

# From Disparity to Equity: Initiatives for Child Poverty Reduction in the Greater Vancouver Region

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, high inflation rates in Vancouver have affected many citizens, especially lower-income families where even many children have been driven to poverty. According to the 2022 BC Child Poverty Report Card, 14 out of 26 urban areas in BC had at least 1,000 children living in poverty, with especially large numbers coming from Metro Vancouver (57,500 children) (First Call, 2022). Families at an economic disadvantage cannot provide basic necessities for their children to live a fulfilling life. After a prolonged time, this presents challenges for young individuals as they struggle to access quality education, healthcare, and opportunities for personal and professional development, creating a cycle that can be difficult to break. This review aims to analyze the current problem of youth poverty in Greater Vancouver to determine the various initiatives that should be taken — both by the local community and governing body — to combat this rising issue. From conducting research and analysis, the abundant evidence coming from varying sources shows that there are clear and cohesive ways to help low-income communities and reduce child poverty.

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, Vancouver has grown to be one of Canada's most developed cities. Its natural beauty intertwined with its vast infrastructure makes it an ideal spot to live which is why many families have moved to this city. Nonetheless, the price of maintaining the same quality of life as before has increased dramatically due to various factors. Although many households have been affected, low-income families have been influenced the most with over “10 [to] 63 [%] of Canadians ... worried about the impacts of inflation on food, housing and other expenses” (Al-Hakim, 2023) according to Statistics Canada.

However, their cry for help has not gone unnoticed and solutions have been presented to aid in reducing child poverty. For example, in 2018, B.C. launched its first-ever poverty reduction strategy TogetherBC which aimed to reduce the province's overall poverty rate by 25% and the child poverty rate by 50% by 2024 (gov.bc.ca, 2018). However, after 4 years, the poverty rate in Vancouver, the largest city in B.C., still has not decreased but rather has been slowly sneaking upwards. While initiatives have been taken to aid those in poverty, a more powerful hand must be given to those in need to make a difference in the long run.

Therefore, this review will analyze the main problems faced by youth in poverty in Vancouver today and evaluate the various solutions that can be taken by both citizens and those in higher power to aid underprivileged individuals.

## Child Poverty in B.C.

Poverty manifests in various forms, with absolute and relative poverty being the most common classifications. Absolute poverty denotes a per-person income of approximately \$2 per day, while relative poverty occurs when income falls below 50% of the median income of the population. Situational poverty arises from crises or economic downturns affecting the population temporarily, whereas generational poverty persists across at least two previous family generations. In Vancouver, Canada, these latter forms of poverty are increasingly evident.

Moreover, child poverty, as defined in this report, encompasses children aged 0 to 17 living in impoverished conditions, calculated by dividing the number of children in poverty by the total child population.

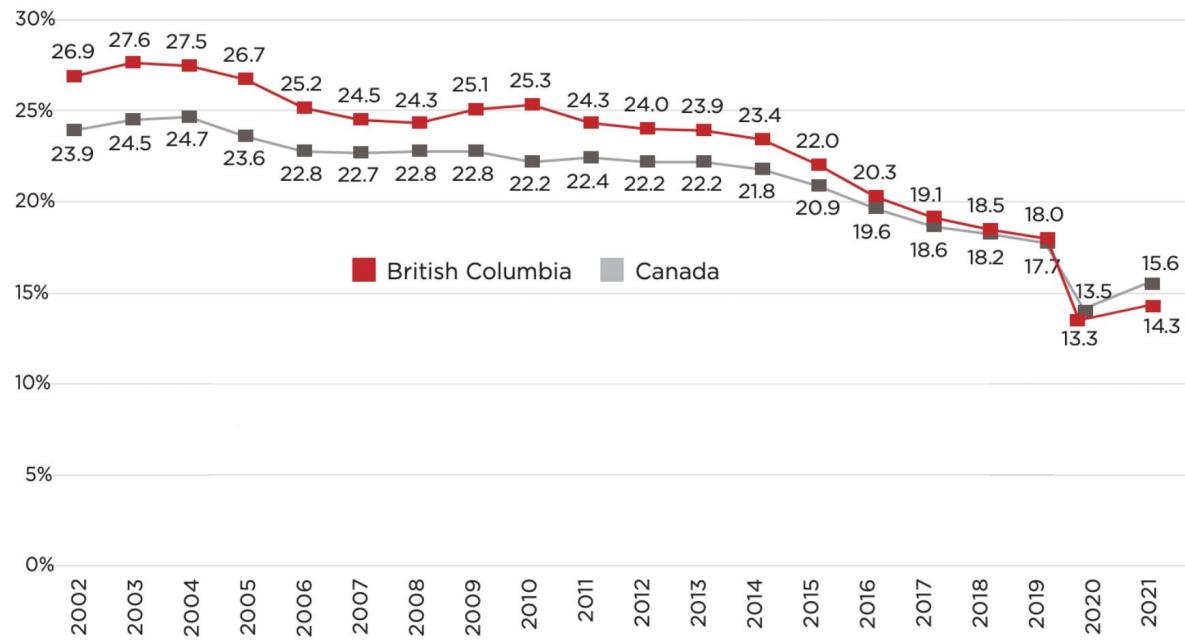
In 1989, the House of Commons unanimously vowed to end child poverty by 2000; however, B.C.'s child poverty rate reached its all-time high in 2003 (First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society, 2023). The journey of eliminating the child poverty gap has not been easy or short. Nonetheless, after the peak in 2003, efforts were made as child poverty began to steadily decline. If that was the case, what caused the recent upsurge? To answer this, it's important to analyze trends to understand the exact timeline of when the poverty rate changed dramatically. This can be further connected to finding the various causes as the changes can be linked to big events in that specified time frame.

### Investigating Shifts in Child Poverty Trends

Important dates to note when discussing the shifts in child poverty rates are 2003 and 2020. Following the Parliament of Canada's decision to eliminate child poverty by 2000, the rate reached its highest ever with approximately 27.6% of the total child population in B.C. in poverty. Afterwards, from 2004 to 2020, the child poverty rate in B.C. and Canada overall declined steadily to reach its lowest recorded rate of 13.5% in 2020 (First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society, 2023). Government efforts attributed to the large decline and many initiatives were taken to ensure that the rate continued to decline.

For example, in 2016, the Government of Canada introduced the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), a progressive, near-universal income transfer that lifts many children from the depths of poverty. By adjusting the benefits according to inflation and poverty reduction targets, the government was capable of creating hope for all children to live in a fairer society (UNICEF Canada, 2023). The decline only accelerated from 2019 to 2020 when Canada was hit by the global COVID-19 pandemic. While those in poverty in other countries suffered an even larger financial crisis, Canadians were given temporary pandemic income benefits known as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) (CBC News, 2024). According to the UNICEF Report Card, this allowed the child poverty rate in Canada to drop more than it's ever had in one year than in the last 20 years.

However, shortly after the pandemic had passed, the benefits for children and families were withdrawn. The lack of government aid alongside high inflation has caused the child poverty rate to once again rise (Owen, 2023). According to the First Call report, without proper initiatives put into place, it is highly likely that progress made to lower poverty rates in 2020 will be completely wiped out by increasing costs.



**Figure 1.** Child poverty rates in Canada and B.C. from 2002 to 2021. Courtesy of Statistics Canada (2023).

### *Aboriginal, Immigrant, And Lone-Parent Children*

In general, the demographic of children in B.C. is very diversified and data points towards the fact that the overall child poverty rate hides the fact that minority groups are more susceptible to falling into poverty than others. According to the 2021 Census data, racialized minority groups had a poverty rate of 13.5% which is much higher than the rate of 9.8% for non-racialized groups. Visible minority groups in B.C. are primarily Arabs, Asians, West Asians, and Latin Americans who all have triple the risk of falling into poverty than other ethnic groups (Statistics Canada, 2021). The data for Vancouver is similar; however, groups can be further narrowed down as the population has different visible marginalized groups. Specifically, those groups are Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and children coming from lone-parent families.

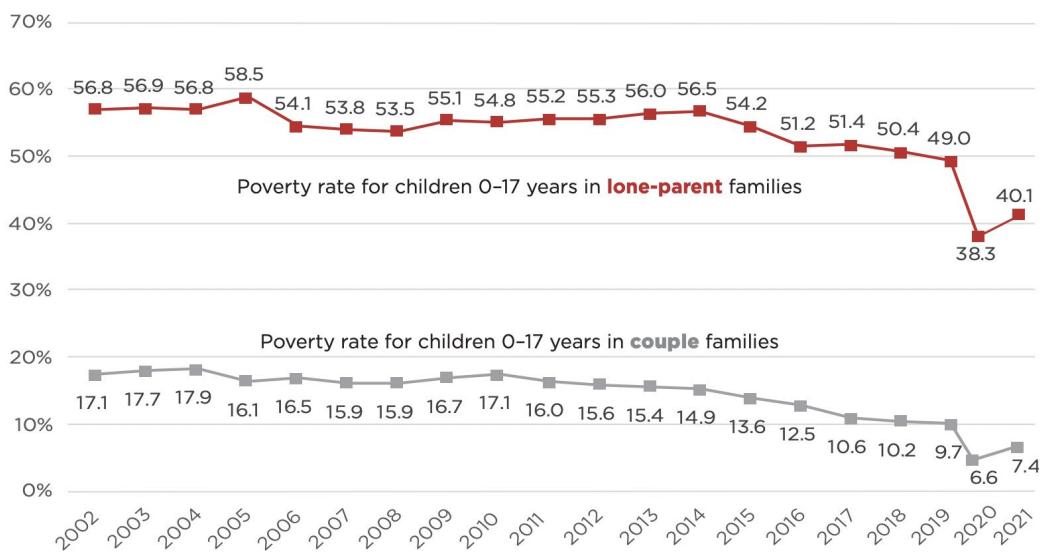
To begin, the city of Vancouver has the third largest urban Indigenous population that is also extremely diverse as it includes First Nation, Metis, and Inuit people across all of Canada (City of Vancouver, n.d.). Specifically, Vancouver is situated on the traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. These three groups descended from a much larger culture called the Coast Salish that make up most of the Indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest Coast. In Canadian history, the country has taken many tactics to eliminate First Nations culture. An illustrative example of this is the Indian Act (1876), which was a set of colonial laws put into place by the Canadian government with the ultimate goal of assimilating their people into Euro-Canadian society (Parrott, 2022). Before its abolishment in 1985, the Aboriginal community changed completely as they were placed into isolated reserves with inadequate housing and contaminated water supplies.

Furthermore, children were taken away from their families and placed into residential schools where they faced years of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. In B.C., there were a total of 18 federally/church-operated residential schools with 5 of them being in Vancouver. The long-lasting trauma faced in these schools impacted generations and has caused families to fall into illegal substance use and alcohol addiction, ultimately affecting the lives of future generations. All these factors gathered together have made Indigenous youth the most susceptible group in 2021 to fall into poverty in B.C. with 31% currently in poverty which is twice as high as the average B.C. child poverty rate (First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society, 2023).



Secondly, immigrant or refugee children are the second highest group currently in poverty in B.C. According to data from the 2023 BC Child Poverty Report Card, since 2020, one in five (21%) of immigrant children face poverty. Immigrant parents typically face unemployment, underemployment, or low-income jobs that are not enough to sustain the family. Moreover, immigrant families face many obstacles such as waiting periods, language barriers and lack of program knowledge to get government aid (DeParle, 2023). As time goes by, without the necessary support, these families fall under the poverty line and basic necessities such as food and shelter become very difficult for parents to provide for their children.

Lastly, children from lone-parent families have significantly higher poverty rates than children from couple families. To illustrate this, the poverty rate for children from lone-parent families is 40.4% which is five and a half times larger than its counterpart which has a poverty rate of only 7.4% (First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society, 2023). Over the last few years, the gap has widened particularly because initiatives have been taken to reduce poverty rates in coupled families, however, not enough attention has been put on lone-parent families. It's important to realize that the latter family type is more vulnerable to poverty as there is only one potential earner for a family of at least one child to support. Therefore, the income of that single adult has to stretch further than in other families (Zon and Aldridge, 2018).



**Figure 2.** The child poverty rate by family type in B.C. from 2002 to 2021. Courtesy of Statistics Canada (2021).

## The Main Causes of Child Poverty in B.C.

There are several causes for the recent uprise in child poverty. The most notable one was the withdrawal of the pandemic benefits which was primarily responsible for the dramatic drop in the rate from 2019 to 2020. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was vital in keeping low-income families afloat during the massive economic shutdown and to prevent the financial crisis of those individuals from falling even deeper under the poverty line. The government provided \$500 a week, the necessary amount to pay for rent and basic necessities, to over nine million employed and self-employed Canadians who were directly affected by the pandemic (Neufeld, 2024). However, in 2021, CERB expired and the child poverty rate is once again slowly creeping upwards. However, while the rate is steadily increasing, the blame cannot be solely put on CERB's removal from citizens. Experts have found that the worsening of child poverty can be more directly correlated to the

Canadian economy not fully recovering after the pandemic. According to the Conference Board of Canada, in April 2020, the Canadian economy had only regained 55% of the jobs lost between February and April, resulting in an overall employment shortfall of over 1.3 million compared to pre-pandemic levels in February. Despite efforts and a gradual economic rebound, many families continue to face challenges, especially with the rising inflation rate.

Moreover, Canadian citizens not only grapple with the cessation of support but also contend with mounting inflation. According to Director of Policy and Research Lisa Wolff at UNICEF Canada, the rise in the cost of living, dueted with the hiked interest rates, has been a major factor in the rise in child poverty in Canada. The combination of these economic pressures has placed significant strain on Canadian families, particularly those already vulnerable or living paycheck to paycheck. As inflation erodes the purchasing power of their incomes, families find it increasingly difficult to afford basic necessities, let alone invest in their children's education or future. Without adequate support systems in place, the cycle of poverty becomes harder to break. As Lisa Wolff emphasizes, addressing these interconnected issues requires a comprehensive approach that considers not only immediate relief measures but also long-term strategies to address systemic inequalities and promote economic stability for all Canadians, especially the most vulnerable among us.

Furthermore, the housing market is currently also a big concern, with skyrocketing prices making it increasingly unattainable for many families to purchase or even rent suitable accommodations. This housing crisis further compounds the challenges faced by low-income families, contributing to the cycle of poverty and inequality in Canada. In fact, according to the 2021 census, of 660,000 total renter households in B.C., more than 105,000 households pay more than 50% of their gross income on rent (Griffiths, 2023). The large portion of income going towards housing makes it difficult for families to fulfill the needs of their kids. Moreover, the escalating cost of housing has even pushed many families to the brink of homelessness, exacerbating the challenges they face. A family's socioeconomic status is the ultimate leading factor in a child's life. It not only affects the family's immediate living conditions but also their children's access to education, healthcare, and opportunities for social mobility, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

## Consequences of Poverty on the Development of Adolescents

The consequences of poverty on the development of adolescents are profound and multifaceted. Economically disadvantaged adolescents often face limited access to quality education, healthcare, and nutritious food, which can hinder their cognitive development and academic achievement. A study by the *Paediatrics & Child Health Journal* found that out of all Canadians, only 31% of youth from the bottom income basket attended postsecondary education while 50.2% in the top income quartile attended one (Ferguson et al., 2007). This provides general evidence that low-income individuals are disadvantaged throughout the education system and changes within school boards across Canada must occur to aid those in need.

Moreover, adolescents from low-income backgrounds may lack access to mentors or role models who can provide guidance and support for their personal and professional aspirations. This absence is often due to limited resources within their communities, where mentorship programs may be scarce or underfunded. According to a Civic Enterprises and Hart Research study from 2014, which included over 1,100 young adults, marginalized kids who have mentors are 55% more likely to enroll in college (Big Brothers Big Sisters, n.d.). This highlights the critical importance of mentorship in bridging the opportunity gap for disadvantaged youth, offering them the guidance and support needed to pursue their educational and career goals despite systemic barriers.

Additionally, growing up in poverty exposes adolescents to increased stressors such as unstable living conditions, family conflict, and community violence, which can contribute to mental health issues like anxiety and depression or even illegal substance use. An example of this in Vancouver is depicted in Indigenous communities where the intergenerational trauma experienced by families often manifests in various forms, such as

high rates of addiction, domestic violence, and mental health struggles, significantly impacting the well-being and resilience of young individuals within these communities. Tragically, these challenges can escalate to the point of suicide, a reality underscored by statistics from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which reveal that First Nations youth face suicide rates five to seven times higher than their non-First Nations peers (Macdonald and Wilson, 2013). Being placed into impoverished environments beyond their control, Indigenous individuals are often left with limited options. When compounded by the trauma they experience, the challenges pile on, pushing them towards unhealthy coping mechanisms and entrenching them further into a vicious cycle that is hard to break.

Overall, the cumulative effects of poverty on adolescents' development can perpetuate cycles of disadvantage and limit their potential for future success. Addressing poverty-related disparities is essential for ensuring holistic well-being and equitable opportunities for all adolescents.

## **Initiatives/Solutions That Can Be Taken to Reduce the Wealth-Poverty Gap**

With the rise in child poverty in Vancouver, B.C., and all of Canada, it is clear that initiatives must be taken as soon as possible to stop it from getting out of hand. In particular, reducing the poverty and socio-economic gap is vital as it not only improves the quality of life for affected children and their families but also contributes to building a more equitable and prosperous society for all citizens. Various solutions are explored in this review and they are specifically split into two types based on their size: small, location-based efforts and larger, federal interventions.

### **Small, Location-Based Efforts**

Small-scale initiatives are pivotal in addressing the multifaceted challenges of child poverty and supporting underprivileged youth. Location-based non-profits focusing on donating to charities that aid child poverty and underprivileged youth serve as critical pillars in local communities. By targeting specific geographic areas, these organizations can channel resources effectively to address the unique needs and challenges faced by families and children in those regions. An illustrative example of this is the Harvest Project which is an organization that operates with a mission to provide essential support to individuals and families facing poverty and homelessness in the North Shore area of Vancouver. Through a range of services including food provision, clothing assistance, counselling, and job training programs, the Harvest Project aims to address the immediate needs of vulnerable populations while also empowering them to break free from the cycle of poverty in the long term (The Harvest Project, n.d.). What sets the Harvest Project apart is its focus on the specific geographic area of the North Shore. By targeting this region, the organization can tailor its resources and support services to meet the unique needs and challenges faced by families and children in the community. Their localized approach enables them to provide targeted support, ranging from essential needs assistance to educational and extracurricular opportunities, thereby making a tangible difference in the lives of disadvantaged youth.

In addition, the municipal and provincial governments can also play a part in aiding the reduction of child poverty in Vancouver. Specifically, by prioritizing access to affordable childcare and increasing financial assistance programs as they are proven to be fundamental strategies in combating child poverty. For example, from 2019 to 2020, both provincial and federal benefits were introduced in Canada and B.C. saw a drastic decrease of 40,600 children living in poverty (First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society, 2022). Affordable childcare options alleviate financial burdens on families, enabling parents to pursue employment or education opportunities while promoting early childhood development. Simultaneously, enhanced financial assistance programs provide essential support and resources to families and children in need, empowering them to overcome socioeconomic barriers and achieve long-term stability and success.

## Federal Intervention

In order for real and dramatic progress to occur, larger initiatives that are particularly controlled by the Canadian Federal Government are necessary. An integral component is leveraging and improving existing mechanisms such as the Canada Workers Benefit (CWB) and Canada Child Benefit (CCB) programs to provide crucial financial support to vulnerable populations.

The CWB is a refundable tax credit designed to supplement the earnings of low-income individuals and families, effectively boosting their disposable income and reducing the prevalence of poverty. By incentivizing workforce participation and rewarding employment, the CWB not only alleviates financial strain but also promotes economic self-sufficiency and upward mobility. However, errors in the administration of the CWB can lead to significant challenges for eligible individuals and families. Incorrect benefit calculations or processing delays can result in financial instability and hardship, hindering the ability of households to cover essential expenses and plan for the future. Moreover, these errors may disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, exacerbating existing inequalities and barriers to economic mobility. To address these issues and ensure that the CWB effectively supports those in need, modification must be considered to expand the program's framework and design. This involves streamlining application processes, enhancing outreach efforts to ensure accessibility for all eligible individuals, and adjusting benefit levels to account for provincial variations in living costs (Koebel and Pohler, 2019).

Similarly, the CCB provides financial assistance to families with children, offsetting the costs associated with childcare, education, and other child-related expenses. Yet, according to recent figures in 2021, 1 in 5 children living in food insecure households indicated that not enough support was being given by the benefit to the people (Men et al., 2023). This underscores the imperative that if the program fails to effectively alleviate poverty, it necessitates improvement. Furthermore, according to Employment and Social Development Canada, the federal government estimates that merely 88% of the 4,056,060 families qualified for the CCB received it when it was first introduced in 2016 (Pentland, 2020). This raises concerns as researchers believe the most vulnerable families were those left out. This hypothesis is made on the basis that those who are highly marginalized, such as First Nations, or vulnerable immigrants might not have the necessary means or knowledge of the advantage. Therefore, implementing improvements such as increasing the publicization of the CCB and altering the technical design of the benefit is crucial to maximize its impact. The former includes offering easily accessible resources and supportive services to assist families in navigating the application procedure which guarantees to a certain measure that most eligible families are informed about and capable of accessing the CCB. The second half includes considering adjustments to the CCB's design to better target vulnerable populations and address gaps in coverage (Li and Neborak, 2019).

By expanding and enhancing these tax credit programs within the broader poverty reduction strategy, the Canadian government can ensure that vulnerable populations, including Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and lone-parent families, receive the necessary support to overcome economic barriers and achieve greater financial stability and well-being. It must be noted that more thorough research must be conducted to fully understand and ensure the improvements in the following programs will directly benefit lower-income families and therefore improve the child poverty rate in Vancouver.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this review evaluates various initiatives that can be taken to support and reduce child poverty in the Greater Vancouver region. Born into an economically disadvantaged family, children under the poverty line face challenges that they hardly have any control over and must endure the consequences that affect their long-term development. To properly improve the poverty rates in different communities located in Vancouver, it's vital to first do more research on the varying causes that push children into poverty. From this, efficient solutions

can be tailored to aid the specific demographic in that particular area. By incorporating these initiatives in Vancouver, a better understanding of how it may positively affect the population can be obtained and with more analysis, it is possible to expand these initiatives to use in other cities of B.C. or provinces of Canada. However, more research on the limitations of the initiatives must be further studied before implementing them on a larger scale to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability in addressing child poverty across diverse communities. This will provide further evidence and proof that the solutions addressed in this paper are viable and will drastically change child poverty in Vancouver.

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