenous-specific high school counselling.	Set aside resources and structures to increase support for high school counsellors to help Indigenous youth seek out and complete financial aid applications for post-secondary education and skill-development.	B.C. government, MEd

Disclaimer: While we would have appreciated consulting with the First Nation Education Steering Committee (FNESC) to gain valuable insights on developing the recommendations, it was not possible due to time constraints. However, we strongly recommend that the government consults with FNESC on these recommendations given their expertise in this area. It is imperative that the Province reassesses its strategy to close the gap in education outcomes between Indigenous and non Indigenous people, working together with the federal government, school boards and superintendents, Indigenous leaders and communities, and FNESC.

Conclusion

THE MANDATE OF THIS PROJECT was to examine the current system of income supports available to First Nations in British Columbia and to understand barriers, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. Using a variety of indicators of well-being and progress available in the data, as well as listening to community voices, we documented the extent to which Indigenous peoples in B.C. are disproportionately and negatively affected by poverty and to what degree income support programs are successful in addressing existing gaps. Our list of recommendations outlines meaningful actions that can be undertaken with partnerships and respectful dialogue moving forward.

There are numerous reasons for the ongoing and disproportionate income vulnerability that impacts Indigenous peoples and communities in B.C.: lack of education, lack of access to medical service providers, remote locations where employment and educational opportunities are not readily available, and many other factors. These are rooted in ongoing land dispossession, which is accompanied by political, social, and cultural oppression and marginalization, systemic racism and intergenerational trauma. Many of these hardships can be traced back to historical injustices. The government of Canada's colonization carried out through the *Indian Act* created the reserve system, and forced assimilation policies created residential schools, which had horrific impacts for Indigenous peoples. They are directly responsible for poverty creation.

Through our knowledge exchanges with Key Knowledge Advisors and Band Social Development Workers in communities, along with the Community Integration Specialists, we identified numerous barriers to accessing Income Assistance services. Many of these are linked to historical or ongoing forms of colonization. For example, Indigenous Income Assistance clients often do not feel comfortable sharing the daily challenges they experience or explaining their circumstances to government workers, which is required in the Income Assistance application process. Our recommendations provide concrete actions and strategies to reduce or eliminate the direct barriers Indigenous peoples face when accessing provincial or federal services.

In addition, through statistical analysis, we have documented how disparities and inequities in education and health lead to ongoing poverty – spanning multiple generations. Closing these gaps must be a priority in any long- or medium-term strategy to reduce Indigenous income vulnerability. At the same time, all levels of government and society need to work to together in addressing the deeper roots of Indigenous poverty in B.C., such as *Indian Act*-imposed obstacles to good governance and functional capital

markets; ongoing land dispossession; political, social, and cultural oppression and marginalization; intergenerational trauma; and systemic racism.

We also learned, however, that communities overcome gaps and barriers in service through Indigenous resurgence of cultural and traditional ways of life. Indigenous peoples are strong and vibrant, and Income Assistance recipients try hard to get what they need and often receive support from family to survive on insufficient monthly income support. While our findings show that Indigenous peoples in B.C. experience significant and persistent inequities that affect their health and social and community well-being, it is thus important to recognize that Indigenous peoples continue to show remarkable resilience and strength. In fact, many First Nations communities are taking important steps to address the structural origins of inequity through self-government, treaty implementation, land management codes, and adopting traditional governance systems.

We have noted that the impacts of colonialism are ongoing and persist through Canadian systems and policies, and are entrenched in the justice system, education system, health care system, and child welfare system. These linkages are discussed throughout this report, and they cannot be remedied by focusing exclusively on social assistance programming. Indigenous communities in B.C., and across Canada, experience ongoing impacts from colonization causing cultural genocide, societal disruption, dispossession, and geographic dislocation. These factors, while they vary from person to person, or community to community, form the larger context within which poverty of Indigenous peoples in B.C. needs to be understood and addressed.

The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), along with numerous court challenges over the years, have slowly and steadily brought recognition to the transformational change that needs to occur. Both the federal and the B.C. governments endorsed UNDRIP and committed themselves to the objectives of the Declaration and its full implementation. Legislation has been passed to establish UNDRIP as a framework to reconciliation and to ensure that an action plan is developed to achieve the Declaration's objectives over time. At the provincial level, a draft action plan spanning all departments has already been formulated on the basis of extensive collaboration and consultations between the provincial government and First Nations and Indigenous partners and organizations. This action plan is currently open for feedback from the Indigenous peoples of B.C. Many of the proposed actions and priorities contained in the draft touch upon the themes in this report, notably those in housing, education, health, and racism and discrimination in government services. As we suggest, addressing these issues will overcome barriers for Indigenous peoples in the provincial support system and help to create pathways out of poverty. Above all, meaningful poverty reduction strategies need to acknowledge and uphold Indigenous peoples' inherent right to self-determination, economic freedom, and the right to their title and rights over their land and waters. As the late Secwépemc leader Arthur Manuel emphasizes in the *Reconciliation Manifesto*, land restitution is the foundation for Indigenous self-determination and prosperity – without a land base and economic rights over that base, Indigenous peoples will be disadvantaged and trapped in dependency forever.

References

Aboriginal Housing Management Association & Housing Research Collaborative of the School of Community and Regional Planning. (2020). *Urban Indigenous Housing in BC: Municipal response through housing policies and plans* [Summary Report]. Aboriginal Housing Management Association & University of British Columbia. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/573e02ab62cd943531b23633/t/600f5460f6c6424d411ff8b7/1611617378284/Final%2BReport.pdf

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. (2012). *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (1st ed.). Crown Business.

Akee, R. K. Q., Copeland, W. E., Keeler, G., Angold, A., & Costello, E. J. (2010). Parents' incomes and children's outcomes: A quasi-experiment using transfer payments from casino profits. *American Economic Journal. Applied Economics*, *2*(1), 86–115. https://doi.org/10.1257/app.2.1.86

Aragón, F. M., & Kessler, A. S. (2020). Property rights on First Nations reserve land. *The Canadian Journal of Economics*, *53*(2), 460–495. https://doi.org/10.1111/caje.12434

Aragón, F. M., & Kessler, A. S. (2021). Custom Elections and Local Policies: The Case of Canada's First Nations. *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, *111*, 238–242. https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20211100

Baird, S., Ferreira, F. H. G., Özler, B., & Woolcock, M. (2013). Relative Effectiveness of Conditional and Unconditional Cash Transfers for Schooling Outcomes in Developing Countries: A Systematic Review. *Campbell Systematic Review*, *9*(1), 1–124. https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2013.8

Baker, M., Messacar, D., & Stabile, M. (2021). *The Effects of Child Tax Benefits on Poverty and Labour Supply: Evidence from the Canada Child Benefit and Universal Child Care Benefit* (Working Paper 28556; NBER Working Paper Series). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28556/w28556.pdf

Bartlett, R. H. (1977). The Indian Act of Canada. *Buffalo Law Review*, *27*, 581.

Beedie, N., Macdonald, D., & Wilson, D. (2019). *Towards Justice: Tackling Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada*. Upstream. https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Upstream_report_final_English_June-24-2019.pdf

Bettinger, E., Terry, B., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *127*(3), 1205–1242. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjs017

Bill C-15: An Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, (2021). https://parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/bill/C-15/first-reading

Bill 41: Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, 2019, 4th Session, 41st Parliament, British Columbia. https://www.leg.bc.ca/parliamentary-business/legislation-debates-proceedings/41st-parliament/4th-session/bills/first-reading/gov41-1

British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development [creator] (2019). Child Welfare (ICM). Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019.

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2019). 2019/20 Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) administration manual: Grades 4 and 7. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/assessment/fsa-administration-manual.pdf

British Columbia Ministry of Education [creator] (2018): Education – K-12 (Edudata). Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2020a). 2020/21 Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) Administration Manual – Grades 4 and 7. Government of British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/assessment/fsaadministration-manual.pdf

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2020b). Aboriginal Report 2015/16—2019/20: How Are We Doing? Government of British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/reports/ab-hawd/ab-hawd-school-districtpublic.pdf

British Columbia Ministry of Health [creator] (2018). Consolidation File. Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Health [creator] (2018). Hospital Discharge Abstracts (DAD). Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Health [creator] (2018). MSP – Medical Service Plan. Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Health [creator] (2018). Mental Health. Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Health [creator] (2018). Registry & Premium Billings (RBPlites). Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Health [creator] (2018). Vital Stats. Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher], 2019

British Columbia Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction [creator] (2020). BC Employment and Assistance (BCEA) V02. Data Innovation Program, Province of British Columbia [publisher].2019.

British Columbia Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. (2018). What We Heard About Poverty in B.C. [Supplemental Report]. Government of British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/initiatives-plans-strategies/povertyreduction-strategy/what-we-heard-supplemental.pdf

Canadian Constitution Act, 2 35 § 2, 1982. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-13.html#docCont

Canadian Mortgage and Housing Association. (2019). *The Housing Conditions of Off-Reserve Aboriginal Households*. https://assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sf/project/cmhc/pubsandreports/socio-economic-analysis/2019/socio-economic-analysis-housing-conditions-off-reserve-aboriginal-households-69482-en.pdf?rev=032744de-1256-4b81-8746-53b5af7d4d6e

Canadian Public Health Association. (2019). *Policy Statement: Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation*. https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/about/reconciliation/indigenous-reconciliation-policy-e.pdf

Corntassel, J. (2012). Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, *1*(1), 86–101.

Ermine, W., Sinclair, R., & Jeffery, B. (2004). *The Ethics of Research Involving Indigenous Peoples*. Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre.

First Nations Health Authority. (2019). *First Nations Regional Health Survey: Phase 3 (2015-2017)* [Provincial Report]. https://www.fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-First-Nations-Regional-Health-Survey-Phase-3-2015-2017-BC-Provincial-Report.pdf

First Nations Health Authority. (2020). *First Nations Illicit Drug Deaths Rise during COVID-19 Pandemic*. First Nations Health Authority. https://www.fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/covid-19-pandemic-sparks-surge-in-overdose-deaths-this-year

First Nations Health Authority, Province of British Columbia, & Indigenous Services Canada. (2019). *Evaluation of the British Columbia Tripartite Framework Agreement on First Nation Health Governance Report*. https://www.fnha.ca/Documents/Evaluation-of-the-BC-Tripartite-Framework-Agreement-on-First-Nations-Health-Governance.pdf

First Nations Information Governance Centre. (2021). *Home*. First Nations Information Governance Centre. https://fnigc.ca/

Frenette, M. (2019). *Are the Career Prospects of Postsecondary Graduates Improving?* Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019003-eng.pdf?st=0geJgctm

Frohlich, K. L., Ross, N., & Richmond, C. (2006). Health disparities in Canada today: Some evidence and a theoretical framework. *Health Policy (Amsterdam)*, *79*(2), 132–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2005.12.010

Government of British Columbia. (2018). *Homes For B.C.: A 30-Point Plan for Housing Affordability in British Columbia*. https://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2018/homesbc/2018_Homes_For_BC.pdf

Government of British Columbia. (2019). *TogetherBC: British Columbia's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/initiatives-plans-strategies/poverty-reduction-strategy/togetherbc.pdf

Government of British Columbia. (2021), Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act: Action Plan – *Draft for Consultation*. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/ministries/indigenous-relations-reconciliation/declaration_act_action_plan_for_consultation.pdf

Government of British Columbia. (n.d.). *Connectivity in B.C.* British Columbia. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/connectivity-in-bc

Government of Canada. (2021). *Income Assistance National Program Guidelines 2019 to 2020*. Government of Canada. https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1565185888233/1565187157281

Graham, J. (2006). *Managing the Relationship of First Nation Political Leaders and Their Staff*. Institute on Governance. https://epub.sub.uni-hamburg.de/epub/volltexte/2009/995/pdf/2006_FNleader_staff_rel.pdf

Green, D., Gutierrez, P., Milligan, K., & Snowberg, E. (2021). *Basic Income: Characteristics Related to Presence in and Absence From the Tax System*. Research paper commissioned by the Expert Panel on Basic Income. https://bcbasicincomepanel.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Basic_Income_Characteristics_Related_to_Presence_in_and_Absence_from_the_Tax_System.pdf

Green, D., J. Kesselman, and L. Tedds (2020). Covering all the Basics: Reforms for a More Just Society, *Final Report of the British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income*. https://bcbasicincomepanel.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Final_Report_BC_Basic_Income_Panel.pdf

Green, D., Hicks, J., Warburton, R., & Warburton, W. (2020). *BC Income Assistance Trends and Dynamics: Descriptions and Policy Implications*. Research paper commissioned by the Expert Panel on Basic Income. https://bcbasicincomepanel.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/BC_Income_Assistance_Trends_and_Dynamics_Descriptions_and_Policy_Implications.pdf

Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PloS One*, *15*(5), e0232076–e0232076. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076

Hertz, S., Gray, R., & Leslie, M. (2020). *User Experiences of the System: A Qualitative Analysis of the Access Issues Encountered by Clients of the British Columbia Social Assistance System.* Research paper commissioned by the Expert Panel on Basic Income. https://bcbasicincomepanel.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/User_Experiences_of_the_System_A_Qualitative_Analysis_of_the_Access_Issues_Encountered_by_Clients_of_the_British_Columbia_Social_Assistance_System.pdf

Homelessness Services Association of BC, Urban Matters, & BC Non-Profit Housing Association. (2018). *2018 Report on Homeless Counts in BC.* Prepared for BC Housing. https://www.bchousing.org/publications/2018-BC-Homeless-Counts.pdf

Horgan, J. (2020, November 26). *Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction Mandate Letter*. https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/SDPR-Simons-mandate.pdf

Hwang, S. W. (2001). Homelessness and health. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, *164*(2), 229–233.

Indian Act, R.S.C, 1985, c. I-5. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/FullText.html

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. (2017). *Evaluation of On-Reserve Housing* [Final Report]. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-CIRNAC-RCAANC/DAM-AEV/STAGING/texte-text/ev_eorh_1506017018558_eng.pdf

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, & Employment and Social Development Canada. (2016). *Joint Evaluation of the On-Reserve Income Assistance Reform*. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-CIRNAC-RCAANC/DAM-AEV/STAGING/texte-text/ev_jeonia_1498147558131_eng.pdf

Kessler, A.S., & Quinless, J. (2022).*Income Supports and Indigenous Peoples in B.C.: An Analysis of Gaps and Barriers, Summary Report.* https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/poverty-reduction-strategy/basic-income-report

Krieger, J., & Higgins, D. L. (2002). Housing and Health: Time Again for Public Health Action. *American Journal of Public Health*, *92*(5), 758–768. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.92.5.758

Manuel, A., & Derrickson, R. M. (2017). *The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the land, rebuilding the economy*. James Lorimer and Company Ltd., Publishers.

Newhouse, D. (2003). The Invisible Infrastructure: Urban Aboriginal Organizations and Institutions. In D. Newhouse & E. J. Peters (Eds.), *Not strangers in these parts: Urban Aboriginal peoples*. Policy Research Initiative.

O'Callaghan, K., & Madison, G. (2019). *Update on Bill 41: With DRIPA as Law, What Can We Expect Next?* Fasken. https://www.fasken.com/en/knowledge/2019/12/with-dripa-as-law-what-can-we-expect

Office of the Auditor General. (2015). *An Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the B.C. Public School System*. https://www.bcauditor.com/sites/default/files/publications/reports/OAGBC%20Aboriginal%20Education%20Report_FINAL.pdf

Office of the Ombudsman. (2009). *Last Resort: Improving Fairness and Accountability in British Columbia's Income Assistance Program*. Public Report No. 45 to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. https://bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/Public-Report-No-45-Improving-Fairness-and-Accountability-in-BCs-Income-Assistance-Program.pdf

Office of the Ombudsperson. (2018). *Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance* (Special Report No. 40 to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia). Office of the Ombudsperson. https://bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/Special-Report-No-40-Holding-Pattern-Call-Wait-Times-for-Income-and-Disability-Assistance.pdf

Office of the Ombudsperson. (2020). *Systemic Investigation Update – Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance*. Office of the Ombudsperson. https://bcombudsperson.ca/assets/media/OMB-HoldingPattern-MonitoringUpdate-WEB.pdf

Oreopoulos, P., & Petronijevic, U. (2013). Making College Worth It: A Review of the Returns to Higher Education. *The Future of Children*, *23*(1), 41–65. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2013.0001

Poverty Action Research Project. (2018). *Pursuing Well-being: Lessons from the First Nation Poverty Action Research Project*. https://www.edo.ca/downloads/poverty-action-research-project-2.pdf

Quinless, J. (2017). *Decolonizing Bodies: A First Nations Perspective on the Determinants of Urban Indigenous Health and Wellness in Canada, PHD Dissertation*. University of Victoria.

Quinless, J., & Corntassel, J. (2018). *Responsive Research in an Era of Reconciliation*. IPAC Vancouver, Indigenous Services Canada, Vancouver.

Quinless, J. M., & Adu-Febiri, F. (2019). Decolonizing microfinance: An Indigenous feminist approach to transform macro-debit into micro-credit. *International Sociology*, *34*(6), 739–761. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580919865103

Raymond, M., & Sadoulet, E. (2003). *Educational Grants Closing the Gap in Schooling Attainment between Poor and Non-Poor*. Working Paper. Last retrieved October 24, 2021 at https://are.berkeley.edu/~esadoulet/papers/Duration_WP.pdf

Richards, J. (2020). *No Easy Answers: Insights into Community Well-being among First Nations*. C.D. Howe Institute. https://www.cdhowe.org/sites/default/files/attachments/research_papers/mixed/Final%20E-Brief_304.pdf

Statistics Canada. (2016). *Unemployment rates of population aged 15 and over, total and with Indigenous identity, by educational attainment, Canada*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410036101

Statistics Canada. (2017a). *Census in Brief: The housing conditions of Aboriginal people in Canada*. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016021/98-200-x2016021-eng.cfm

Statistics Canada. (2017b). *Census in Brief: Does education pay? A comparison of earnings by level of education in Canada and its provinces and territories*. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016024/98-200-x2016024-eng.cfm

Statistics Canada. (2021a). *Life tables, 2016/2018*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200128/dq200128a-eng.htm

Statistics Canada. (2021b). *Market Basket Measure (MBM) thresholds for the reference family by Market Basket Measure region, component and base year*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601

Stefanovich, O., & Jones, R. P. (2021, March 11). Federal government vows again to end boil water advisories but offers no new target date. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ottawa-new-website-term-drinking-water-advisories-1.5943388

Tourand, J., Smith, A., Poon, C., Saewyc, E., & McCreary Centre Society. (2016). *Raven's Children IV: Aboriginal youth health in BC*. https://apsc-saravyc.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2018/04/ravens_children_iv.pdf

Trudeau, J. (2015, November 12). *Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Mandate Letter*. https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2015/11/12/archived-minister-indigenous-and-northern-affairs-mandate-letter

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (n.d.). *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation—The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Volume 6). Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Volume_6_Reconciliation_English_Web.pdf

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to Action*. http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

Turpel-Lafond, M. E. (2020a). *In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in B.C. Health Care*. https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/613/2020/11/In-Plain-Sight-Full-Report.pdf

Turpel-Lafond, M. E. (2020b). *In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in B.C. Health Care—Data Report*. https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/613/2021/02/In-Plain-Sight-Data-Report_Dec2020.pdf1_.pdf

Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. (2021, March 26). *Re: UBCIC Resolution 2021-17 "Decolonizing the Persons with Disabilities Designation (PWD) Application and Appeal Process."* https://disabilityalliancebc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021March_UBCIC_BC_Resolution2021-17_PWD.pdf

United Nations. (2008). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

Uppal, S. (2017). *Insights on Canadian Society: Young men and women without a high school diploma*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2017001/article/14824-eng.htm

Williams, R. (2021, April 21). For many First Nations in B.C., connecting to high-speed internet is just the first hurdle. *Policy Options*. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/april-2021/for-many-first-nations-in-b-c-connecting-to-high-speed-internet-is-just-the-first-hurdle/

Appendices

Appendix A: The Basics of Income Assistance in British Columbia

Off-reserve Income Assistance is provided through the British Columbia Employment and Assistance (BCEA) program through two streams: Income Assistance (Temporary Assistance) and Disability Assistance (PWD). Hardship assistance exists for individuals who are in need and awaiting Employment Insurance or during the mandatory three-week work search period prior to receiving Income Assistance benefits.

Income assistance consists of two separate components: a support allowance intended to cover the costs of food, clothing and personal items; and a shelter allowance. Persons receiving Income Assistance fall into one of four categories:

1. Expected to Work – employable individuals who are expected to seek and maintain employment
2. Expected to Work Medical Condition – for employable individuals with short-term medical issues
3. Temporarily Excused – for single parents with a child under three, and for seniors
4. Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers – for individuals with a medical condition that precludes or impedes employment

Persons who are precluded from work for a medical condition may still not be eligible for Disability Assistance. To receive support through the Disability Assistance stream, an individual must have a severe condition that is expected to continue for at least two years, restricts their ability to perform daily living activities, and requires assistance with daily living activities. The condition can be physical or mental. A person who receives Disability Assistance receives a higher assistance rate, supplementary assistance and specialized employment supports. Individuals who receive Income Assistance or Disability Assistance might also be eligible to receive General Supplements and Health Supplements that are intended to offset additional costs such as essential medical treatment, transportation benefits or child's schooling.

Disparities exist in the provision of Income Assistance on- and off-reserve. Income Assistance and Disability Assistance for all individuals living off-reserve is provided by BCEA. The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction has a separate branch that conducts reviews based on risk assessments, and Employment and Assistance Workers and investigative officers, now called Quality Compliance Specialists, work to detect cases of assistance abuse. As applications are reviewed, clients and Employment

and Assistance Workers work together to create an employment plan, and third-party providers provide clients with targeted support in employment, mental health, addictions, and affordable housing/homelessness. Payments follow an annual schedule and T5 forms are generated for tax purposes. Payments from other agencies such as EI, or paid employment are deducted from payments. Any appeal issued by a client is submitted directly to an independent body, the Employment and Assistance Appeal Tribunal.

For individuals on-reserve, Income Assistance falls under the authority of Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). Disability Assistance is designated by the British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS) on behalf of ISC. The Band Social Development Worker (BSDW) assumes all the responsibilities without support from ISC, including client review, reporting, and detection of assistance abuse. In order to prevent fraud, payments are issued in the form of manual cheques from the Band Social Development Worker who is also responsible for collecting recoveries. BDSWs do not have access to an integrated software system, and the demands of manually reporting and maintaining files often occupy a large share of their time. The lack of support from ISC and community isolation results in fewer services being available for Income Assistance recipients and BSDWs. BSDWs experience high turnover rates, lack of training and lower wages than for comparable positions off-reserve. On-reserve, appeals are submitted to a three-person committee.

Eligibility policy is largely similar, but differences in demographics create inequalities. Applicants (new and returning) are expected to conduct a three-week work search before receiving benefits. Up until January 2020, applicants were expected to be financially independent for two consecutive years before applying and could not have unresolved warrants for arrest.[76] Limited employment opportunities on-reserve amplify the need for Income Assistance while making mandatory work search for eligibility obsolete. Furthermore, over-policing in Indigenous communities and harsher sentencing results in requiring that the individual hold no unresolved arrest warrants inequitable in practice. This injustice applies for all applicants from over-policed communities living off-reserve as well. Payments rates are generally the same on- and off-reserve, except for in certain exceptional situations where on-reserve rent is not covered. Recipients cannot access funds for security

[76] WorkBC services are offered provincially through 102 WorkBC Centres as well as virtually, providing consistent, reliable services including Assistive Technology Services, Apprentice Services, and Employment Services. Indigenous peoples have access to the full suite of services, whether they reside on- or off-reserve.

WorkBC provides comprehensive employment services and supports based on individual needs ranging from independent self-serve services to individualized case management services, including access to services such as skills training, wage subsidy, financial supports, and more. WorkBC Centres and federally funded Indigenous Skills Employment Training (ISET) agreement holders collaborate and may cost-share services to support mutual clients being served through both programs to assist individuals to achieve sustainable employment. In some communities there are formal partnerships in place between WorkBC and ISETs, and in other communities outreach services are provided at Friendship Centres, Band Offices, Tribal Councils, etc.

Employment-obligated Indigenous clients are provided the choice of being referred to a WorkBC service provider or an Indigenous Skills Employment Training (ISET) service provider, which is consistent with existing policy and a 2007 Memorandum of Understanding.

deposits and utilities, and no provisions exist to ease the transfer to off-reserve rental housing in the case of a temporary job opportunity.

In addition to unintended discrepancies, clear differences exist between the provision of social assistance on- and off-reserve. On-reserve, there are no employment programs offered for recipients, despite employment and training being a crucial component of Income Assistance. Off-reserve, SDPR offers multiple employment programs, such as the Employment Program of BC, Employment Programs for Persons with Disabilities, and the Self Employment Program. Certain special allowances are not offered on-reserve or are reduced, including the school start supplement, volunteer supplement, special needs, and moving cost coverage. Health coverage for on-reserve recipients is limited since only Registered (Status) Indians are eligible to receive health coverage from Health Canada. In addition, medical coverage is limited on certain reserves, and the additional funds required to access those services outside the community are not guaranteed.

Income Assistance Rates in British Columbia

The support allowance for Income Assistance recipients varies by family size and composition. As of October 1, 2021, a single employable adult receiving the maximum shelter allowance would receive a total of $935 per month. A family of seven, where both parents are above the age of 65, receiving the maximum shelter allowance would receive $2,470 per month. Comparing social assistance rates to the poverty threshold set by the Market Basket Level allows rates to be measured against the cost of living. For a reference family (two adults and two children), the MBM threshold in Vancouver is $50,055 per year and the MBM threshold in rural B.C. is $42,628 per year (2019). A family of four, where all parents are below the age of 65 and employable would receive $1,770 per month (including the maximum shelter allowance), for a total of $21,240 per year. Assuming the parents do not earn employment income, they would receive additional income from the Canada Child Benefit and other benefits, but social assistance alone would lift the family to 42.5 percent of the MBM in Vancouver and 50 percent of the MBM in rural British Columbia.

Timeline of Important Changes to Social Assistance

In the past 20 years, important changes have happened to British Columbia's social assistance program. Changes happen because of change in government leadership and economic conditions (especially labour market conditions).

Employment Obligations

Clients who fail to search for work, quit employment without a valid reason, refuse work or get fired can be refused Income Assistance. From 1972 to 1995, the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act* stated that all employable recipients were expected to utilize the resources provided by Income Assistance programs to become financially independent. However, mothers with dependent children under the age of 12 and persons with disabilities were exempt from work requirements. As the societal role for mothers evolved, so did the work expectations. In 1996, the *BC Benefits (Income Assistance) Act*

imposed employment obligations for single parents with children above the age of seven. Single parents with children above the age of seven were only exempt from employment obligations if the child had a disability or if they could demonstrate no appropriate childcare was available in their community. In 2002, the *BC Benefits Act* was amended to only excuse single parents from employment if the child was under the age of three.

In 2002, Employment Plans were introduced with standardized requirements for clients. Work obligations were increased, and punitive consequences for failure to meet requirements were introduced. In 2004, medical conditions that temporarily excuse a client from their employment obligations were expanded to include mental health conditions and drug or alcohol abuse. In 2008, single parents with children under three became required to complete the three-week work search to be eligible to receive benefits, despite being exempt from employment obligations.

In 2002, a three-week work search requirement was implemented before applicants could be approved to receive Income Assistance payments. In 2012, the policy was amended to require a five-week work search for new clients but continued to require a three-week work search for returning clients. In 2019, the policy was reversed to require only a three-week work search for all clients.

Earning Exemptions

Earning exemptions refers to the amount that is earned monthly from employment that can be retained in full and is not subject to a partial reduction (claw-back). From 2002 to 2012, all earning exemptions were eliminated for employable persons. Clients with a disability or with a child with a disability had a flat rate exemption of $200 in 2002 which increased to $800 by 2012. Because earning exemptions are applied monthly, persons who work for only short periods of the year may see a larger proportion of the income clawed back than if employment were spaced over the course of the year. As a result, the Annual Earnings Exemption (AEE) pilot was introduced in 2013 and became permanent in 2015 for individuals on Disability Assistance. The current annual earnings exemption is $15,000 for a single person receiving Disability Assistance. Earning exemptions are $500 per month for employable adults. Beyond the earning exemption, earnings are clawed back at a rate of 100 percent, meaning all income earned beyond the earning exemption is deducted from Income Assistance payments.

Permitted Assets

As of 2002, the BCB defines an asset as any form of cash or equity in property, stocks, bonds, certificates, or other possessions that could be converted to cash. Prior to 2001, the asset limit for single clients was $500, $1,000 for couples without children, $3,000 for clients with a disability and $5,000 for families with children plus an additional $500 for each additional child. In 2002, asset limits were increased to $1,500 for single clients and $2,500 for couples. In 2003, Child Disability Benefits were exempt as both income and assets. In 2005, funds held in a registered education savings plan (RESP) were exempted as assets. As of 2006, federal child benefits are exempt from income and assets and in 2008 the Working Income Tax Benefit was exempt.

In 2012, asset limits were increased to $2,000 for single clients, $4,000 for couples with children, and $5,000 for clients with a disability. In addition, the equity limit for one vehicle was increased to $10,000. The largest changes to asset limits were introduced in 2015, when the asset limit for families where one person has a disability was increased to $100,000 and to $200,000 for families where two people have a disability. In 2019, asset limits for single clients were increased to $5,000 for single clients and to $10,000 for couples.

Payments received from the Jericho Hill School for the Deaf settlement, the CPP class action settlement, the BC Institutional Legacy Trust Fund, the Missing Women Compensation Fund (for children of women identified in Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, the Songhees Nation settlement agreement and the Esquimalt Nation settlement, and the Memorial Grant Program for First Responders were all exempt as income and assets.

Appendix B: Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Glossary

ACRONYM OR TERM	DEFINITION
AHMA	Aboriginal Housing Management Association: An umbrella organization for Indigenous non-profit housing providers in B.C.
B.C.	British Columbia
BCANDS	British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society
BCB	*BC Benefits (Income Assistance) Act*
BCEA	BC Employment and Assistance program
BCR	Band Council Resolution
BSDW	Band Social Development Worker
CCB	Canada Child Benefit: A tax-free benefit for low-income families with children (replaced the Canada Child Tax benefit in 2016).
CCTB	Canada Child Tax Benefit. Was replaced by the CCB in 2016.
CEP	Common Experience Payment
CHN	Core Housing Need
CIS	Community Integration Specialist
CMA	A Census Metropolitan Area consists of one or more neighbouring municipalities situated around a core. A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more live in the core.
CMHC	Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation
Community engagement	Different methods used to gather community members' views and priorities, such as dialogue sessions, consultation, outreach, kitchen meetings, and interviews.
Community visioning	Term used to describe a process for a group or team working together to help a community develop shared visions for the future of a site, area, community, or organization. Thinking collectively about what the future could be for a community.
CPP	Canada Pension Plan
CRA	Canada Revenue Agency
CRTC	Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission

ACRONYM OR TERM	DEFINITION
CSD	Census Sub-Division. An area that is a municipality or an area that is deemed to be equivalent to a municipality for statistical reporting purposes. It is the smallest standard geographic area for which all census data are disseminated.
CWB	Community Well-being Index
DA	Disability Assistance
DIP	Data Innovation Program, Government of British Columbia
DRIPA	Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act
EAW	Employment and Assistance Workers
Economic family	Term used by Statistics Canada to define a broader concept of family. Includes all persons in the same dwelling who are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law union, adoption, or a foster relationship.
EI	Employment Insurance
Employment rate	The percentage of labour force participants, ages 20-64, employed during a given (fixed) week.
ETW	Expected to Work
FNESC	First Nations Education Steering Committee
FNHA	First Nations Health Authority
FNIGC	First Nations Information Governance Centre
FNLC	First Nations Leadership Council
FSA	Foundation Skills Assessment
GIS	Guaranteed Income Supplement is a non-taxable monthly benefit paid to residents of Canada who receive an OAS pension and who have little or no other income.
GST	Federal Goods and Services Tax
HST	Harmonized Sales Tax
IA	Income Assistance
INAC	Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada – now Indigenous Services Canada
Indicators	Measures used to track progress on achieving results. Indicators for community plans typically work best and are most meaningful when they are chosen by the community.
IRSSA	Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement
ISC	Indigenous Services Canada

ACRONYM OR TERM	DEFINITION
LICO	Low Income Cut-Off – a measure of poverty
LIM	Low-Income Measure of Poverty
MBM	Market Basket Measure of Poverty
MEd	Ministry of Education
SDPR	Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction
MSP	Medical Services Plan
N/A	Not available
n.d.	No date
OAS	Old Age Security: A universal retirement pension available to most residents and citizens of Canada aged 65 and older.
OCAP	Ownership, control, access, and possession
Participation rate	The expression of the labour force as a percentage of the population aged 15 years and older (Statistics Canada, 2007)
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PPMB	Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers
PST	Provincial Sales Tax
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
RESP	Registered Education Savings Plan
Socio-economic	Describes social, economic, and health considerations
SRO	Single Room Occupancy describes buildings and residential hotels containing small single rooms, usually about ten-by-ten feet in size. Residents share common bathrooms and sometimes cooking facilities.
TA	Temporary Assistance
TRAC method	Trans-local relationships, Responsibility to partners, Accountability mechanisms, Community timeframes
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
UBCIC	Union of BC Indian Chiefs
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UCCB	Universal Child Care Benefit
Unemployment rate	The number of unemployed individuals aged 15 to 64, expressed as a percentage of persons actively seeking employment and willing to work, i.e., who are in the labour force.

Appendix C: Primary Data Collection and Methodology

This section gives a brief overview of how we approached our research in community. Throughout, we took steps to respectfully and responsively conduct participatory research within each community. We also adapted our research protocols to ensure the safety of all participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February 2019, an invitation was sent out to the Band councils of all First Nations communities in British Columbia through the First Nations Leadership Council, a collaborator of the study. In response, the following seven Nations originally expressed an interest in the project: Tsleil-Waututh Nation, Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation, Tseshaht First Nation; Fort Nelson First Nation, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, Xaxli'p First Nation, and Gitanmaax First Nation. After SFU/UVic Research Ethics gave the community-based research the green light in January 2020, we began the process of community engagement. Following the expression of interest of the seven Nations, we contacted each Nation, using email and telephone correspondence during the months of February and March 2020. During the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, all communications with communities were suspended until May 2020. Community engagement slowly proceeded in May 2020 but only with a few communities via online face-to-face meetings and phone calls. With the exception of Gitanmaax First Nation, all Nations that had originally answered the invitation to participate responded to our engagement. Gitanmaax First Nation did not, even after repeated attempts, and the focus of the study remained the six participating communities.

Responsive Research and the TRAC Method

For the research conducted in community, we were guided by a Responsive Research Framework that braids social scientific methods and Indigenous methodologies. Responsive research is grounded in the TRAC method (Quinless & Corntassel, 2018), which builds **T**rans-local relationships, acknowledges **R**esponsibility to partners, includes **A**ccountability mechanisms, and honours **C**ommunity timeframes. The TRAC method facilitates meaningful forms of relational accountability in community partnerships where research programs are responsive to the short- and long-term needs of Indigenous nations and peoples. We identify five main tenets of an approach to responsive research through the TRAC method which are guided by community ethical protocols that can be applied when working within an Indigenous context. Those are:

- a trauma-informed research practice in the context of working with Indigenous communities that have experienced colonization
- focusing on community knowledge and sustainability of knowledge
- combining western methods with Indigenous methodologies
- approaching research from a strengths-based approach and not a deficit model

- incorporating "interpretative flexibility", i.e., using standard research tools with components that reflect cultural diversity and meanings and interpretations anchored in Indigenous ways of knowing, seeing and understanding

The four approaches on which TRAC is based braid together western methodologies with Indigenous methodologies and are outlined below. How these approaches work together in the research design lifecycle as well as how key research elements feed into those approaches, is illustrated in Figure B-1 below.

1. **Trans-local Relationships** – relationships developed that respect diversity by focusing on localized Indigenous knowledge and place with the intention of developing sustainable, long-term relationships that are mutually beneficial. Future Indigenous community relationships emanate from your localized partnerships and reflect the complexities of Indigenous nations' governance and research practices. This is a useful design when working with various communities in vast geographic regions such as Canada.

2. **Responsibility to Partners** – it is our ethical responsibility to research relationships, including the application of OCAP (ownership, control, access, and possession) to the responsive research process. These research partnerships and collaborations generated in conversation with and by ongoing needs of Indigenous nations. Finding culturally relevant ways of implementing free, prior, and informed consent is especially important here.

3. **Accountability Mechanisms** – honouring Indigenous community protocols and relational practices throughout the research design process, including accounting for the living histories of the Indigenous nation(s) in partnership and the resulting trauma from colonization. This is what we do with the information we have been given and a reminder that the research processes that you engage in are just as important as the outcome of the project. Having continuous communication and processes for renewing your commitment of the project will keep the project on track, and reflects the critical notion that the relationship is ultimately more important than the project outcomes. These outcomes can be integrated into the data processing and interpretation phase of the project as well as the writing of the report and knowledge sharing back to the community and with project partners.

4. **Community Timeframes** – is a way of honouring the fact that Indigenous peoples have their own sense of time based on place-based relationships, language, ceremonies, familial responsibilities, kinship networks, and sacred living histories (Corntassel, 2012). It is important for researchers to adhere to the community's sense of time rather than imposing their own deadlines and research needs.[77]

[77] The challenges to completing key informant interviews include the fact that they can take a significant amount of time to complete (i.e., scheduling and rescheduling), and findings from interviews can be challenging to analyze and synthesize (i.e., different stakeholder groups with differing levels of program involvement, differing agendas, differing understandings of and experiences with, the program).

Figure B-1: Responsive Research Design and the TRAC Method, Quinless & Corntassel, 2018

Implementing Responsive Research Design

The COVID pandemic created a challenge for conducting field research. The community-based research process was initially planned to include a number of community visits by the researchers engaging in initial consultation meetings, in-depth interviews, and community focus groups. As in-community visits were no longer feasible, all communications were conducted via phone or online. We changed our methods of data gathering as well, with key informant interviews conducted remotely and household interviews conducted through the use of a self-administered questionnaire, with a community researcher available on call to answer questions.

Consultation Meetings: We first held meetings with key administrative/research staff to discuss community issues and concerns. The intent of these meetings was to identify the health values, social values, and economic values of the community and to capture their concerns surrounding the project.

Band Council Resolution for Ethics Agreements: Following the consultation meetings, a collaborative research ethics agreement was drafted for each Nation separately, and each agreement was approved through Band Council Resolution (BCR) in order to proceed with the community research. This was a lengthy process and took from May 2020 to September 2020. There were no risks anticipated for participation with this project for any Nation. All of the six Nations signed the ethics agreements, and each participant signed an informed consent agreement.

Hiring of Community Researchers: The role of the community researcher is paramount to creating a research approach that is critical for community-based research and in working with Indigenous communities to gather and submit information about income support systems and community needs.

Community Feedback for Research Design: Each community was engaged in giving feedback (including revising) the interview questions for the key informant and community questionnaires to ensure each question was appropriate and responded to the realities of income supports for the community. The Nations retained a copy of the Excel database of aggregated community data.

Training of Community Researchers: Based on the highly sensitive nature of this research project, *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act* (HIPPA)-compliant software was used to hold weekly confidential meetings with community researchers. In addition, formal training sessions were scheduled to convey important information about the project; assist in teaching, with interactive virtual training and interviewer practice; and support community researchers in feeling confident in their role in the community. The feedback we received at this point on a post-project follow-up discussion has been that "the training was invaluable for data entry, community interviewing, and overall research project management". Community researchers attended three training sessions to learn how to safely deliver and collect questionnaires during times of COVID-19 and how to confidentially handle participant information, scan and upload documents securely, and enter the data into data trackers. Researchers were provided with a community researcher task summary, a household tracking file and a data tracker in Excel format to use in completing the project.

Ethics Agreements and Creating Ethical Space

Building positive relationships with Indigenous communities and organizations is essential for establishing successful partnerships and advancing reconciliation. The concept of "ethical space" (Ermine et al., 2004) is a space between two entities, the Indigenous and western worlds of culture and knowledge, and is relevant in this community engagement work. Our approach in creating collaborative research agreements with each First Nations community and also through individual informed consent aligns with Ermine's notion of ethical space. Allowing for community-specific ethics agreements is a practical application of the TRAC method and facilitates compliance with the "Our Data, Our Stories, Our Future" vision that guides the First Nations Data Governance Centre's principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating research data with First Nations communities. OCAP, as sanctioned by the First Nations Information Governance Committee (FNIGC, 2021), was established to inform the ethical and culturally competent collection of data between researchers and Indigenous Nations. All agreements reflect the four main principles of OCAP outlined as follows:

1. **Ownership** – the concept that Indigenous Nations collectively possess cultural knowledge, data, and information;

2. **Control** – the rights of Indigenous peoples to control their empirical environments that are infused with their everyday life, which includes research, information, and data;

3. **Access** – the concept of Indigenous groups having control and ownership of and accessibility to the data collected; and,

4. **Possession** – this refers to the trusted relationship between the possessor of data and those who own said data (FNIGC, 2021).

In particular, each community was actively involved in modifying the interview questions for the key informant and community questionnaires to ensure each question is appropriate and responds to the realities of Income Assistance for the community. Each individual participant of the study owns his or her personal information, while the researchers collect the data. The collective qualitative data are owned by the researchers for publication and knowledge mobilization purposes in aggregate formats. For each participant community, aggregated data files are provided as a record of the information collected in the community. The discussion of the results of the study with all participant communities will be shared.

Cultural Safety and Cultural Humility

The concept of cultural safety was first introduced in 1990 by Irihapeti Ramsden, a Maori nurse in Aotearoa (New Zealand), as a response to the poor health status of the Maori people. Cultural safety is often confused with concepts like cultural awareness, cultural competence, and cultural sensitivity. These concepts are not interchangeable but are best viewed as parts of a continuum of care with cultural safety and cultural humility as the ultimate objective. The journey of cultural humility often starts with cultural awareness – recognizing that differences and similarities exist between and across cultures. The acknowledgement of cultural differences is the first step and begins with observing those differences. Learning about the histories that impact Indigenous peoples in Canada is an important part of developing cultural awareness. Cultural humility is a process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic conditioned biases, and to develop and maintain respectful processes and relationships based on mutual trust. This involves humbly acknowledging oneself as a lifelong learner when it comes to understanding another's experience, being open to asking questions and listening openly to others and appreciating spaces of silence for reflection. Cultural humility is a lifelong journey of self-reflection and learning that involves listening about our own culture and biases.

Cultural safety and cultural humility are overarching principles that are threaded through our research process and are part of responsive research and the TRAC method by ensuring that outcomes have been based on respectful engagement that recognizes and strives to address power imbalances that may have occurred during the research process. Cultural safety moves beyond the concept of cultural sensitivity to analyzing power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonization, and colonial relationships as they apply to community-based research in such a way that people are supported to draw strengths from their identity, culture, and community (Quinless & Adu-Febiri, 2019).

Our approach to cultural safety has been to adopt a humble, self-reflective clinical practice that positions our research team as respectful and curious partners when knowledge gathering, rather than as a figure of higher knowledge and authority. The key elements of cultural safety and humility form a protocol for building relationships with Indigenous peoples whether that be through individual interactions or through institutional policy and programming.

Gathering Data During COVID

The six Nations participating in the research were Tsleil-Waututh Nation, Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation, Tseshaht First Nation, Fort Nelson First Nation, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, and Xaxli'p First Nation. These communities are quite diverse, including rural and urban communities with varying access to resources and perspectives on the risks and impacts of COVID-19, and each following their own governance models for informed consent protocols. As in-community visits were no longer feasible, we switched to different methods of data gathering, with key informant interviews conducted remotely, and household interviews conducted through the use of a self-administered questionnaire, with a community researcher available on call to answer questions.

Key informant interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants knowledgeable about the social, economic, and health aspects of community social and economic life. As those interviews had to be done remotely, we adapted our key informant processes to include the use of Doxy.me, an online secure video interviewing platform utilized by the B.C. Ministry of Health, maintaining the highest standard of confidentiality available in B.C. Doxy.me video calls are conducted through an encrypted peer-to-peer connection between the provider and patient. With this method, information is exchanged through the internet directly between the two participants rather than passing through a server. No personal information or conversations are maintained within the Doxy.me platform. All key informant interviews in community were conducted with Doxy.me.

Household Interviews. We prepared 25 questionnaires for each of the six communities that were mailed in sealed envelopes to the community researchers for drop-off/pick-up by participating households. Each questionnaire was inserted into a sealed zip-lock bag with a sanitizer wipe, face mask, and pen for participants to keep. All research supplies were prepared with safe handling and then mailed to the community researcher in each community. During the preparation of the packages, masks were worn, and all material was handled by participants wearing gloves.

Community Conversations/Focus Groups. As a result of the pandemic, we did not have the opportunity to conduct the community conversations as planned. Instead, we administered the questionnaire to each household.

Demographic Profile of Households Interviewed

Table B-1: Summary Statistics of Household Data

DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTIC	ALL HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS	INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS	RESPONSE RATE TO DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTION
Total Count	277	104	100%
Gender (proportion female)	50.4%	61.8%	98.1%
Age (average)	35.2	46.9	92.3%
Children under 18	27.8%	0%	92.3%
Family Type (proportion)			92.3%
Single Person	39.6%	n/a	
Lone Adult with Child(ren) <18	6.3%	n/a	
Two or More Adults with Child(ren) <18	22.9%	n/a	
Two or More Adults Without Child(ren)	31.2%	n/a	
Number of Household Members (Average)	2.66	n/a	100%
Working-Age Adults Employed (proportion)	29.1%	17.5%	96.8%
Education of Adults (proportion)			96.4%
Less than Grade 9	12.8%	12.8%	
Completed Grades 9-12	48.9%	46.8%	
Some Post-Secondary	31.4%	37.2%	
University	6.9%	3.2%	

Appendix D: Secondary Data Description, Methodology, and Regression Analysis

Data Description

Through the B.C. government's Data Innovation Program (DIP), the B.C. government provided us with a dataset combining detailed individual records from the Vital Statistics, B.C. Ministry of Health, the B.C. Ministry of Education, and the B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The majority of the data cover a time span from roughly 1989 to 2017. The data cover all B.C. residents unless they do not interact with any one of the government's systems we have data from (which include MSP and birth records). In the data, an individual is classified as Aboriginal if they self-identified as Aboriginal at least once in any of the administrative data files that have such identifiers (notably the data from the Ministry of Education or birth records) or have MSP premiums paid by Health Canada, which would be the case for registered First Nations, also referred to as Status Indians.[78] In our data, we thus classify individuals as Status Indians if they have their MSP premiums paid by Health Canada. They are non-status Indians if they appear as Aboriginal in any of the data files but are not Status Indians. Because the administrative files include school enrollment records and those are the main source of our non-status (self-declared) Aboriginal ancestry indicator, the size of the younger age cohort of the non-status Aboriginal group is increasing disproportionately over time. Put differently, the education data contain an artificially young population. Further, self-identified Aboriginals appearing in the school records without Indian status experienced the fastest growth of any Indigenous subgroup in our data, likely due to an increased willingness to self-identify over the past few decades.

Education Data (DIP)

The educational data from the Ministry of Education contain a self-declared aboriginal identifier as well as information on whether the student resides on-reserve.

Figure 3-10 plots the proportion of students who graduate with a Dogwood Diploma within six years from the first time they enroll in Grade 8. They include students who graduate in time with an adult graduation diploma. Aboriginal is classified according to whether the student self-identifies as Aboriginal at any point in time during K to 12. The non-Aboriginal category only includes students who have never self-identified as Aboriginal. The on-reserve category are students who are classified as Band Residents.

As mentioned in the main text, our measured graduation rates are smaller than those published by the B.C. Ministry of Education in its yearly updates. There are two main reasons for this discrepancy. First, unlike the published statistics, our sample includes students who never registered in Grade 8. The online statistics do not include home-schooled and ungraded students. Both groups not only have much lower graduation

[78] Indian status is the legal status of a person who is registered under the *Indian Act*.

rates, but Aboriginal students are over-represented among those who are never registered in Grade 8 (and they have a lower graduation rate than non-Aboriginals who are never registered in Grade 8). Second, while we can observe provincial out-migration directly through (a lack of) enrollment in the provincial MSP plan, the ministry has to estimate this number. The specifics of the model they use lead to a systematic overestimation of Aboriginal out-mobility.[79] By not including (disproportionately Aboriginal) students who are never registered in Grade 8 and by applying the higher than actual Indigenous-specific out-migration estimates, the ministry underestimates the number of Aboriginal students expected to graduate from a given Grade 8 cohort, which is the denominator in the calculated graduation rates. As a result, the graduation rates are overestimated.

In the regression analysis on education and cycle of poverty below, we also use a series of other indicators, as follows. We first link students to their parents with the MSP contact phone number. We can then code an indicator for "family type" by defining:

- a two-parent married family if the student lives in a two-parent household (according to the MSP registration file), in which the parents are married according to either the marriages or the birth file
- a two-parent "other" family if the student lives in a two-parent household (according to the MSP registration file), but we have no information on whether the parents are married or not
- a lone-parent family if the student lives in a single parent household (according to the MSP registration file)
- the student as an unattached minor if there are no parents listed in the MSP registration file. The student may be in care or in the home of a relative in this case.

Using the link to the parent(s), we can also observe whether at least one parent received Income Assistance within the time frame of interest and whether a parent receives an MSP subsidy within the time frame of interest. Both are measures of poverty but only apply to off-reserve students. Finally, we observe whether any of the parents' MSP premiums were paid by their employer. The latter is a proxy for employment, and plausibly higher-quality employment.

[79] To estimate out-migration of school-aged children, the ministry uses the rate at which elementary students drop out of the school system. The mobility of families with high school-aged children is lower, however, and particularly so (for all ages) for Aboriginal families relative to the general population. For example, they estimate that 4,244 of the students who would have graduated in 2015-2016 have left the province. We identify out-migrants directly as those students who were not registered with MSP when they were 16 and 17 years of age. We find about 1,800 such students in the file. By not including (disproportionately Aboriginal) students who are never registered in Grade 8 and by applying the lower Indigenous-specific out-migration estimates, the ministry underestimates the number of Aboriginal students expected to graduate from a given Grade 8 cohort, which is the denominator in the calculated graduation rates. As a result, the (estimated) graduation rates are higher than actual. We also observe that a small number of students who left the province return and graduate in B.C. We drop those students so as to not bias our sample.

Health Data (DIP)

The statistics we provide on health and well-being use information provided by the Ministry of Health and also include vital statistics. The data comprise all B.C. residents registered with MSP in July of each year from 1991 to 2016. Due to data limitations, we only considered persons aged 19 to 65. The data include both on-reserve and off-reserve residents.

In our calculation of mental health and mortality trends, the denominator is the number of people registered with MSP in July of each year from 1991 to 2016. The numerator is the number of those people who were admitted to hospital with the respective health code or died between August and the following July.

For Figure 3-12, we code mental health issues for those individuals who appear in the MSP procedure billings file with a mental health ICD9 code. Mental health ICD9 codes are those whose first three digits range from 290 to 291, inclusive, along with two MSP specific codes.[80]

For Figure 3-13, we measure hospital inpatient admission by the number of persons appearing in the Discharge Abstract Database (DAD), adjusted for age. The measure includes patients who died in hospital. We do not include the non-Status Indian group in the figure because the differences to the Status Indian group were very small once we adjusted for age. To adjust for age, we ran a regression on hospital admission (DAD record) using dummy variables for the year of the record and for age, with two separate regressions for Status Indians and the remainder of the population. The figure then reports the coefficients on the year dummies of the regression. The resulting graphs are adjusted so that the predicted rate is equal to the average in the first year.

Figure 3-14 plots the fraction of deaths in each subgroup, adjusted for age, for persons aged 19 to 65, using the same methodology as the previous figure, i.e., it reports the coefficients on the year dummies of a regression, using dummy variables for age and year, with two separate regressions for registered First Nations and the rest of the population. The resulting curves are adjusted, so predicted values in the first year coincide with the actual average.

Social Assistance Data (DIP)

The social assistance data come from the B.C. Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The dataset itself does not contain an Indigenous identifier; however, since we can link individuals to the education and health data, the same ancestry indicator(s) apply; in particular, we classify a person as Aboriginal if they are self-declared in the education system, or identified as Aboriginal in the births or deaths file, or if their MSP premiums were paid by Health Canada because they are registered

[80] See https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/practitioner-pro/medical-services-plan/diag-codes_mental.pdf for a list of mental illness diagnostics that fall under the ICD9 code.

Indians. Everyone else is classified as non-Aboriginal. We have records of all people who received Income Assistance either as a client or a dependent (by month) from 1989 to 2017. The totals differ from the published totals (by 1 percent in December 2017) because some records weren't linked.

Census Data and CWB Index

The census data we use are the micro-data from the long-form Canadian census in the year 2016. The long-form census is distributed to every household on-reserve.[81] The data contain detailed household and individual level data, including income (for the year 2015), Band membership, education, and other socio-economic characteristics. We identify individuals as "Aboriginal" if they self-identify as Aboriginal in the census. We identify individuals as "First Nations on-reserve" if they self-identify as Aboriginal and have their place of residency in a First Nations community. The latter is identified as a separate Census Sub-Division (CSD) in the census.[82]

Since 2004, the ministry responsible for Canada's Indigenous population (currently ISC) has published the Community Well-Being Index (CWB) as a way to measure social conditions in individual First Nation and Inuit communities. Communities with fewer than 65 people are not included. The index uses results from the census, and also provides equivalent results for "other" communities across Canada.[83] The CWB is constructed from four equally weighted sub-indices: per capita income, an education index, a labour force participation index, and a housing index (no health index is provided). In this study, we only use the education sub-indices from which the CWB is calculated. University attainment is measured by the proportion of a community's population 25 years and over that has obtained a university degree at the bachelor level or higher. High school completion is measured by the proportion of a community's population 20 years and over that has obtained at least a high school certificate. Our data source for the charts relating to the CWB index is https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/SAC-ISC/CWB/index-graphs-en.html. It is important to note, however, that the overall (composite) CWB index focuses on only four dimensions to well-being, which are not reflective of Indigenous ways of understanding well-being, Indigenous values, or even Indigenous data sources. For that reason, the CWB instrument as a tool is generally not used by B.C. First Nations and is considered problematic (Quinless, 2017).

---

[81] The response rates in most Indigenous communities have historically been quite high, in excess of 90 per cent for the census. However, not all reserves are enumerated, either because the number of residents is too small or because some communities refuse entry of statistical enumerators as part of a political decision. In B.C., only one First Nation (Esquimalt) made an explicit decision not to participate in the 2016 Census. More detailed information on definitions used to gather the 2016 Census data on Aboriginal peoples, how the data were collected and the relevant data quality aspects can be found at https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/98-307/index-eng.cfm.

[82] A CSD is the general term for municipalities or areas equivalent to municipalities for statistical purposes such as Indian reserves, Indian settlements, and unorganized territories. This geographical variable allows us to identify the population living in First Nations communities.

[83] For detailed documentation, refer to The Community Well-Being Index (CWB): Measuring Well-Being in First Nations and Non-Aboriginal Communities, 1981-2006

Tables and Regression Analysis

A Primer on Regression Analysis

As documented in the report, Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in B.C. differ along a number of demographic and other characteristics (age structure, location, educational achievement, etc.). One aspect of these differences is that they may conflate the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in important outcomes of interest such as poverty, education, and incidence of receiving Income Assistance. For example, if there are more children and fewer adults of working age in one subpopulation relative to another, then average income in the former is lower than in the latter, even if every single working-age individual in both populations earns the same income. Similarly, if there are more single parents in one population versus another, then one would expect relatively more people to receive Income Assistance in that population, irrespective of ancestry. For some questions, however, it is instructive to separate out the influence of those other characteristics that may affect an outcome of interest, in order to isolate the "effect" of ancestry. A methodological approach to achieve this is *regression analysis*. Regression analysis is a statistical tool that allows us to make statements about gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households or persons *with similar observed characteristics*. The basic idea of regression analysis is to control for other factors that affect the outcome of interest, thus isolating the "effect" of being Indigenous beyond those factors. The analysis then delivers estimates of the gap between households across two subpopulations, Indigenous versus Non-Indigenous, accounting for (i.e., controlling for) differences in observable characteristics. The controls we use throughout the report in our regressions (also known as independent variables or regressors) may include location (same census division), age, gender, household size, the highest educational attainment, family type, year of observation, parental characteristics, mental health characteristics, etc. For each specific regression we estimate, a complete list of controls is documented, together with the sample, in the notes to the accompanying regression table.

Income and Government Transfers

Table C1 below gives the coefficient estimates of the gap in income and other outcomes of interest between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (column 1), and between First Nations on-reserve and the rest of the population (column 2), for the year 2015-16. Our sample consists of the universe of B.C. residents in the 2016 census microdata file. Below each estimated gap, we report the *standard error* of the estimated gap. The standard error is a measure of the precision of an estimated number. All estimations shown here are considered highly *statistically significant*.[84]

The outcome we consider in the first column is whether or not a household's disposable income falls short of the corresponding MBM poverty line. Similarly, the second row gives the dollar gaps in income between two comparable households. One can think of the estimated coefficient in the first row (on the "Aboriginal" identifier) as showing the

[84] As a rule of thumb, if the estimated gap is less than 2 standard errors away from zero, it is not considered statistically significant. All our estimates are statistically significant at the 1 percent level and above. This means that there is less than 1 percent chance the actual underlying gap is zero.

"unexplained" gap, i.e., the additional likelihood of being officially poor or the reduction in income for an Indigenous relative to a non-Indigenous person, which is not explained by the fact that this person is more likely to be less educated, younger, a lone parent, residing in a rural area, etc. It is worth noting that both the estimate for the poverty rate gap and the estimate for the income gap are substantial but smaller than the raw gaps from Figures 1-4 and 1-7, respectively, indicating that a large portion of the gaps can be attributed to lack of education, a different family and age structure, fewer employment opportunities due to location, and other differences in the underlying subpopulations.

The final noteworthy estimates in this table concern Income Assistance. We see that both types of Indigenous households (on and off-reserve) receive more Income Assistance on average than non-Indigenous households with similar observed characteristics. The point estimates give an extra $131 for on-reserve First Nation families and $840 for off-reserve Aboriginal families. It seems surprising that the latter group receives more than the former group, even though we know poverty rates to be higher on-reserve. This peculiarity in the data is most likely explained by the fact that many First Nations communities will collect the shelter allowance amount directly from ISC for Band housing; thus, households do not actually collect the shelter allowance, and as a result, the transfer would be recorded as a social assistance payment in the census.

Table C-1: Regression Analysis – Gaps in Income and Government Transfer Components

OUTCOME VARIABLE	FIRST NATIONS ON-RESERVE	ABORIGINAL OFF-RESERVE
Poverty indicator (MBM based)	0.11 (-0.00)	0.02 (-0.00)
Total income	-23,145.65 (-939.48)	-3,020.60 (-558.29)
All government transfers	2,009.12 (97.57)	1,518.48 (64.37)
OAS and Guaranteed income	370.05 (-36.03)	-94.76 (-14.80)
CPP	-712.66 (-42.59)	169.34 (-27.11)
Employment insurance	974.81 (-53.874)	231.17 (-32.63)
Child benefits	1,343.51 (38.46)	230.67 (19.08)
Social assistance	131.05 (35.95)	840.53 (27.75)
Other government transfers	-97.63 (-40.17)	141.53 (-33.21)

NOTE: Ordinary least squares regressions. Standard errors in parenthesis. The number of observations in these regressions ranged from 296,395 for total income to 47,035 for the employment insurance regressions. Further details such as the coefficients on other covariates and R squared statistics are available upon request. The regressions control for census division fixed effect, principal maintainer age, age squared and gender, household size and its square, number of under 15 years old, 65 and older, number of income earners, and full-time working household members, indicators of family type (single, lone parent, couple without children, couple with children), maximum education attainment in the household, and size of nearest population centre.

High School Graduation

Table C2 below displays our regression results on high school graduation rates. The outcome variable we considered given the DIP data available is on-time graduation from secondary schools, defined as receiving a B.C. Dogwood Diploma or Adult Graduation Diploma within six years of entering Grade 8. Our sample consists of over 630,000 youth that attended B.C. secondary schools over the period of 2011 through 2018,[85] and we included the year of graduation, student gender and age, as well as whether or

[85] Our sample includes all B.C. students who were in Grade 7 between 1999-2000 and 2011-2012 inclusive. This allows us to look at the factors affecting graduation for the cohorts who have had six years to graduate following Grade 8 in the years 2005-2006 to 2017-2018. Our data ends with the 2016-2017 school year, so the last cohort has not had an extra year to graduate. We supplemented these data with the records of home-schooled and ungraded students who were never in Grade 7. We linked children to their parents using the MSP contact numbers. We dropped all students identified as a non-resident of B.C.

not the student was classified as a special needs child. This means that we accounted for important factors such as time trends in (relative) graduation rates, gender, and age, or possible over-representation of Indigenous children in special needs categories. In the most basic analysis, we find that the graduation chances of youth that self-identified as Aboriginal were 23.4 percentage points lower than that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and those youth who live on-reserve were an *additional* 12.9 percentage points less likely to graduate. Controlling for variation between schools reduces the estimates somewhat but not significantly. Indigenous youth attending the same school in the same year are still 20 percentage points less likely to graduate than their non-Indigenous classmates, and for students who live on-reserve, there is an additional 11 percentage points gap. Put differently, if we compare a typical non-Indigenous youth to an Indigenous youth of the same age and gender, *in the same year attending the same school*, the latter's chances of graduating on time are 33 percentage points lower if that youth was a reserve resident; this gap equals 40 percent of the average graduation rate. The gap is not quite as large for Indigenous youth off-reserve but still remarkable. Again, *within the same school and the same cohort*, Indigenous students are over 20 percentage points (or 25 percent of the average) less likely to graduate than their non-Indigenous classmates. Adding additional explanatory variables such as family type, employment, and social assistance status of the parents, as well as Grade 7 numeracy, reading, and writing scores decreases the estimated graduation gaps further, but large discrepancies continue to remain. Even when comparing to a non-Indigenous peer in the same school and year, with the same parental background, living in the same family type, and with the same provincial skill assessment score, the likelihood of an Indigenous youth who lives on-reserve graduating was still 20.2 percentage points – or roughly one-quarter – lower.[86]

[86] It should be noted, though, that since we do not observe Income Assistance status on-reserve in our data, the corresponding coefficient includes on-reserve poverty as a factor.

Table C-2: Regression Analysis, Indigenous Disparities in Graduation Rates

EXPLANATORY VARIABLES	ON-TIME GRADUATION RATE				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Self-Identified as Aboriginal	-0.234 (0.001)	-0.199 (0.002)	-0.165 (0.002)	-0.127 (0.002)	-0.113 (0.002)
Reserve Resident	-0.129 (0.004)	0.114 (0.004)	-0.105 (0.004)	-0.114 (0.004)	-0.089 (0.006)
Parent receives Income Assistance				-0.149 (0.001)	-0.136 (0.001)
Parent receives MSP subsidy				-0.029 (0.001)	-0.027 (0.001)
Parents' Employer Paid MSP				0.027 (0.001)	0.023 (0.001)
Grade 7 Numeracy Score					0.018 (0.001)
Grade 7 Reading Score					0.023 (0.001)
Grade 7 Writing Score					0.007 (0.001)
Mean Graduation Rate	0.811	0.811	0.811	0.811	0.811
School Fixed Effect	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Family type Fixed Effect	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES
Number of Observations	606,436	606,411	606,411	606,411	606,411
R Squared	0.133	0.166	0.186	0.212	0.211

NOTE: Ordinary least squares regression. Our sample pools all years 2011-2018. Each regression includes year, gender, age, and special needs group fixed effects. Column (2) adds school fixed effects. Column (3) adds family type fixed effects. Reported standard errors are (heteroskedasticity) robust. "Self-identified as Aboriginal" and "Band Resident" are flags in the enrollment records indicating whether the student self-identifies as Aboriginal and lives on-reserve, respectively. "Parents Received Income Assistance" and "Parents Received MSP Subsidy" indicate whether the child's parents received Income Assistance or the MSP low-income subsidy while the child was between the ages of ten and 17. Both are measures of poverty, but only apply to off-reserve students. "Parents' Employer Paid MSP" indicated that the parents of children between the ages of ten and 17 had employers who paid their MSP premiums. The Grade 7 scores are the Foundation Skills Assessment scores standardized to be mean zero and standard deviation one. Special Needs Group Fixed Effects indicate categorical groups of children's special needs (including no such classification).

Primary Education

As we see from Table C2, Grade 7 provincial skill assessment scores are an important determinant of the likelihood of graduating from high school in BC. One question one could ask, therefore, is how much of an achievement gap do Indigenous children face already at the end of Grade 7. If there was a significant gap, this would further amplify the discrepancies in high school. To investigate this question, we again conducted a regression analysis, this time using Grade 7 achievement, measured by the Foundation Skill Assessment (FSA) scores in numeracy and reading, as an outcome. The results are gathered in Table C3 below. The analysis shows that large gaps exist for both scores; for example, the average numeracy score of an Aboriginal elementary student on-reserve is about 97 points, or one-fifth (20 percent), lower than the average score of a non-Indigenous student, controlling for age, gender, and special needs categories. Additional controls, such as family, shrink the gaps somewhat, but the gaps are still strikingly large. For instance, the numeracy score for Aboriginal children living on-reserve is still about 50 points lower than that of their observationally identical counterparts, implying that the scores of these children typically fall into the lower one-third of the score distribution. A similar picture emerges for the reading scores, where the on-reserve gaps are even more pronounced. Even controlling for school and parental background puts the average reading score of Grade 7 Indigenous students whose parents live on-reserve at almost 60 points lower than their peers, which puts them into the lowest quintile (20 percent) of the distribution. Children growing up off-reserve are not as disadvantaged but there is still a gap of about 17 points, or 3.4 percent of the average score.

Table C-3: Regression Analysis, Indigenous Disparities in Grade 7 FSA scores

EXPLANATORY VARIABLES	GRADE 7 NUMERACY SCORE				GRADE 7 READING SCORE			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Self-Identified as Aboriginal	-61.01 (-80.34)	-30.54 (-36.73)	-26.95 (-36.73)	-21.41 (-28.86)	42.32 (-58.46)	-25.27 (-34.49)	-21.301 (-28.68)	-16.61 (-22.10)
Reserve Resident	-36.35 (-19.07)	-26.36 (-12.98)	-23.67 (-11.68)	-27.76 (-13.72)	-50.87 (-28.06)	-44.83 (-21.86)	-42.69 (-20.85)	-43.80 (-21.41)
Parents Receive Income Assistance				-30.15 (-42.07)				-20.08 (-27.66)
Parents' MSP subsidized				-1.74 (-2.91)				-5.23 (-8.62)
Parents' Employer Pays MSP				-0.75 (-1.69)				6.89 (15.26)
School Fixed Effects	No	YES	YES	YES	No	YES	YES	YES
Family Type Fixed Effects	No	NO	YES	YES	No	No	YES	YES
Mean Score	480.8	480.8	480.8	480.8	494.1	494.1	494.1	494.1
Observations	210,607	210,607	210,607	210,607	211,872	211,872	211,872	211,872

NOTE: The regressions pool all Grade 7 students, for the years 2011-2018 who participated in the provincial skill assessments. Each regression includes age, gender, year, and special needs group fixed effects. Column (2) adds school fixed effects, and column (3) adds family type fixed effects (single parent, two parents, unattached minor). Standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust. "Self-identified as Aboriginal" and "On-reserve" are flags in the enrollment records indicating whether the student self-identifies as Aboriginal and lives on-reserve, respectively. Regressions in column (4) also control for whether "Parents Received Income Assistance" and "Parents Received MSP Subsidy", indicating whether the child's parents received Income Assistance or the MSP low-income subsidy while the child was between the ages of ten and 17. "Parents' Employer Paid MSP" indicated that the parents of children between the ages of ten and 17 had employers who paid their MSP premiums. This is a proxy for employment, and plausibly higher-quality employment. The Grade 7 scores are the Foundation Skills Assessment scores standardized to be mean zero and standard deviation one. Special Needs Group Fixed Effects indicate categorical groups of children's special needs (including no such classification).

Incidence of Receiving Income Assistance before Age 22

The table below gives the results of our regression analysis to help quantify (intergenerational) dependency and the cycle of poverty. The outcome we consider is whether an individual received Income Assistance in any of the 36 months, from the months of their 19th birthday onward. The sample consists of all young adults who were children in Grade 7 between the years 1999-2000 and 2011-2012, plus those who were ungraded and home-schooled and were in the school system in the year they turned 12. The Aboriginal indicator comes from (self-identified) school enrollment records. Other than the Indigenous identifier, we are interested in how academic achievement (measured by "graduated from high school") and mental health issues (measured by either special needs or a doctor's visit with a diagnosis in the mental health range) affect the likelihood of receiving Income Assistance before the age of 22. We also control for whether parents received Income Assistance, family types, whether a parent receives MSP subsidy, whether an employer pays for the MSP, physical disabilities, age, gender,

and year of observation. None of the estimated coefficient changes significantly if we drop Grade 7 children on-reserve from our sample, for whom we do not observe the Income Assistance status of parents.

Table C-4: Regression Analysis – Gaps in Early Adulthood Dependency

PREDICTORS/EXPLANATORY VARIABLES	OUTCOME INCIDENCE OF RECEIVING INCOME ASSISTANCE BEFORE AGE 22
	ESTIMATED COEFFICIENT
Aboriginal	0.209 (0.002)
High School Graduate	-0.133 (0.001)
High School Graduate x Aboriginal	0.065 (0.002)
Mental Health Record	0.043 (0.001)
Mental Health Record x Aboriginal	0.067 (0.002)
Parent on Income Assistance	0.069 (0.001)
Parent on Income Assistance x Aboriginal	0.140 (0.001)
Observations	606,411
R Squared	0.21

NOTE: Ordinary least squares regression. The reference date for each adult in our sample is whether we observe them on September 30 of the year they entered Grade 7 or, for the ungraded and home-schooled, September 30 of the year they turned 12. The sample was further restricted to BC residents and to students who were registered with MSP continuously while aged 16 and 17. We identify (self-identified) Aboriginal through the MEd enrollment records. "Graduation from high school" is defined as in the regression in Table C2. "Mental health record" indicates that the student either had a special needs code G, H, M, N, or R (defined by MEd), or that the student visited a doctor resulting in a diagnosis in the mental health range (ICD9 codes 290-319). Additional controls are whether parents received Income Assistance, family types, whether a parent receives MSP subsidy, whether an employer pays for the MSP, all of which are defined above. We also control for special needs codes A, B, C, D, E, F, J, K, or Q (these are physical disabilities or learning disabilities not directly related to mental health), student age and gender, as well as year fixed effects.

Author Contact Details:

Dr. Anke Kessler
Department of Economics
SImon Fraser University
8888 University Dr.
Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6
akessler@sfu.ca

Dr. Jacqueline Quinless
Centre for Indigenous Research and Community-Led Engagement (CIRCLE), & Department of Sociology
University of Victoria
Unceded Coast and Strait Salish Territory
Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2
quinless@uvic.ca

Please contact Dr. Anke Kessler for all inquiries regarding content, methodology, and data.