



# Calgary, Alberta

## *“What We Heard”* Community

### Conversation Summary

February 22, 2023

CAMPAIGN **2000**  
END CHILD & FAMILY POVERTY

**POVERTY!**  
**TALKS!**

 vibrant  
COMMUNITIES  
CALGARY

## Introduction

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Below, we've summarized the main themes of the community conversation in Calgary, Alberta with seven working parents/single working parents with lived experience of poverty.

The conversation was hosted by *Poverty Talks!* and *Vibrant Communities Calgary* in partnership with *Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty*.

This summary is in four sections based on the topics of discussion. Main themes with related content and quotes are presented for each topic. The conversation content will be further analyzed over the next year, alongside content from other conversations across the country, to help create a community-driven indicator framework and recommendations for action.

This summary was created after sending a draft to the participants and host organizations to see if these points sounded right, offer an opportunity for corrections or clarification, and ensure that they had the chance to hold and use this information as soon as possible. This finalized version (May 2023) reflects the feedback we received, and the content will be further analyzed over the next year with attention to that feedback. Thanks to everyone who participated and responded!

We've tried to be true to the content and emotion of the conversation, which touched on the sensitive and difficult topics of experiencing poverty and discrimination, and that may come through in what's presented here.

Since this is a 'What We Heard' summary, we have listened to what participants shared and reflected that back here. With that in mind, there may be content presented here that does not align with Campaign 2000's values or platform.

A major theme that emerged was the exclusionary nature of the poverty line. Working parents and single working parents who can't make ends meet are being excluded from the narrow definition of 'low income' because they are technically above the poverty line, resulting in limited access to benefits, programs and supports. Participants described a cycle that they can't get out of, leading to feelings of desperation and hopelessness, despite being told that working should provide enough income to better their situation. Participants recommended that the government urgently expand eligibility for low income benefits and supports.

## **A community with no poverty has...**

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### **Joy, hope, and the ability to thrive**

- Everybody would be happy with no stress and no struggling
- Kids would be playing
- Rainbows, sunshine, flowers, dancing, music
- Holistic wellness
- Thriving, not surviving
- Opportunities to explore all your talents and the same for your children
- Diverse communities, different languages
- Hope

### **Support**

- Communities that get together
- It would be judgment-free, supportive, and accepting
- Having someone to turn to: "Each person will have a support, a supportive person, whether it be a friend [or] somebody close to them that they can turn to... Just having that available person where if you need to talk about anything, you can just get on the phone and you know they'll be there for you."
- No need for programs – neighbours and families would share and live in community

### **Barrier-free opportunities, services, and supports**

- Accessible education for all
- Access to transit for everyone, no matter their circumstances
- More jobs
- No homelessness
- No addiction

## **Living in Calgary as working/single working parents and experiences of poverty**

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### **Being left behind by narrow definitions of low income**

- Many participants described being not technically within the government's definition of low income, so they are unable to access any of the supports for folks in that definition. Despite being technically above the poverty line, their income is so low and their costs are so high, especially for housing, that they are unable to make ends meet and have no way to move out of the cycle.
- People are being made to feel like it's their own fault and they should be able to work harder to exit the cycle, but it's impossible.

- Example: A single parent with two children and no family in the area, who is working, with no access to low-income supports or assistance, and is just barely above the line. In this situation they found it was hard to justify even going to work, because if they stay home and don't work, they could access benefits and take care of their children.
- Feeling desperate: "Where does it end? Because it's getting worse by the day. We're getting more desperate by the day... people have lost compassion, because they think we're lazy. When you work full time, and you have no time to yourself, how are you lazy? I can't access any education to educate myself out of this because I can't afford to. Who has money for education?"
- Education is touted as a way out, but feels impossible: "You want to go to school to get higher education, but you don't want to go into debt for student loan because you ...have five kids to look after."
- Gendered aspects of parents' income, especially for single mothers whose co-parent is a man – the men earn higher incomes and government looks at the combined income, even if husband doesn't adequately support wife: "They say [to the mom], OK, you get the child support, so why don't you pay this, this and this? But his earning is high."
  - Can also result in abuse of the mother – the government needs to analyze situations in more detail, on a case by case basis, "for those families where the husband doesn't support the family."

### Hopelessness

- Cyclical feeling of not enough money and no way to get out of the situation: "it's round and round you go."
- Can lead to higher suicide rates, feeling hopelessness: "Where you are hanging by the thread, sometimes it crosses your mind, why am I here, right? If all this bad is going to happen and why I am here?"

### Barriers to benefits, services, and supports

- Expanding on the point above – not fitting the government's definition of low income leads to being excluded from benefits and supports for people on low incomes.
  - Example of exclusion from benefits: "Last year, that COVID benefit for the people who sent their kids to daycare. I was working full time. But I was working from home, my child was home because I was working full time. Why should I choose to send my child to daycare? Guess what I don't qualify for the benefit. I took care of my child. So that was the purpose to help the parents who take care of the child. I did that. Why you don't want to help a single mom, which I am, taking care of a child."
  - Barriers to supports, like dental care: "With broken teeth in my mouth, and broken teeth in my son's mouth, I'm too rich. It's heartbreaking. The doors

getting smacked in your face every time. And that's where I'm at, I don't have access to any supports, but I need them."

- Other barriers for working parents/single working parents in Calgary and Alberta
  - No high schools in the Northeast
  - Not enough access to food in the Northeast
  - Rural settings don't have enough shelters or transportation, and it's difficult to access supports
  - Limited mental health supports in rural communities, especially for children – have to travel to access that support
  - People exiting incarceration don't receive supports or access to shelter. They often don't have knowledge of the community, being transferred to Calgary from elsewhere. Can result in re-offense: "They're turning around and they're going back to the same behaviour rather than being set up for that success."

### High cost of living

- Bill companies in the province are running up charges far higher than usage
- Inflation – cost of everything, including groceries, is very high

### Having to choose between parenting and work

- Single parents have limited options for employment since it has to be during the day, so that daycare/school is available
- Parents, especially single parents, have to make impossible choices: "You have to choose, should I stay home? Or should I go work? How I'm going to pay that bill, if I stay home, you know? If I don't, who's going to take care of my child? If I don't want to work, how am I going to put him in childcare?... If I go work, how can I be that parent who makes time for the child? So how many times I've had those days where I'm like, I'm not being a good parent, just because I have to pay bills."
- Hard to ensure you're providing the basics for kids, like activities that provide physical activity, especially for single parents: "How do you make time let alone the finances?" There isn't support for parents, or ways to make it accessible for parents who don't have the time or resources.
- Any compounding factors make situation even more challenging, e.g. a child with a disability, or children in care: "That becomes a hard process too because now you're paying for court," or for transportation to see them and be able to have a relationship with them.

### Barriers to accessing housing

- Overall lack of housing, especially low-income housing
- It's become standard practice to demand a credit rating, even though the government says not to share this with others. "People in poverty don't have credit, or they have bad credit. One of the two. How do we get housing?"

- Criminal record is a barrier to housing, because of limited employment options
- Exploitative rental market, no rent caps
  - Landlords and property managers benefiting from rental market: “They’ve created this as a job so they can become rich off your back”
  - “How do we ever get out from under that, when that's what's allowed to take place? Like you can't really get out from under that. So, the rich are literally getting richer and the division, of course, getting bigger by the day, because there's no control over it. And they're allowed to do whatever they want. ... again, in this province especially, there's zero cap, there's zero restriction.”
- Homelessness and shelters
  - Prejudice and assumptions against people experiencing homelessness – “You ask people to better themselves and help themselves out of the situation but then there's no bathroom even to clean themselves or use to use a washroom”
  - Lack of supports in the shelters – “I was not asked, why are you here? What are your goals? I was not given a list of landlords, a package to the city...” Not having anyone to turn to.
  - Nothing to do in the shelters, not enough programming

### Barriers to community

- No time for community: “A lot of us are missing the time to actually gain a community. Like, I've lived here for years. But friends, I have not. I have no time to meet people. I have no money to go meet people. If I met someone on mums group on Facebook, want to go for coffee, I don't drive, I don't have money for coffee. I don't have money for bus fare. And I, again, don't qualify for a free one”
- Especially because many people come to the city looking for work – no family or existing connections

### Barriers to health care

- Major barriers with health care and tax systems – one mistake 15 years ago is still having major impacts on a family’s benefits and repayments: “We're living dollar to dollar and always have been like, because of that mistake for the last 15 years”
- Dental care in particular – huge impact when you don’t qualify. Such high cost and big health impact when you can’t access.
- Chronic illnesses, health care, major cost barriers. “[My partner is] supposed to be on this biologic shot, \$5,000 a month. No, I'm not joking. It took four years to finally get an advocate to get compassionate care. But in those four years, he had his fifth [major surgery] and is now needing a sixth. That medicine should have been available the day he needed it. And without that kind of barrier... that meant he had no available medicine, and had to just live suffer and decline health even further. So, he at the

moment is now a home waiting another operation and can't help with finances to our home. And so that barrier has pushed us further into poverty. And I'm not unique."

- Other examples like diabetes, chronic health issues where you can't live if you don't have access to medicine, but you can't pay for it.

## What is working in your community?

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### Education, volunteering, and peer support

- Doing school courses and helping friends do the same
- Volunteering for the zoo – match you with someone working at the zoo, could lead into a job
- Running a peer support group for single moms – didn't find what they needed, started it themselves

### Friendship

- Find a friend to become your family – who support each other and each others' children. Help get some time alone, help with childcare.

### Services available

- The food bank has stopped asking how much money you have – sense of more trust now
- Food bank set-up that's like shopping in a store, choose what you eat, choose food that suits your actual needs and preferences
- Shelters and community hubs opening doors in winter for people to take showers – providing that dignity

## Actions that the government needs to take are...

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### Urgent change

- Urgent change is needed to address desperate situations: "It's beyond hurt. Hurt was so far back. I wish it was hard. But it's desperate. The government needs to hear that, it's desperate, it's not hard. Not asking for easy, asking for some sort of hope for a future for my life, for my child."
- Action around inflation: "The government needs to do something. Like no one will be able to survive at this rate that all the prices and inflation rate is going."

## Expand or add nuance to definition of low income

- Examine more closely and adjust government definition of what low income is: "I am technically not in low income. So I can't get dental for myself, my son. I can't access any of the communal supports. But my housing, because they don't have a rental cap in this province, is eating up 65 percent of my income. How am I supposed to ever see a future for my son, let alone myself? That is my reality, has been since I was born because it was my parents' reality. It has to change at the top."
- Flexibility for benefits
  - Need to be less stringent, have more leeway, because every situation is different – read the situation
  - "More resources need to either be more open to looking at your specifics, your specifics, not what fits in their little lines they've already put there for you."

## Improve access to housing

- Create interest-free loan for low-income families so they can buy a house
- Look into landlords demanding credit rating and history
- Shelters should be asking questions about goals, connections, mental health, next steps when people come through their doors. Giving people access to computers, more advocates, list of landlords in the area.
- More affordable housing. Expand access to mortgages and home ownership: "If I can pay rent, why can't I pay the mortgage?"

## Improve access to food

- More access to food in the Northeast
- More neighbourhood pantries in community hubs
- Create a policy that prohibits throwing out leftover food from stores/businesses – ensure it has to be donated to the food bank or elsewhere so that people who need it can access it.

## More services and supports for people living on low incomes

- Cell phone programs for people living in shelters/unsheltered
- Access to public washrooms for people experiencing homelessness
- Childcare support in the evening, so that single parents can choose jobs that have shifts in the evening if they need to
- Credit forgiveness programs to help people build credit
- More funding and support opportunities for peer support groups, like the one run by participants for single moms – "we don't get any grants, because you're not registered because it's too costly." Expand criteria and accessibility.
- Improve access to life-saving health care and medicine.



## Accountability and compassion from people in power

- Accountability for those with power, whether in schools or the government – holding those accountable in their own organizations/institutions
- Change in attitude and approach. Have faith that a person coming to you really needs your help. “We need inclusion.”
- Show compassion to citizens

## Community-centred approaches to poverty reduction

- Community understandings of poverty: “We should all be asking people; how do you personally observe poverty? What's in your own backyard?”
- Listen to the voices of the people – send people out into the communities so that government policy and work actually reflects what people want and need. Work together regardless of party affiliation to achieve shared goals.
- More opportunities for community members to share knowledge and advocate for their needs. Learn from each other and exchange information.
- Learn from others’ successes: “Take the strengths of the other countries. What's working well in your country, what's working in your country? Build upon it. You know, take it back to your own country. This is what's working well.”