



REPRESENTATIVE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy Submission**

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## Introduction

My Office applauds the B.C. government for taking the first steps towards creating a strategy to reduce poverty in B.C. by soliciting the views of citizens. I am pleased to offer this submission on behalf of the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) to help inform this strategy.

The mandate of my Office is to champion fundamental rights and promote improvements in services for vulnerable children and youth. Through the *Representative for Children and Youth Act*, my Office oversees the provincial child welfare and other child-serving systems, including policies and services provided to children, and investigates and reports on both individual situations and larger trends to spur necessary improvements to the system. Our goal is to improve the lives of all children and youth in B.C. by working towards a province in which children and youth are healthy and safe and their interests and viewpoints are heard and acted upon.

There is no doubt that the work of my Office is affected by deep-seated poverty that exists in this province. Poverty begets poverty, becoming a multigenerational issue that is difficult to escape. Therefore, it is within my mandate to advocate for poverty reduction across the province as it relates to vulnerable children and youth and young people who have aged out of government services.

This submission places a particular focus on two groups of children and youth:

- Children and youth living in vulnerable situations, and
- Youth who age out of government care.

B.C. is a province of wealth. Governments have claimed a strong economy, surplus budgets and the lowest unemployment rate in Canada. Often missing in this narrative, however, is a discussion about who is excluded from these benefits. To be a great province, it needs to provide equal opportunity for all people who live here.

Canada is a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. By ratifying these Conventions, Canada agreed to abide by their principles and standards. Each Convention acknowledges the rights of, amongst others, children – and their parents – to a standard of living sufficient for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, that parents will be assisted to provide for their children, and/or all levels of economic and social conditions will be improved, without discrimination.<sup>1</sup> These are commitments that B.C. must take seriously. In addition, there are calls for the *B.C. Human Rights Code* to be updated to include the provision of social condition (particularly poverty) as

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<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3,

grounds of discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Improving the socio-economic conditions of all children and their parents must be paramount in the poverty reduction strategy.

Underpinning this submission is the belief that in order for all children and youth to be healthy and safe and to have equal opportunities, they need to live in families, neighbourhoods, communities and nations devoid of poverty and its accompanying intersecting factors.

In 1989, the House of Commons in Ottawa voted unanimously to end child poverty by the year 2000 – 18 years ago. According to Campaign 2000's 26<sup>th</sup> report, child poverty in Canada has increased from 15.8 per cent in 1989 to 18.3 per cent in 2016.<sup>3</sup> Over the last 10 years, jurisdictions across the country have been developing and implementing plans to reduce poverty, particularly amongst children. B.C. is one of the last provinces to develop a poverty reduction strategy and, simultaneously, has one of the highest child poverty rates in the country. We can and must do better for our children.

## **Children and youth living in vulnerable situations**

There is unanimous agreement among those who measure poverty that, regardless of the measures used, there is too much poverty in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Despite its wealth, B.C. is not exempt. While my Office is concerned with the well-being of all children in B.C., I am most concerned for children living in vulnerable situations. Not only is living in poverty one such vulnerability, it also contributes to others. Child poverty does not exist in isolation from family and community poverty. While it is important to grasp the rates of child poverty, it is just as important to understand family poverty and the factors that contribute to it, to contextualize the reality in which many children in B.C. live. When parents live in poverty, so do their children.

Poverty in B.C. largely affects marginalized populations such as Indigenous people, disenfranchised youth, immigrants, people with disabilities and lone-parent families led by women. Members of these groups are more likely to earn their livelihood through low-wage employment, from income assistance or from disability assistance. Annual incomes for parents on either income assistance or disability assistance continue to fall well short of the poverty line.

However, while many people think of poverty as being an issue only for those on some kind of income assistance, poverty in B.C. is actually much more of a low wage story.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, more people living in poverty are working – frequently referred to as working poor – than

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<sup>2</sup> B.C. Human Rights Commission. *A Human Rights commission for the 21st Century: British Columbians talk about Human Rights A report and recommendations to the Attorney General of British Columbia*, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Anita Khanna. 2016 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada. Toronto: Campaign 2000, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> John Stapleton. *A Basic Income for Canadians: What Would Change*. Toronto: The George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Ivanova Igluka. *Working Poverty in Metro Vancouver*. Canadian Centre for Poverty Alternatives, 2016.

receiving income only from income assistance or Employment Insurance. Single parents experience the greatest risk of being working poor, with enormous implications for their children.

Another common misconception is that the working poor comprise only minimum wage workers. In fact, the majority of the working poor in B.C. earn above minimum wage but remain below the poverty line. According to First Call, a coalition of organizations advocating for children and youth in B.C., *“In 2015, a single parent with one child working full-time for the whole year for minimum wage would have only earned \$18,761 in employment income, leaving them \$10,111 below the \$28,872 LIM (Low Income Measure) before-tax poverty line for this family type and size.”*<sup>6</sup>

Understanding families’ income levels must be done in tandem with understanding pressures on those incomes. Increases to wages as well as income assistance and disability assistance rates have not kept pace with increases to the costs of living in B.C., most notably in large urban areas. Of particular note are increasing rents, the lack of affordable housing, growing homelessness, increasing child care costs and limited availability, and the rising use of food banks. In B.C. in March 2017, 100,000 people relied on food banks. More than 30 per cent of these were identified as children. The choice between paying the rent or buying food is not one any parent should have to make.

The recent provincial Budget 2018 focused on child care, specifically for low-income parents, and funding toward affordable housing. These priorities are a clear acknowledgment of the challenges facing parents and are a laudable first step. Organizations such as Together Against Poverty in Victoria tell of the many calls they receive from single parents who ask to access emergency rental support; deemed ineligible or unable to access necessary funding, they are days away from homelessness.<sup>7</sup> It is a slippery slope from poverty into homelessness, even when one is earning a wage, as noted above.

Most prominent is the rate of poverty for Indigenous families. Approximately one-quarter of all Indigenous children in Canada live on-reserve, where the poverty rate is greater than three times the rate for non-Indigenous children.<sup>8</sup> The poverty rate for off-reserve Indigenous children in B.C. is nearly twice the provincial average for all children. While the rate of poverty is lower for non-status First Nations and Métis children, the probability that they live in poverty remains high.<sup>9</sup> The circumstances behind these poverty levels are complex, but an underlying theme is low income (see Appendix A).

The outcome of living in poverty for Indigenous children has been disastrous. Many on-reserve families experience substandard housing conditions, limited access to health care, scarce or

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<sup>6</sup> First Call. *2017 Child Poverty Report Card*. Vancouver: First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tapsbc.ca>

<sup>8</sup> David MacDonald and David Wilson. *Shameful Neglect: Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> MacDonald & Wilson, 2016.

contaminated water sources and limited educational options. Poverty clearly exacerbates these conditions while, simultaneously, the scarcity of these basic necessities creates barriers to escaping poverty.

The impoverished conditions experienced by Indigenous people in B.C. are the reality in which a growing number of children and youth live – and the underlying reason many are removed from their families' care. It is no coincidence that poverty rates for Indigenous British Columbians are higher than for non-Indigenous people and that Indigenous children and youth are significantly over-represented in the child welfare and Youth Justice systems in B.C. These conditions are a continuation of historical inequality, which, when combined with an approach to child welfare that also stems from colonization, position Indigenous children and youth at significant risk of being removed from their families, communities and nations as well as from their culture. This decades-old reality is unacceptable.

### Poverty's relationship to child welfare

*“Poverty and lack of affordable housing played a major role in creating the conditions in which this baby was removed from the care of his parents, and insufficient support was provided to this young family.”*

*Housing, Help and Hope: A Better Path for Struggling Families - RCY report 2009*

Poverty is a complex issue that plays out in the lives of children and youth in myriad ways. However, the experiences of my Office leave little doubt that poverty is a feature in the lives of too many children and youth who come into contact with the child welfare and Youth Justice systems. More importantly, poverty is often a key driver of children being placed in government care, underlying many allegations of maltreatment and neglect that result in separating children and youth from their families. A goal of any child welfare system must be to support families to remain together when it is safe to do so. Addressing poverty is one significant way to achieve this goal.

Emerging research findings, particularly from the United States, the United Kingdom and increasingly, from Canada, point to the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect, and between levels of socio-economic adversity and children's chances of formal child welfare intervention.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of a Canadian study exploring the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment has found poverty increases risk of child welfare involvement, without drawing a causal relationship between poverty and child maltreatment or a connection

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Morris et al., “Social Work, Poverty, and Child Welfare Interventions” *Child and Family Social Work* (2018): 1 - 9; Paul Bywaters et al, *The Relationship Between Poverty, Child Abuse and Neglect: An Evidence Review*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016; Leroy H Pelton. “The Continuing Roof Material Factors in Child Maltreatment and Placement,” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, no 41 (2015): 30 - 39; Ashley L. Landers et al. “A scoping review of evidence-based interventions available to parents of maltreated children ages 0-5 involved with child welfare services.” *Child Abuse and Neglect* no 76 (2018): 546 - 560.

with the child welfare system, or claim poverty as a predictor.<sup>11</sup> However, other researchers argue that there is overwhelming evidence that poverty, low income and job loss are strongly related to child maltreatment and neglect, claiming there is a direct link between financial stress, parental conflict, parenting and child well-being.<sup>12</sup> The stress of financial uncertainty on parents can negatively impact parenting skills and child well-being, perhaps more so than the financial hardship itself.<sup>13</sup> Canadian longitudinal studies reveal that children living in poverty are more likely to develop health problems – particularly mental health – display disruptive behaviour, and drop out of school.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, there are signs that economic hardship in families increases the risk of needing family support services, substantiated investigations by child welfare authorities and placement in foster or other out-of-home care.<sup>15</sup>

In a Quebec study, Esposito et al. found that neighbourhood level socio-economic disadvantages significantly contribute to the increased risk of out-of-home placement for all children, particularly young children.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a study done in two U.S. states found that policies that increase incomes of the working poor can improve children’s welfare substantially, again, particularly for younger children.<sup>17</sup> These findings are supported by other research, compelling governments to heed the evidence.

Direct and indirect interactions between poverty and other contributory factors, such as insecure housing, mental illness and substance use, are complex and frequently circular. They can affect parenting – or the perception of parenting. For example, poverty increases the risk of mental illness and mental illness increases the likelihood of poverty. Furthermore, poverty can exacerbate contact with the child welfare system. For example, parental substance use accompanied by poverty is more likely to lead to contact with child welfare involvement than parental substance use accompanied by affluence.<sup>18</sup>

**Lifting parents out of poverty can decrease instances – whether real or perceived – of child neglect.**

Parents and their children can be penalized for living in poverty. For example, if parents need to work several jobs to make ends meet, they may find themselves needing to leave their children

<sup>11</sup>Public Health Agency of Canada. Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008: Major Findings. Ottawa, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Leroy H. Pelton, 2015; Tonino Esposito et al., “Out-of-Home Placement and Regional Variations in Poverty and Health and Social Services Spending: A Multilevel Analysis.” *Children and Youth Services Review*, no 72 (2017): 34 – 43; David W. Rothwell, Katrina Cherney & Nico Trocmé. *Financial Strain, Child Maltreatment and the Great Recession in Canada*. Canadian Child Welfare Research Information Sheet #143E. Montreal, QC: Centre for Research on Children and Families, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> David W. Rothwell, et al., 2015; Tonino Esposito et al 2017.

<sup>14</sup>David W. Rothwell, et al., 2015.

<sup>15</sup> David W. Rothwell et al., 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Tonino Esposito et al., 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Kerri M. Raissian and Lindsey Rose Bullinger. “Money Matters: Does the Minimum Wage Affect Child Maltreatment Rates?” *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72(2017): 60-70.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Bywaters et al., *The Relationship Between Poverty, Child Abuse and Neglect: An Evidence Review*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016.

at home alone if they cannot afford child care. Child welfare may be contacted and determine that the children are being neglected because they are at home alone and remove the children from the home and parent – or in some instances, the parent may enter into a Voluntary Care Agreement until they can figure out an arrangement for their children. Yet, to return children to the parents, certain criteria must be met, such as an appropriate number of bedrooms or proven ability to pay utilities. When these conditions cannot be met because the money is not there, children are not returned home. Families can find themselves in this tenuous situation because they live in poverty, not because they are neglectful parents.

Reducing poverty is essentially harm-reduction. Poverty can lead to poor health, increasing the likelihood of inadequate housing and nutrition, and impacting educational success and opportunities – all social determinants of health. When families experience these, so do their children. When parents' health is poor, their ability to fully care for their children may be – or be seen to be – compromised. When children's health is poor, their ability to reach their full potential is impacted. The only way to effectively improve child and family health is to eliminate, or at least dramatically reduce, rates of poverty.<sup>19</sup> Increasing income and funding social programs that support families and alleviate stress as well as improving social and physical environments (such as neighbourhoods)<sup>20</sup> – taking an upstream approach – are recognized as fundamental to improving economic conditions for families, reducing contact with child welfare, and improving health of parents and children.

### Indigenous children, families and communities

The issues associated with poverty are compounded for Indigenous people, particularly those living on-reserve. A priority concern of our Office is the over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system. Indigenous children and youth represent approximately 63 per cent of the children and youth in government care in B.C. but only about eight per cent of the total child/youth population in this province. Advocating for a reduction to this alarming over-representation is a key function of our Office.

Indigenous people are also more likely to experience poverty than non-Indigenous people. There is agreement among researchers and activists (and lately Canadian politicians, such as Federal Minister of Indigenous Services Jane Philpott, for example) that historical practices of colonialism continue to lead to the high rates of poverty experienced by Indigenous peoples.<sup>21</sup> The effects of colonialism on poverty include “*important causal relationships, such as the decimation of traditional economies, the movement of Aboriginal peoples onto increasingly marginal land and the creation of reserves by the colonial administration*”<sup>22</sup> as well as policies

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<sup>19</sup> Claudia Chaufan et al., “You Can’t Walk or Bike Yourself Out of the Health Effects of Poverty: Active School Transport, Child Obesity, and Blind Spots in Public Health Literature”. *Critical Public Health*, 25, no. 1(2015): 32 – 47.

<sup>20</sup> Bywaters et al, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Melisa Brittain and Cindy Blackstock. *First Nations Child Poverty: A Literature Review and Analysis*. First Nations Children’s Action Research and Education Service, 2015; Wilson and Macdonald 2010

<sup>22</sup> D. Wilson and D. MacDonald. *The Income Gap Between Aboriginal Peoples and the Rest of Canada*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010 in Brittain and Blackstock, 2015 p 18.



and practices of “forced exclusion and assimilation” through which “settler governments attempted, overtly, to uproot and destroy the vitality and autonomy of Indigenous modes of life.”<sup>23</sup>

Discussions during January 2018’s emergency meeting of provincial ministers associated with child welfare, as well as provincial children’s advocates, hosted by Minister Philpott, made very clear how child welfare practices of removing Indigenous children from their families and communities has, for decades, taken precedence over providing sufficient supports that would prevent problems in the first place. Continual under-funding of Indigenous child welfare combined with an emphasis on ‘protective care’ as opposed to ‘supportive care’ has brought too many Indigenous children into government care. Residential schools, the 60s scoop and later child welfare systems successively removed Indigenous children from their homes and communities, frequently using poverty as the rationale. These practices continue today. The result has been an exacerbation of intergenerational trauma and current numbers of Indigenous children in the child welfare system that exceed any time in the past, including the residential schools period.<sup>24</sup>

In 1996, the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* noted the high rates of poverty, ill health, family break-down and suicide in many Indigenous communities, where children and youth were most at risk.<sup>25</sup> The continuing poverty in communities was highlighted again in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*.<sup>26</sup> Prejudicial attitudes toward Indigenous people and their parenting skills, combined with a deeply embedded view that poverty is a symptom of neglect, continue to result in the over-representation of Indigenous children and youth apprehended and taken into care, many of whom experienced (and continue to experience) trauma through abuse and neglect that reverberates through generations. Poverty must not be conflated with neglect or maltreatment. Conditions of poverty do not lead to parents’, families’ and communities’ inability to care for their children and they are not solved by removing children from their care.

Poverty, accompanied by decades of systemic racism, has led, according to Minister Philpott, to the current “humanitarian crisis,” and a “broken system” that is “destroying Indigeneity.”<sup>27</sup> In an era of talk about reconciliation and a new relationship with Canada’s Indigenous peoples, a concentrated effort at addressing poverty among Indigenous people is a necessity to begin walking the talk. The federal government’s 2018 Budget articulates its recognition of this issue, committing \$4.1 billion to Indigenous communities over six years, in addition to dollars already

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<sup>23</sup> G.S. Coulthard. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014 (as quoted in Brittain and Blackstock 2015 p 21).

<sup>24</sup> Brittain & Blackstock 2015 p 60.

<sup>25</sup> Government of Canada. Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Aadnc-aandc.gc.ca. Accessed January 3, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Company. *We must disrupt the foster care system and remove perverse incentives, says Minister Jane Philpott*. CBC Radio: The Current, January 26, 2018.

allocated in the 2016 Federal Budget.<sup>28</sup> That money is earmarked to tackle long-standing problems with infrastructure and social services through investments in new housing and improved child welfare and health programs.<sup>29</sup> While this investment is encouraging, it is not likely to fully address the needs of the current crisis situation for Indigenous children's well-being.

*"Despite such strong evidence that poverty is closely related to parental stress and capacity and risk of maltreatment and neglect, child protection legislation attributes the primary responsibility for conditions associated with neglect to parents, with relatively little emphasis on the role that poverty plays in creating these conditions."*<sup>30</sup>

For children and youth living in vulnerable situations, a comprehensive provincial poverty reduction strategy should pay attention to the role of poverty in the lives of these young people and their families, and institute changes that increase incomes and supports and reduce the risk of child welfare involvement. Investments in upstream supportive services need to be accompanied by a switch in world view, from a protective and apprehension approach to an approach to child welfare where supportive measures are actively considered before removing children from their families. Making funds available for foster care services but not for supporting families is a backward and detrimental approach to policy and only perpetuates intergenerational trauma that grips so many Indigenous communities.

It is common sense that children are best raised by their parents, families and communities – a claim for which there is substantial evidence. It is well documented that children and youth who have lived in government care, particularly Indigenous children and youth, have a greater likelihood of experiencing mental illness, harmful substance misuse, involvement with the justice system, suicide, poverty and homelessness into their adult lives. When measured in dollars, supporting families and communities with prevention initiatives can reap significant benefits and avoid costs downstream.

Government policies can be instruments of change to support a proactive, upstream approach to family support and child welfare to allow families and communities to care for their children and reduce the number of children and youth taken into government care.

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<sup>28</sup> Harris, Kathleen. *Budget 2018: Liberals Spend Billions to Close Gaps for Working Women, Indigenous Families*, CBC.ca 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Harris, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Nico Trocmé et al "Differentiating Between Child Protection and Family Support in the Canadian Child Welfare System's Response to Intimate Partner Violence, Corporal Punishment and Child Neglect". *International Journal of Psychology* 48 No 2 (2013): 128-140.

**Case Study – first published in the July 2009 RCY report *Housing, Help and Hope: A Better Path for Struggling Families***

*A young Indigenous family with a newborn moved back to their home community, a First Nation reserve in B.C., to be closer to family, culture and shared resources. They moved in with their grandparents. Within days of their arrival, MCFD (Ministry for Children and Family Development) received a report concerning someone living in the home with historical child protection issues and determined the home was unsafe. Although aware of the limited housing options on the reserve, MCFD told the parents that they needed to find “a suitable place to live that was not overcrowded and provided safety from family members with histories of abuse and neglect” or their child would be removed. The parents lacked the financial resources available to find housing either on- or off-reserve. They qualified for some financial assistance only if they could prove they found a home off-reserve but without funds for a damage deposit, this option was not possible. The baby was ultimately removed from the parents’ care and placed in a non-Indigenous foster home away from his family, community and culture. When in care, this child was critically injured under suspicious circumstances. The mother clearly stated that they were simply living in this residence due to “economic necessity.”*

*“The child welfare system entered into this child’s life in response to child protection reports from the community, but its ongoing impact on the child’s life related to his parent’s poverty and inability to afford housing that met the ministry’s standards. They were young First Nations parents who wanted to live close to their family and culture for the benefit of their new baby. The available housing was either well outside of their financial means, or with relatives who were persons of concern or who lived off-reserve.” (p 34)*

## Youth who 'age out'

*"Housing is a huge barrier, employment is a huge barrier, surviving is a huge barrier, alcohol is a huge barrier, mental health, transitioning from youth services to the adult system for sure. Also all of your support systems drop you. Like everything, and good luck. Here's your birth certificate, goodbye".*

*Former youth in care from 2014 RCY report  
On Their Own: Examining the Needs of B.C. Youth as They Leave Government Care*

Considerable international research has been done on youth aging out of government care.<sup>31</sup> It makes clear that for most young people no longer under guardianship of the government or who received government assistance to live independently, the likelihood of poverty is very high. A large number do not graduate from high school and those who end up employed are likely to hold low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement. With little or no money, many end up living on the streets. Findings from this research also indicates that youth aging out of government care and assistance are at risk of mental illness, early pregnancy, incomplete education and insecure housing – all risks that are exacerbated by poverty.

A key point in any discussion about poverty reduction and vulnerable youth is the fact that the costs of not helping youth transition out of care are far higher than the costs of providing adequate support. A 2016 study by the Vancouver Foundation as part of its Fostering Change initiative found that adverse outcomes for teens leaving care cost taxpayers up to \$268 million a year, but by contrast, spending about \$57 million a year to support these youth to age 24 (rather than age 19) would more than pay for itself.<sup>32</sup>

### **Case Study – first published in the 2014 RCY report *On Their Own: Examining the Needs of B.C. Youth as They Leave Government Care***

An 18-year-old youth has been in care since age four. She has lived in multiple placements and reports that in recent years she has been homeless much of the time. She struggles with substance use and acknowledges that she engages in survival sex work to meet her basic needs for shelter and food. She wants to have a plan for placement and drug and alcohol treatment set up now, as she knows that after her 19th birthday she will be cut off MCFD services.

<sup>31</sup> Scannapieco, Maria, Marcella Smith and Amy Blakeney-Strong. "Transitions from Foster Care to Independent Living: Ecological Predictors Associated with Outcomes". *Child Adolescence Social Work Journal* 33 (2016): 293-302.; Graham, Kara., Annie Schellinger and Lisa Vaughn. "Developing Strategies for Positive Change: Transitioning Foster Youth to Adulthood". *Children and Youth Services Review* 54 (2015): 71-79.; Mendes, Philip, Dee Michell and Jacqueline Wilson. "Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care and Access to Higher Education: A Critical Review of the Literature". *Children Australia* 39, no 4 (2014) 243-252.; Rutman, Deborah, Carol Hubberstey, April Barlow and Erinn Brown. "When Youth Age Out of Care - A Report on Baseline Findings". (2005); Mendes, Philip and Pamela Snow. *Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care: International Research, Policy and Practice*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.)

<sup>32</sup> Marvin Shaffer, Lynell Anderson and Allison Nelson. *Opportunities in Transition: An Economic Analysis of Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care in their 20s. Report 2 of 3: The Costs of the Adverse Outcomes*. A report for the Vancouver Foundation (2016).

Most young people in Canada tend to live with their families longer into their adult life than in the past.<sup>33</sup> It is also the norm for young people, when they are able to move away from their family home, to continue to seek and receive the support of their family, both emotional and financial, for years to come. Consistent and healthy familial relationships contribute to young people doing well in their lives. This scenario, however, does not reflect the reality for youth aging out of government care or for youth who receive government funds to live independently before they turn 19. There are two groups of vulnerable youth with whom our Office is most concerned: youth aging out of government care and youth on Youth Agreements.

**Youth aging out of government care:** As of February 2018, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) was the guardian to 1,938 youth between the ages of 15 and 19 in government care.<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> The majority of these youth will stay in government care until they age out. As the de facto parent, government must ensure youth aging out of government care do so in the best possible circumstances. However, for most of these youth, that is often not the case

**Youth with Youth Agreements** On Jan. 31, 2018, there were 635 youth receiving Youth Agreements in B.C. These are youth ages 15 to 18 who, for a variety of reasons, cannot live with their families and need financial assistance to live independently. This group struggles with funding of no more than \$1,000 per month through a Youth Agreement from MCFD until their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>36</sup> These youth are not in government care and do not have family support.

These two groups of youth face a number of options when they turn 19. Most of these options result in them continuing to lead vulnerable lives. One option that they may be eligible for, funded by MCFD, is Agreements with Young Adults (AYA).

**Young people with an Agreement with Young Adults (AYA)** (see Appendix B) from MCFD. Youth who were in government care or who received Youth Agreements until their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday may be eligible to apply for an AYA. Eligibility criteria is restrictive, with the maximum monthly living support currently \$1,000 (the 2018 Budget allows an increase to a maximum monthly \$1,250 for those who prove need, with restrictions).

In 2016, 518 youth aged out of government care and 420 youth aged out of Youth Agreements. Of those two groups combined (938), 884 of them were eligible to apply for an AYA, yet only

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<sup>33</sup> Tencer, Daniel. "Record Number of Canadian Youth Living With Parents As House Prices Rise." *The Huffington Post*, January 8, 2017; Statistics Canada. "Census in Brief: Young Adults Living With Their Parents in Canada in 2016. August 2, 2017." Catalogue no. 98-304-X; Young, Leslie. "More Than One-Third of Young Canadian Adults Live With Their Parents: 2016 Census." *Global News*, August 2, 2017; Harvey J. Krahn. "Quick, uncertain, and delayed adults: timing, sequencing and duration of youth-adult transitions in Canada". *Journal of Youth Studies*, December 29, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> This number excludes youth who do not live with their families and receive government financial assistance to live on their own under Youth Agreements.

<sup>35</sup> MCFD Corporate Data Warehouse Portal. Data Retrieved March 28, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> RCY is in the process of requesting more detailed information on YA budgets from MCFD; currently available information is insufficient/unsatisfactory.

223 applied and received AYA funding. Of the 938, a shocking 43 per cent (404) turned to income assistance – either regular income assistance at \$700 monthly, or disability assistance at \$1,135.<sup>37</sup> The income source of the remainder is unknown – a significant concern.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, none of these sources of income comes close to being adequate for vulnerable youth and young people to meet basic needs, particularly in urban areas.

An important finding in the research is that housing is the most significant factor for the successful outcome of other dimensions of transitioning out of care, such as mental well-being and educational outcomes.<sup>39</sup> And yet securing safe, affordable housing is one of the biggest challenges facing youth aging out of government care or government assistance, particularly in urban areas such as Vancouver, Victoria and Kelowna. Since most of these young people do not have sufficient financial resources or family to lean on for support, the result is the high number of young people who end up homeless.

The pathways to youth homelessness are complex, involving a number of interrelated social elements including poor education, poor health (particularly mental health), childhood trauma, family breakdown, involvement with child welfare and justice systems, and, important to note for this submission, poverty. A Canadian survey on youth homelessness reveals the high percentage of youth who are homeless who have had involvement with child protection services or experienced childhood trauma, abuse, and/or neglect.<sup>40</sup> The B.C. child welfare system provides insufficient support to youth leaving government care, essentially setting them up for a life of poverty. Significant improvements are required to how government supports youth aging out of government care or leaving government financial assistance as well as young people who are, by virtue of their age alone, living a life of poverty.

My Office has talked with youth about to leave government care who have been told they are ineligible for an AYA and are frightened about their future. Other youth we have spoken to have told us they “...do not know how the world works, they just know they have to get a job so they

#### Homelessness and Child Welfare

Homeless youth in Canada are 193 times more likely to have been involved with the child welfare system than the general public. More than 47 per cent of homeless youth indicated in a Canadian survey that they had some kind of involvement with the child welfare system beginning, on average, at eight and a half-years-old. Thirty-eight per cent of youth who had aged out of government care suggested a link between aging out and their subsequent homelessness (see footnote 40 and Appendix C).

<sup>37</sup> These figures represent the increase made in the 2018 provincial Budget.

<sup>38</sup> Data received from MCFD Sept 5, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Dixon, Jo. “Young People Leaving Care”. *Child and Family Social Work* 13 (2008): 207-217.; Stein, Mike. “Resilience and Young People Leaving Care”. *Child Care in Practice* 14, no 1 (2008): 35-44.; Holt, Stephanie and Gloria Kirwan. “The ‘Key’ to Successful Transitions for Young People Leaving Residential Child Care: The Role of the Keyworker”. *Child Care in Practice* 18, no 4 (2012): 371-392.; Hiles, Dominic Hiles et al. “So What Am I? – Multiple Perspectives on Young People’s Experience of Leaving Care” *Children and Youth Services Review* 41 (2014): 1-15.

<sup>40</sup> Naomi Nichols et al. *Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action. Executive Summary*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press (2017).

*do not become homeless.*” These young people do not have the benefit of loving parents or family, or the community and accompanying supports that most of the rest of us take for granted. The recent provincial Budget 2018 funding increase for AYAs acknowledges that this is a population in need of support. However, the increase does not nearly address adequately the actual costs these young people face.

## Summary

The evidence is clear: poverty has a dramatic effect on the well-being of children and youth, with long-term effects following them into adulthood. Strong, healthy children and families are pillars of a strong community and province. For children to grow up healthy, safe and well cared for, they and their families need to have access to B.C.’s wealth and upstream supports. The evidence is also clear that providing these supports in an early and timely fashion reaps financial benefits as well, saving the province millions of dollars in adult supports in the long run.<sup>41</sup>

Children and youth who have, through no fault of their own, been in government care or received government assistance to live independently need and deserve the best possible chance to reach their potential and live well. By addressing poverty and inequality, we can, together, build a wealthier province for everyone, a province in which no one – no child – is left behind. If we succeed in doing that, everyone wins.

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<sup>41</sup> Marvin Shaffer, Lynell Anderson and Allison Nelson. *Opportunities in Transition: An Economic Analysis of Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care in their 20s. Report 2 of 3: The Costs of the Adverse Outcomes.* A report for the Vancouver Foundation (2016).

## Recommendations

Throughout this submission, we have referred to several recommendations that are key to a poverty reduction strategy in B.C. However, there are two pragmatic recommendations our Office would like to highlight that government could promptly put into action.

1. During the development of B.C.'s Poverty Reduction Strategy, in order to ground the strategy in a human rights approach, vulnerable children and youth in B.C. should be consulted to respect their perspectives and their voice, in accordance with the UNCRC. The Strategy, upon completion, should reflect these voices.
2. Improve supports (both financial and services) to youth and young people connected with child welfare:
  - Increase financial and other supports for youth on Youth Agreements
  - Increase financial and other supports for young people on Agreements with Young Adults
    - Reduce restrictions on the eligibility criteria for Agreements for Young Adults
    - Remove the maximum number of months during which young people are eligible to remain on Agreements with Young Adults (currently up to 48 months)
  - Extend the age to which MCFD supports young people as they transition into adulthood (currently age 19)
  - Improve supports and services to youth who have aged out of government care or Youth Agreements
  - Increase the age to which young people who have aged out of care can receive these supports, including financial support beyond the current age of 26
  - Increase the age at which people who have experience with child welfare are eligible for free post-secondary tuition (currently age 26)
  - Reduce the time people need to have been in foster care to be eligible for free post-secondary tuition (currently 24 months)
  - Monitor the youth homeless counts throughout B.C. and develop a youth homelessness strategy.



## Appendix A: Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada

- Four out of five reserves have median incomes that fall below the poverty line in 2015
  - In absolute numbers, of the 367 reserves across the country for which there was data on total individual median incomes in 2015, 297 fell below the poverty line, while just 70 registered median incomes above the poverty line.
  - At the lowest end, 27 reserves reported median total incomes below \$10,000 during the same year
- Press, Jordan. *Over 80% of Reserves Have Median Income Below Poverty Line, Census Data*. Global News, October 10, 2017

## Appendix B: Agreement with Young Adults (AYA)

### Eligible Youth:

- Are at least 19 and not yet 27 years of age
- On their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, are one of the following:
  - In the continuing custody of the Director or permanent custody of the Superintendent of Child and Family Service
  - In the guardianship of the Director of adoption or of the Director under section 51 of the *Infants Act*
  - In a Youth Agreement

### Length of an Agreement:

- AYAs can last for a maximum of 48 months in three or six-month increments

### Purpose of financial support:

- Complete high school, attend a post-secondary educational or vocational training program, attend an approved life skills program or complete a rehabilitative program.
  - A specific course load is required, one that many young people who have been in care or struggled on their own find difficult to maintain, especially if they must work to make ends meet or have not been in the education system for a while.
- Contributes towards covering the costs of living expenses, child care, tuition fees and health care
- Young person must demonstrate need for increase from \$1,000/month to \$1,250/month.

## Appendix C: 2017 Metro Vancouver Youth Homeless Count

- Total number of homeless: 3,605
- 386 identified as youth under the age of 25
- 119 were under the age of 19
- 18 under the age of 19 were in the care of the ministry
- 16 under the age of 19 had previously been in the care of the ministry
- 746 self-identified as Indigenous.

B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association and M. Thomson Consulting. 2017 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver. Prepared for the Metro Vancouver Homelessness Partnering Strategy Community Entity. Burnaby, BC: Metro Vancouver, 2017.

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