



United Way
Greater Victoria

UNITED TO REDUCE POVERTY

CONVERSATION RESULTS

Contact Information

UWC Name: United Way Greater Victoria

Contact Name: Danella Parks, Director Community Investment

Contact Email: danella.parks@uwgv.ca

Conversation Information:

Information was gathered via an anonymous survey. 56 completed surveys were analyzed with the data summarized in the following report.

Introduction and Qualifying Information

Victoria BC is economically and socially, a city of extremes. With a median house cost of \$542,400¹ and the third highest rental costs in Canada², the division between the financially secure and those living on the edge has continued to expand. 13% of Victoria residents are considered low-income and struggle with high food costs, untenable rental costs, lack of housing options (in November, 2016, the vacancy rate in Greater Victoria was 0.5%³), growing utilities charges, and low wages that have failed to adjust to the general rate of inflation in the province.

On the night of February 10, 2016, there were at least 1,387 people experiencing homelessness on the streets of Victoria and of that number, 32.6 % identified as First Nations.⁴ These results indicate that Aboriginal individuals in Greater Victoria experience homelessness at a disproportionate level when compared to non-Aboriginal individuals. With the number of supportive housing facilities not in proportion to the ever rising need, non-profit outreach services in the CRD face increasing pressure to alleviate the crisis.

Within Victoria, ‘poverty’ can be seen as falling into two streams: absolute poverty exhibited in homelessness, lack of any discernable income, and an inability to obtain basic necessities for quality of life. The other form could best be described as relative poverty exemplified by the ‘working poor’ – those who live paycheque to paycheque, earn wages far below the living wage (most recently calculated at \$20.01 per hour, \$9 above the current minimum wage), and must forgo life enhancing activities in order to afford the necessities of life. Last year, nearly 1 in 4 Victoria residents spent half their income on rent alone.⁵

Although these two forms of poverty are distinct, they often overlap. If there is no safety net to fall back upon, being unable to pay rent can lead an individual to eviction and ultimately homelessness if interventions are not provided.

These challenges, combined with a growing mental health, addictions, and most recently, devastating opioid crisis (which claimed the lives of 922 British Columbians last year alone⁶), makes addressing the issue of poverty all the more urgent if solutions are to be found.

¹ <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/victoria-is-least-affordable-smaller-housing-market-in-canada-report-1.8588407>

² Ferreras, Jesse. “Canada’s Most Expensive Cities to Rent Now Include Both Vancouver and Victoria.” *Huff Post British Columbia*. 13 Sept. 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/13/canada-most-expensive-rent-vancouver-victoria_n_11997756.html

³ <http://www.timescolonist.com/business/greater-victoria-housing-market-overvalued-cmhc-says-1.9036616>

⁴ <https://www.crd.bc.ca/docs/default-source/housing-pdf/pitcount-report26apr2016.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.timescolonist.com/business/renters-suffer-in-greater-victoria-s-hot-real-estate-market-1.2265304>

⁶ <http://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/trudeau-talks-legalized-pot-b-c-s-opioid-crisis-during-visit-to-victoria-1.3308272>

2 | UNITED TO REDUCE POVERTY – CONVERSATION RESULTS

The following responses have been solicited through an anonymous survey sent out via email as well as offered in person at the All Candidates Electoral Debate and “Make Poverty Public” event held on April 29, 2017 in Greater Victoria’s Centennial Square. The subsequent replies reflect a range of opinions and suggestions derived from persons of varying economic and social demographics. Respondents include front-line care providers in the social service sector, individuals personally affected by poverty, and those involved in non-profit Board engagement.

The 56 responses are not a curated nor exhaustive research study, but stand as an honest poll, reflecting the feelings and general experiences of those who partook in the questionnaire.

Therefore, the summaries below do not necessarily purport to represent United Way Greater Victoria’s guiding vision but instead draw together the unique voices and perspectives of those who participated.

Topic A

Survey participant’s guiding vision for Canada’s Poverty Reduction Strategy could best be summarized as:

A Canada wherein every citizen has the right and ability to enjoy an adequate standard of living that supports physical, mental, and emotional well-being, human potential, and dignity. In order to thrive, basic needs such as housing (affordability and homelessness), food, health supports, and income disparity must be addressed.

Poverty was predominantly defined by participants as an inability to meet basic needs, a lack of resources that prevent an individual from enjoying a minimum standard of living, and a “helpless cycle of living costs outweighing income and resources.” One participant described poverty as “a lack of support (whether from family, community, or government), a lack of access to basic necessities of life, and absolute depletion of hope and happiness.”

Participants stressed the need for government to do more for the vulnerable within our community and society at large, as non-profit social agencies should not have to shoulder the brunt of social challenges alone. Comments also included an emphasis on shelter as a human right, the importance of a minimum income for all Canadians, and an increase in suitable, professional services for those struggling with mental health challenges and addiction.

What success would look like as per the survey participant’s responses:

Success was predominantly envisioned as a complete eradication of homelessness wherein no person has to spend a night on the streets, vastly improved mental health and addictions supports, a basic or guaranteed income for Canadian citizens, affordable housing complexes, affordable childcare options, and more job growth. It was also put forth that true success would hinge upon the provincial and federal levels of government enacting change that would address income disparity.

Participants outlined suggestions as to how a successful strategy could best be measured/assessed and sustained:

Measurements:

- Use of the Market Basket Measure (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2013002/mbm-mpc-eng.htm>) to assess the income tax reports for number of Canadians who meet that basic threshold.
- Governmental LICO measurements (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2009002/s2-eng.htm>)
- Regular annual census of those living on the most extreme margins of society.
- Stats Canada and other statistics and survey reports.

Assessments:

- Use of tax return information
- Case studies
- Comparison of the living wage of each individual city/town/district and what the average wage is.
- Tracking of individuals and not just numbers; what specific strategies or life events helped those who were previously categorized in a vulnerable demographic and now no longer are.
- Evaluating all that is in place at the moment and the impact that it has; going beyond what is, and reaching out to individuals according to their respective needs; putting in place services that interact together (i.e. strengthening the network of services).

Sustainability:

- Operationalized strategy with sufficient funding to achieve outcomes and goals. Cross-ministerial approach.
- Functioning, long-term strategy, regardless of the political party in power. Make it unbreakable, as it effects basic human rights!
- Incentivizing Canadians to support the non-profit sector.
- Increasing corporate taxes
- Greater work place accommodations for those with mental health challenges.
- Fixed targets tied to adequate health and social transfer payments so that targets can be met. Policy change must require provinces to direct funds to housing and income assistance.
- Sustainable job creation.
- Inter-governmental and multi-sectoral approach.
- Seeking the support of the Tamarack Institute and Vibrant Communities. <http://vibrantcanada.ca/> <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>
- Understanding the realities of the most oppressed as it is crucial to raise the standards for all.
- Directly asking the most vulnerable.

Topic B

Is there a successful local solution that could be adapted and replicated elsewhere:

We received a minimum of Victoria based solutions but the ones that were cited included Ready to Rent – an agency which utilizes an innovative approach in educating at risk tenants and landlords alike, Victoria Cool Aid Society’s employment programs and downtown community centre, the Homelessness Prevention Fund, which offers grants to help keep low-income individuals housed, and the T’Souke First Nation solar energy initiative.

Many respondents tended to look outwards towards Provincial, National, and even International solutions and strategies. These include:

- Quebec’s \$10 a day childcare
- Alberta's FASD 10-Year Strategic Plan (2007 - 2017) - which has been supported by a cross-ministerial leadership team and has a Learning organization as one of 5 key pillars of the strategy.
- Medicine Hat, Alberta’s strategy to guarantee that everyone has a place to live (see <http://www.mhchs.ca/housing-development/the-plan-end-homelessness/>)
- Guaranteed income experiments as are currently being tested in select regions of Ontario as well as in Northern Europe.
- American and European school’s after-school programs that feed every student healthy and nutritious meals, regardless of their family's wealth, so everyone is treated as equals.

Topic C

The top three issues Canada’s PRS must address are:

1. A guaranteed or basic income model to reduce income disparity
2. Affordable housing for individuals and families. Rent control.
3. Mental health and addiction supports – lack of long-term care facilities was cited frequently as a significant barrier to helping individuals overcome addiction challenges and detox.

Other prominent issues included the opioid crisis, better access to affordable and nutritious food, Aboriginal poverty and inclusion (including providing greater access to culturally sensitive Indigenous resources), and more affordable childcare for working parents. Employment was also emphasized – both accessible job training and better opportunities for full-time work.

To effectively reduce poverty, participants stressed that Canada’s PRS must include:

- Guaranteed or basic income for Canadians
- Real mental health and addiction supports
- Living wage implementation
- Affordable housing creation
- Affordable childcare

- Solutions for homelessness that include more shelters, supported housing, rehabilitation, and support for non-profits and front-line social workers.
- Better job preparation and training
- Partnership with First Nations community leaders
- Open dialogue between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in order to gain a deeper understanding of what different demographics feel about the impact of poverty in their community.

The overall focus was upon solutions and not Band-Aids; sensitivity to the issues but firmness in terms of rehabilitation and social assistance qualifiers; less bureaucracy and talk and more action!

Other Topics

The following responses reflect the survey participant’s thoughts about issues they wanted to draw particular attention to or felt they didn’t have an opportunity to express fully through the other questions posed. Where possible, responses were categorized into the four proposed ‘thematic outcomes’ for the Tackling Poverty report (see below).

Overall, the responses reflect a recognition that poverty is not only a financial issue, but also encompasses other less obvious factors such as culture, literacy, health disparities, and social supports –to name a few.

One participant felt that “it is a sore state of affairs that our government systems (on all levels) are almost entirely dependent on non-profits and religious organizations to step in and help its communities. Our current system does nothing to encourage or prevent Canadians from either becoming impoverished or breaking away from poverty. Instead, it relies on good citizens, who entirely depend on donations for continuance of their programs, to support its community. It’s high time that our government help more in lifting the financial burden off non-profits, and intervene into areas that are at high-risk for poverty to provide all the basic necessities of life (food, water, and shelter). Consider: what would happen if non-profits suddenly disappeared one day?”

Opportunity:

- I hope the MP's can answer these important issues!
- Government should do the right thing!
- Thank you for advocating for this important topic
- Canada needs a real poverty reduction plan, and it needs to be effective, realistic and immediate. The end cost to all of us is way higher than the cost to help people now.
- The need to build political will and leverage will that already exists is crucial. Supporting people in poverty and those who are homeless to lobby and fight for their needs is also important.
- Desire to see ACTION

6 | UNITED TO REDUCE POVERTY – CONVERSATION RESULTS

- Community wellness clinics or hubs can also create better and more affordable access to health care
- Community outcomes maps

Inclusion:

a) Access:

- Sometimes it is not that there are not programs available but the people needing them may not have the literacy, access to resources, or ability to follow through long term with what we "functioning members of society" believe is easy for everyone to do if they only tried. Most of us have access to e.g., transportation, banking, medical coverage, technology, etc. that may not be available for many in poverty or they do not know how to access
- Individuals and families not knowing where to go to access supports, and experiencing barriers when they do find the right supports. People find the application processes very difficult and assistance to fill these forms out is not readily available.
- How can a young person like myself to work in a city and have any hope to buy a place or start a family when the living wage is \$20.01 per hour?
- Individuals working and struggling to pay for basic living expenses are not able to afford health needs and thus go without unless a NPO offers subsidized/free dental, eyewear, mental health counselling etc.

b) Focus areas for the plan

- Food security strategies
- Child care
- Homelessness is unacceptable
- Mental health, addictions underfunded
- Lower tuition
- More social housing- Housing First
- Increasing living wage
- Raise the disability rates
- Free healthcare and transitional housing units to move people from shelters to permanent housing

Prosperity:

- Compelling corporate Canada to pay decent wages and to reduce off-shoring of jobs would solve some of the problem.
- Canada is a wealthy country- it is a disgrace that we have so many Canadians living in poverty!!
- Abolish payday loans and rent to own places that feed on the poorest people.
- Create a fairer tax system so that those living on low incomes pay less tax and those who are wealthy, including corporations pay their fair share.

Reconciliation:

- Giving indigenous youth an opportunity to learn and experience their language and culture in school, and allowing other non-indigenous students an opportunity to learn it as well to break down racial barriers.
- “Our organization works with homeless Indigenous People. Many more resources are needed than currently exist to meet their need. For example, stabilizing a person in a home in a way that they are substance free is just the first step. Missing are the cultural resources to aid the person in embracing their deep poverty, that is, the inter-generational violence that impacted them as a child which drove them into addiction and resulted in generational fracturing of their family. For example, aiding a person in accepting that they were 'dumped' into a family after the 'sixties scoop' and separated permanently from their family and culture. For example, aiding a person gain internal force after acknowledging her story of a child rape. Inspiring people to 'parent' adult men and women who were abandoned as children and whose development is functionally stunted. The deep 'work' is one on one, rational, and grounded in connection.”