



Understanding the Impacts of and Finding
Community Solutions to Poverty in Lethbridge

LOW INCOME IN LETHBRIDGE: A PROFILE

“YOU’RE TRYING TO GO UP A WATERFALL”: A REPORT

POVERTY ROUNDTABLE REPORT

Vibrant Lethbridge

Community and Social Development

City of Lethbridge | February 2015

“We envision a city in which all individuals, families, and communities have opportunities for healthy development leading to social well-being.”

-City of Lethbridge Social Policy, 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR	4
SECTION I: Low Income in Lethbridge: A Profile	5
SECTION II: “You’re Trying to go up a Waterfall”: A Report	21
SECTION III: Community Agency Consultation and Recommendations	39

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR



The mandate of Vibrant Lethbridge, an initiative of the City of Lethbridge Community and Social Development Committee, is to elevate the profile of poverty in Lethbridge, engage multi-sectoral partners and identify community assets and systemic/programmatic

interventions that could strengthen the community's response to poverty related issues.

Vibrant Lethbridge actively engages with people in our community who has lived experience and may be affected by the strategies we recommend. This serves to ensure we are building support within the community based on the needs and assets. Vibrant Lethbridge has ready access to an advisory group that can facilitate and support future proposed strategies and provide opportunities for collaborative approaches to reducing the effects of poverty in Lethbridge.

Vibrant Lethbridge engages a broad and diverse group of organizations; business sector and community leaders promoting a collaborative planning process to help integrate community efforts to address poverty in Lethbridge.

The development of this report combining the Low-Income in Lethbridge- A Profile and You're Trying To Go Up A Waterfall are two of Vibrant Lethbridge's strategic goals for 2013/14. The purpose of these reports are to glean an understanding of the overall community profile of poverty as well as the individual experiences of poverty in Lethbridge from people who have lived experience with the effects of poverty. The community based research required for the Waterfall Report took over six months and a considerable number of volunteer hours to coordinate and execute and we are grateful for their

dedication and perseverance to complete. We are most grateful to the people who participated in the focus groups; for their trust, openness, courage and willingness to tell their stories. This research along with input from community agencies, will inform the development of bold new steps to reduce the impact of poverty experienced by Lethbridge citizens.

The Low-Income in Lethbridge- A Profile identifies Lethbridge as having the highest level of child poverty in the province with 1 in 5 children affected. This is clearly an incentive for continued advocacy for preventative and supportive programs that help families create financially sustainable living environments. This report added a new section this year highlighting a living wage specifically for Lethbridge. Living Wage is the amount of income an individual or family requires to meet their basic needs, to maintain a safe, decent standard of living in their communities, to save for future needs and goals and to devote quality time to friends, family and community (VCC, 2012). This calculation does not include special dietary needs, savings for retirement, hobbies, pet ownership, or entertainment.

When people live in persistent financial distress, the whole community pays in increased costs to the health care, education, social services and criminal justice systems as well as impacting our local economy in lower spending on goods and services. Sustained poverty reduction will improve the quality of life for all members of our community, in particular our children, and provide for a healthy and sustainable future.

I look forward to the next phases of this important work together.

Sincerely,
Renae Barlow

Chair, Vibrant Lethbridge Sub-committee
Chair, Community and Social Development Committee

For more information about our committee, please visit our website at www.vibrantlethbridge.com

SECTION I: LOW-INCOME IN LETHBRIDGE: A PROFILE

NOTE: Low income measurement in this report has been changed from use of LICO to LIM.

LETHBRIDGE QUICK FACTS

(using data from 2011, unless otherwise specified)

- Compared to other Alberta cities, Lethbridge has the second highest low-income rate, next to Medicine Hat.
- Living with a low-income is the reality for:
 - 12.0% of the total population
 - 1 in 5 children; the highest child poverty rate in Alberta
 - 31.7% of single-parent families (calculated for Lethbridge Region)
 - 24.5% of the total urban Aboriginal population
- 6.4% unemployment rate (June 2014 Lethbridge Region unemployment rate was 4.6%)
- A single individual at the current minimum wage will have to work more than 40 hours per week to reach the Low-Income Measure
- In 2013, 992 food hamper recipients were first time users
- Each month, over 1,100 food hampers are distributed
- Although the number of people relying on Food Banks is decreasing, in 2013 there is 27.6% increase in use among the indigenous population.
- There is a considerable increase in waitlists for access to affordable housing. Over 1000 households living with low incomes are in need of housing

StatsCan 2011 and local data sources

HOW IS LOW-INCOME MEASURED?

There is no official poverty line for Canada. In its absence, governments and non-governmental organizations use several different indicators to estimate poverty levels. The most commonly used are low income cut-offs (LICOs); Low Income Measures (LIM); and Market Basket Measure (MBM), each giving similar results.

Many of these indicators are said to measure "low income" as opposed to poverty. In the absence of an official poverty line, the National Council of Welfare, and many others, considers these low income indicators to be useful ways of examining poverty in Canada (National Council of Welfare, 2009).

While the first two lines were developed by Statistics Canada, the MBM is based on concepts developed by Human Resources and Skill Development Canada. Although these measures differ from one another, they give a generally consistent picture of low income status over time. None of these measures is the best; each contributes its own perspective and its own strengths to the study of low income so that cumulatively, the three provide a better understanding of the phenomenon of low income as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2013a).

LOW-INCOME CUT-OFF

- The low income cut-offs (LICOs) are income thresholds below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income to the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family (Statistics Canada, 2013a).
- According to the most recent base for LICOs, the 1992 Family Expenditures Survey, the average family spent 43% of its after-tax income on food, shelter and clothing (Statistics Canada, 2013a).
- Vary based on different family and community sizes.
- As defined by LICO, people living in low income spend at least 20% more of their income than the average household on basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter (HRDC, 2008).
- The low-income gap measures how far below the low-income cut-offs the income of a family is (HRDC, 2013).

Low-Income Cut-offs (1992 base) after tax Population 30,000 to 99,000		
Family Unit	Low-Income Cut-off 2006	Low-Income Cut-off 2011
4 persons	27,741	30,487

Source: Statistics Canada, 2013a

LOW-INCOME MEASURE

- The Low Income Measure (LIM) is based on one-half (50%) of median family income, adjusted for family size. A family with an income below this level is considered to live in low income (National Council of Welfare, 2009).
- It is an international measure used to compare poverty rates in different countries around the world. (Statistics Canada, 2013a).
- It does not require updating using an inflation index because they are calculated using an annual survey of household income, both derived and applied using a single income survey (Statistics Canada, 2013a).

- Unlike LICOs, they are the same in all parts of the country. This means they do not reflect the different costs of living across the country (National Council of Welfare, 2009).

Low-Income Measure (after tax)		
Family Unit	LIM-AT 2006	LIM-AT 2011
1 person	16,789	19,930
2 persons	23,504	27,902
3 persons	29,044	34,479
4 persons	33,578	39,860
5 persons	37,607	44,643
6 persons	41,133	48,828

Source: Statistics Canada, 2013; and Statistics Canada, 2009

MARKET BASKET MEASURE

- The Market Basket Measure (MBM) is based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living. It includes the costs of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter and other expenses for a reference family of two adults aged 25 to 49 and two children aged 9 and 13 (Statistics Canada, 2013a)
- The MBM thresholds are calculated as the cost of purchasing the following items (Statistics Canada, 2013a):

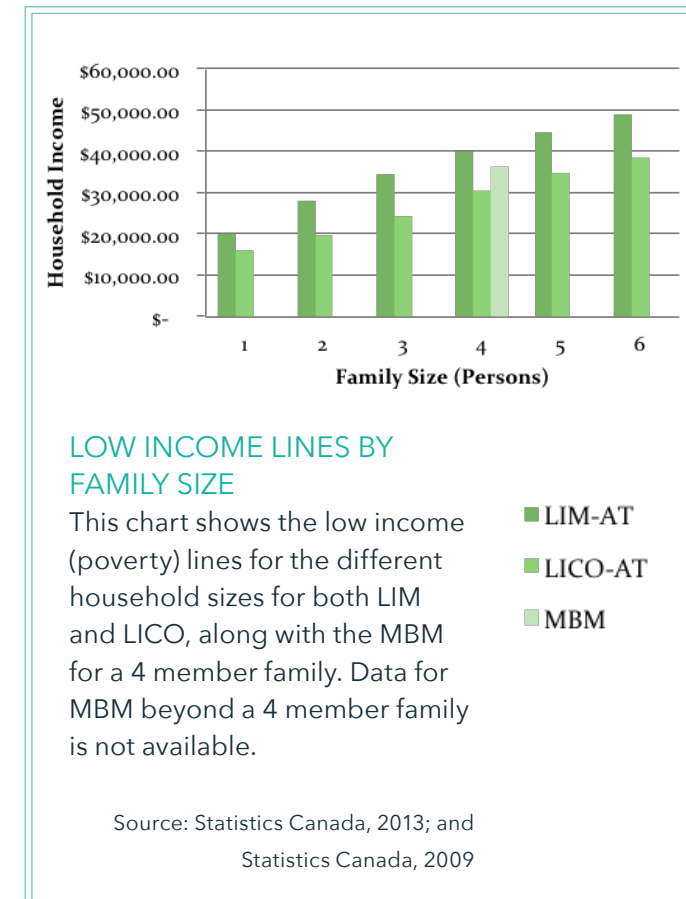
- A nutritious diet as specified in the 2008 National Nutritious Food Basket.
- A basket of clothing and footwear required by a family of two adults and two children.
- Shelter cost as the median cost of a two- or three-bedroom units including electricity, heat, water and appliances.
- Transportation costs, using public transit where available or costs associated with owning and operating a modest vehicle where public transit is not available.
- Other necessary goods and services.

The **Market Basket Measure** threshold (2011-base) for reference family of two adults and two children in an Alberta city with a population between 30,000 and 100,000 in the year 2011 is:

\$32,242

MEASURING LOW-INCOME

In previous publications of this report LICOs were used as the measurement tool. However, due to a change in low-income reporting from the new use of the National Housing Survey (NHS), this report will use after tax Low-Income Measure (LIM-AT) unless otherwise noted.



While many low income measures, including the LICO, are well suited to the analysis of trends in low income, the after-tax Low Income Measure (LIM-AT) is better suited to the analysis of low income in the NHS because the threshold level of income below which one is considered to have low income is itself derived from the households that responded to the survey (Statistics Canada, 2013a).

More national and provincial reports are using the LIM-AT to measure low income. The decision to discontinue use of the Low Income Cut-off is in part because, since 1992, LICO has only been updated for inflation and not other changes in the expenditures of Canadian families. Statistics Canada has no plans to update LICO, whereas LIM is updated every year (Campaign 2000, 2012).

HOW DOES LETHBRIDGE MEASURE UP?

THE INCIDENCE OF LOW-INCOME

- The Lethbridge population in 2011 was 81,390 (Statistics Canada, 2013e)
 - The 2014 population is 93,004 (City of Lethbridge, 2014).
- Compared to other Alberta cities, Lethbridge has the second highest low-income rate.
 - It remains among the highest in Alberta while other cities, namely Calgary and Edmonton, have moved down in ranking.
- There are more children (less than 18 years) than adults (18+ years), in low-income (Statistics Canada, 2013e).
 - 14.6% of the child population of Lethbridge experience low-income while adults is 12.4%
 - 19.2% of children less than 6 years old experience low-income.

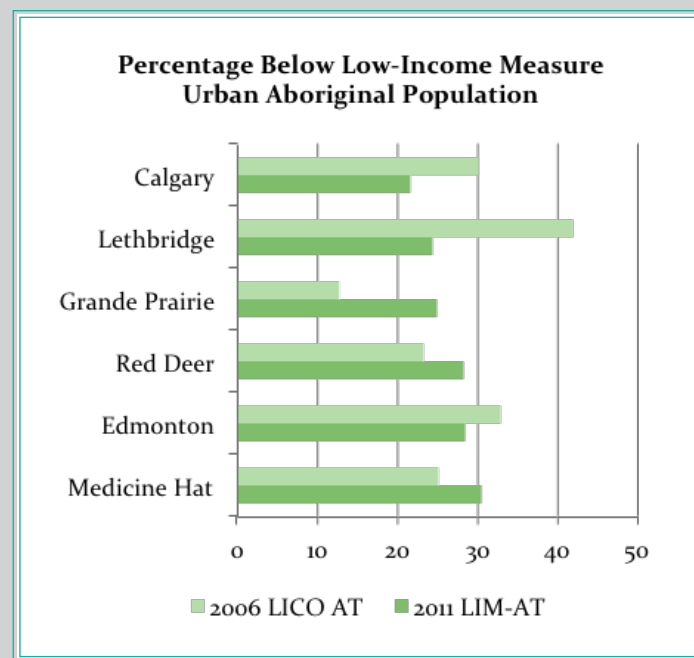
City	*Those living in Low Income		% of Total Population	
	2006 (LCIO)	2011 (LIM-AT)	2006 (LCIO)	2011 (LIM-AT)
Medicine Hat	6,410	7,675	11.2	13.1
Lethbridge	10,900	9,745	13.4	12.0
Red Deer	9,190	10,330	12.6	11.6
Calgary	138,700	118,325	14.2	10.9
Edmonton	127,010	122,195	17.6	10.8
Grand Prairie	4,055	5,580	8.7	10.3

Source: Statistics Canada, 2013c

* The measures in 2006 and 2011 differ due to the shift from the use of the long form to the voluntary National Housing Survey (NHS). The NHS uses LIM-AT to measure low-income instead of the LICO, as used in previous reporting.

LOW-INCOME AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

- The Lethbridge Aboriginal population was 3,770 in 2011, a slight increase in urban population since 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2013d).
- In 2011, 24.5% of the total Lethbridge Aboriginal population lived under the Low-Income Measure (Statistics Canada, 2013d). This is:
- A significant reduction in low-income rate since 2006.
- The 5th highest rate of low-income among urban Aboriginal people in any Alberta City; a decrease from the 1st highest in 2006.
- An accurate count of the decrease cannot be made due to two different measurements being used (LICO-AT, 2006 and LIM-AT 2011)
- In general terms, children (under 18 years) were experiencing low-income to a greater degree than that of adults (18+ years). However, the aboriginal population children and adults are relatively the same in rating.
- Young (under 18 years) females experience low-income (23.9%) far greater than males (17.8%), while it is adult males that experience low-income greater than females (Statistics Canada, 2013d).



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013b

VITALITY OF LETHBRIDGE AND AREA

The following are statistics collected by Vital Signs (2014), a Community Foundations initiative, reflecting the latest data collected for Southwestern Alberta in the year 2012, figures based on LIM:

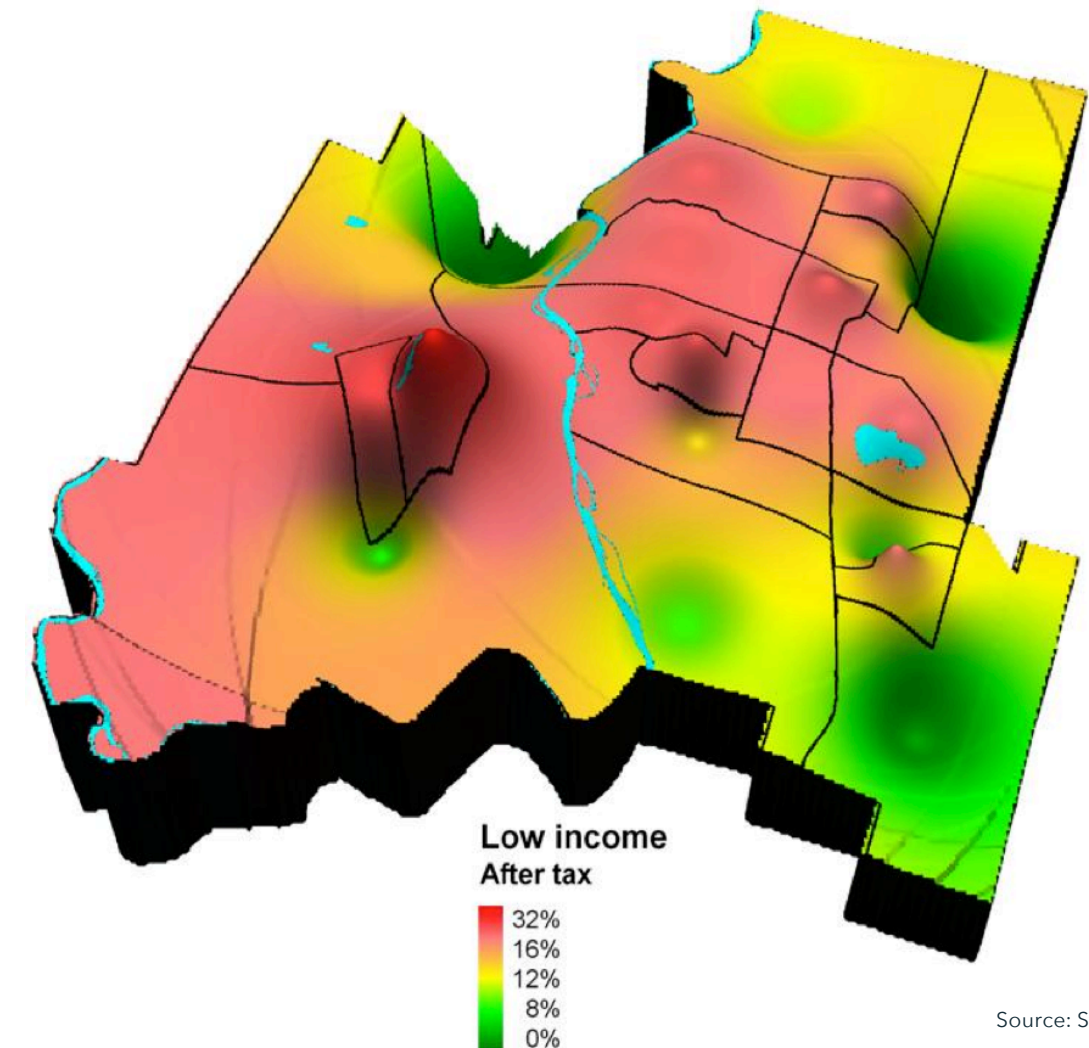
- The overall poverty rate in the Lethbridge Region was 13.0%, down 2.0 percentage points from 15.0% in 2008, and down 3.1 percentage points from 16.1 per cent in 2011. The 2012 figure was 23.6 % below the national average (17.0%), and 6.5% above the provincial average (12.2%).
- The child poverty rate in the Lethbridge Region was 19.1%, down 3.2 percentage points from 22.3% in 2008, and down 2.7 percentage points from 21.8% in 2011. The 2012 figure was equal to the national average, and 18.5% above the provincial average (16.1%).
- The elderly poverty rate in the Lethbridge Region was 1.8%, equal to the rate in 2008, and down 0.2 percentage points from 2.0% in 2011. The 2012 figure was 69.2% below the national average (5.8%), and 58.4% below the provincial average (4.3%).
- The poverty rate of single-parent families in the Lethbridge Region based on the LIM, was 31.8%, up 0.9 percentage points from 30.9% in 2008, and up 0.1 percentage points from 31.7% in 2011. The 2012 figure was 1.3% lower than the national average (32.2%), and 3.2% higher than the provincial average (30.8%).

“The cost of living is rising and the entry level position wage has not caught up.”

- CFLSA, 2013

POVERTY STATUS IN LETHBRIDGE

In 2006 Statistics Canada mapped out low-income (after tax) in Lethbridge. Although this map is outdated it provides a picture of what low-income looks like, geographically, in Lethbridge. According to this map, low-income exists primarily in the neighbourhood of Varsity Village on the west side and parts of London Road (south) Westminster and Park Meadows (north) neighbourhoods on the north side.



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006

LIVING ABOVE THE LOW-INCOME MEASURE

How much does a person need to earn to live above the Low-Income Measure (LIM)?

Comparison of Hourly Wage to Low-Income Measure (LIM)					
Hourly Wage	*Full-Time Income	LIM one person	LIM two persons	LIM three persons	LIM four persons
\$9.00	\$18,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$10.00	\$20,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$11.00	\$22,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$12.00	\$24,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$13.00	\$26,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$14.00	\$28,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$15.00	\$30,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$16.00	\$32,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860
\$17.00	\$34,000	\$19,930	\$27,902	\$34,479	\$39,860

HOURLY WAGES

Minimum wage in Alberta is currently \$9.95, raised from \$9.75, September 2012 and \$9.40, September 2011 (Alberta Government, 2014d).

- Alberta is ranked 10th (lowest minimum wage) out of all the provinces, with a before tax ranking.
- The after tax ranking places Alberta 2nd overall.

The minimum wage will be raised to \$10.20 September 1, 2014 (Alberta Government, 2014d).

To earn an income over the Low-Income Measure (based on 2011 stats):

- Single individuals must work full-time at \$9.97 per hour.
- A lone parent with two children must work full-time at \$17.24 per hour.

12% of Lethbridge residents lived below the Low-Income Measure in 2011

LETHBRIDGE HOUSEHOLD AND INDIVIDUAL INCOMES

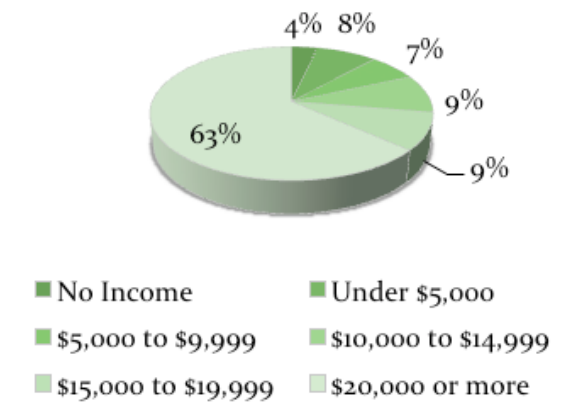
Family household annual income (after tax):

- 1,405 had income under \$10,000
- 2,385 had income between \$10,000 and \$19,999

Individuals annual income (after tax):

- 2,370 without income (3.5% of individuals 15+ years)
- 10,030 had income under \$10,000 (15.3% of individuals with income)
- 12,370 had income between \$10,000 and \$19,999 (18.9% of individual with income)
- 24,770 (36.6%) of individuals earn under \$20,000 income, after tax.

Individual Incomes (after tax) in Lethbridge

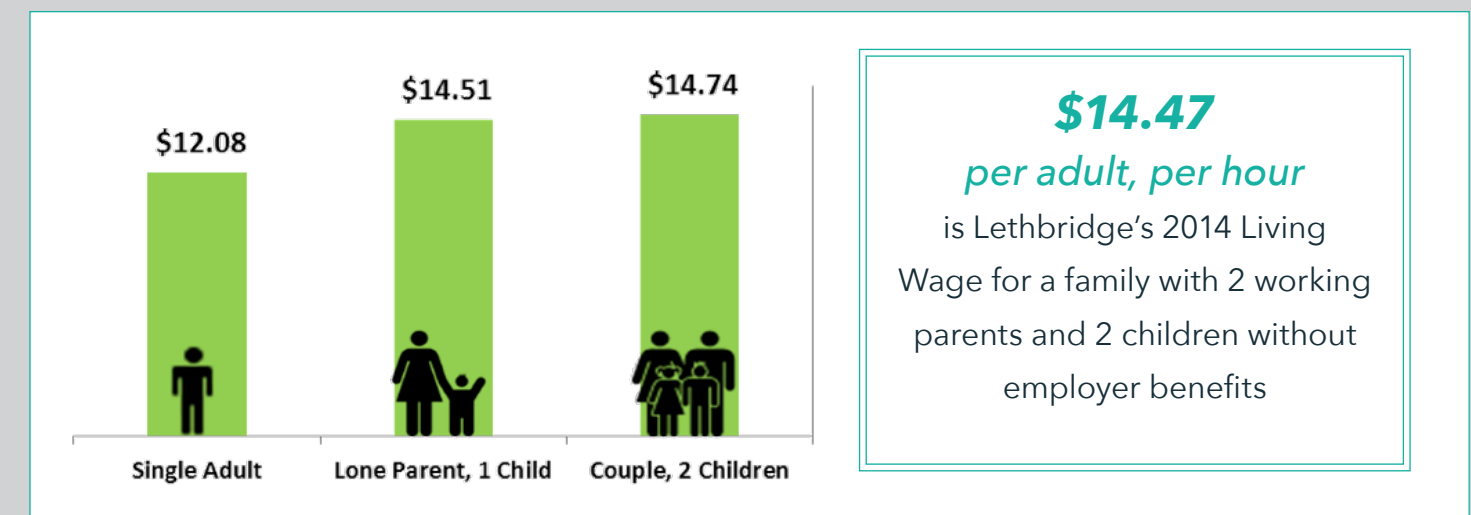


LIVING WAGE

This is a new section of the report, essential to fully understanding poverty in our community.

Living Wage is the amount of income an individual or family requires to meet their basic needs, to maintain a safe, decent standard of living in their communities, to save for future needs and goals and to devote quality time to friends, family and community (VCC, 2012).

A living wage is not the same as the minimum wage. A living wage reflects what earners in a family need to bring home based on the actual costs of living in a specific community (Living Wage Canada, 2013). It is calculated as the hourly rate at which a household can meet its basic needs, once government transfers have been added to the family's income and deductions have been subtracted.



A LIVING WAGE:

- enables working families to have sufficient income to cover reasonable costs
- promotes social inclusion
- supports healthy child development principles
- ensures that families are not under severe financial stress
- is a conservative, reasonable estimate
- engenders significant and wide ranging community support
- is a vehicle for promoting the benefits of social programs such as childcare




LIVING WAGE BENEFITS:

- Community
 - Poverty reduction
 - Enhanced community pride
 - Stimulation of local spending
- Businesses
 - Increased productivity
 - Improved customer satisfaction
 - Decreased internal shoplifting
 - Decreased staff turnover
 - Improved corporate image
- Employees
 - Improved health
 - Better quality of life

M. Haener Consulting Services, 2014

CALCULATING LETHBRIDGE'S LIVING WAGE

Lethbridge's Living Wage estimates have been calculated using the Canadian Living Wage Framework which was released by Vibrant Communities Canada in 2014.

CALCULATION METHOD - Living Wage is the hourly wage rate that allows this formula to balance:	
Annual Family Expenses = Employment Income + Income from Government Transfers - Taxes	
REFERENCE HOUSEHOLDS	
 Couple, 2 children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female parent age 34 & male parent age 36, both working fulltime • 1 female child age 4 & 1 male child age 7
 Lone parent, 1 child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single Mom age 31 works fulltime • 1 male child age 5
 Single adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male age 25 works fulltime
ANNUAL FAMILY EXPENSES	
Budget Inclusions: Special dietary needs • Owning a home • Credit card, loan or other debt/interest payments • Savings for retirement • Parking • RRSP, RESP, or RDSP contributions • Costs of caring disabled, seriously ill, or elderly family members • Hobbies • Pet ownership • Alcohol or tobacco costs • Personal life or disability insurance • Remittances to family members living abroad	

ANNUAL FAMILY EXPENSES

This chart shows the annual expenses used in the calculation.

Note that spending on child care accounts for the greatest amount of the couple family's budget.

The lone parent family and the single adult spend more on shelter costs than any other budget component.



The CLWF recommends that the number of hours used to reflect a full-time work week in a Living Wage calculation is determined based on what typically reflects full-time hours in the province/territory. Statistics Canada data indicates that working 40 hours or more per week is typical of Albertans employed fulltime; therefore a 40 hour work week is used in the calculation.

MEETING NEEDS

How many people's basic needs are met through government assistance and community services?

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

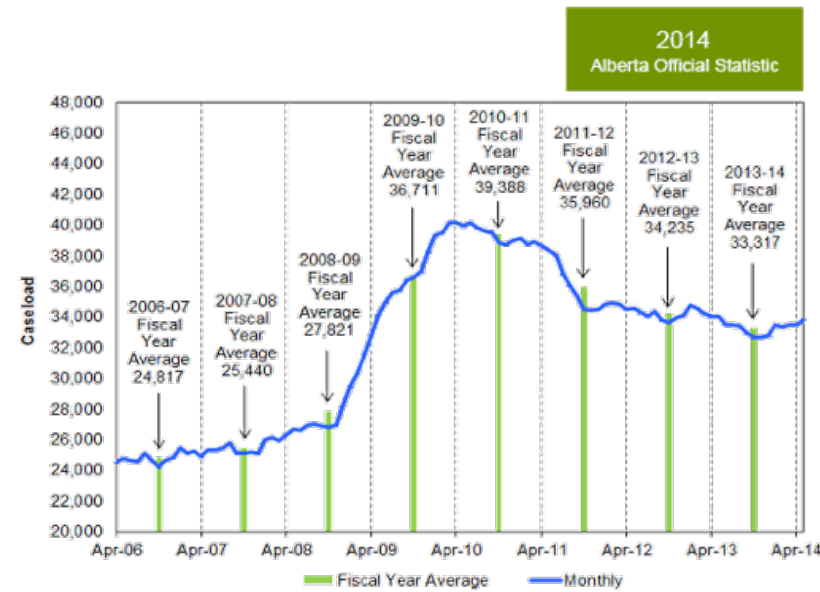
AISH

- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) provides financial, supplementary, and health related assistance to adults with permanent disabilities that limit their ability to earn a livelihood.
- AISH currently provides \$1,588 per month maximum monthly living allowance to qualified individuals (AISH, 2012).
- At the maximum AISH support of \$1,588 per month, an individual receives an income 5% below the LIM.
 - To earn over the Low-Income Measure an individual must have an income of \$1,660 per month.

In 2013, approximately
3,193
 Lethbridge residents
 were receiving AISH

INCOME SUPPORT ALBERTA (IS)

- Provides financial benefits to individuals and families in Alberta who do not have the resources to meet their basic needs, including food, clothing, and shelter.
- In May 2014, the IS caseload was composed of single individuals (66.0%), lone-parent families (27.9%), couples with children (3.8%) and couples without children (2.3%).
- Albertans who were expected to work (ETW) represented 48.7% of the IS caseload in May 2014. Of the ETW caseload, 14.8% were working, 36.3% were not working and 48.9% were temporarily unavailable for work.
- *Specific Lethbridge data not available*



ALBERTA AND LETHBRIDGE REGION EMPLOYMENT/UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

- In 2011 the Lethbridge unemployment rate was 6.4% (Statistics Canada, 2013e).
- In 2013, Alberta had the highest employment rate and participation rate in Canada, and Alberta's unemployment rate of 4.6% was lower than the national average by 2.5 percentage points and was the second lowest in Canada, (Alberta Government, 2014a).
- In 2013, the Lethbridge Region had the largest decline in its labour force of 3.1% (Alberta Government, 2014a).
- In June 2014, the Lethbridge Regions unemployment rate was 4.6%, on par with the provincial rate (Statistics Canada, 2014).
- Historically the Lethbridge region has had some of the lowest unemployment rates in the province and the nation (CMHC, 2014).

COMMUNITY SERVICES: FOOD

LETHBRIDGE SOUP KITCHEN

- On average, 85 persons are served each day at their facility. As well, the Soup Kitchen supplies on average 12 liters of soup every evening to the Emergency Shelter (4,248 liters in 2013).
- The Soup Kitchen used to provide soup to the Streets Alive, but this program no longer exists.
- There has been a decrease in soup prepared and meals served since 2010.

LETHBRIDGE FOOD BANK

- A total of 6,471 food hampers were provided to Lethbridge residents in 2013.
- 8,102 adults and 6,001 children were served by the Lethbridge Food Bank in 2013.
- In 2013, 560 food hamper recipients were first time users, a 19.6% decrease from 2012.
- An average of 540 hampers distributed per month.

INTERFAITH FOOD BANK

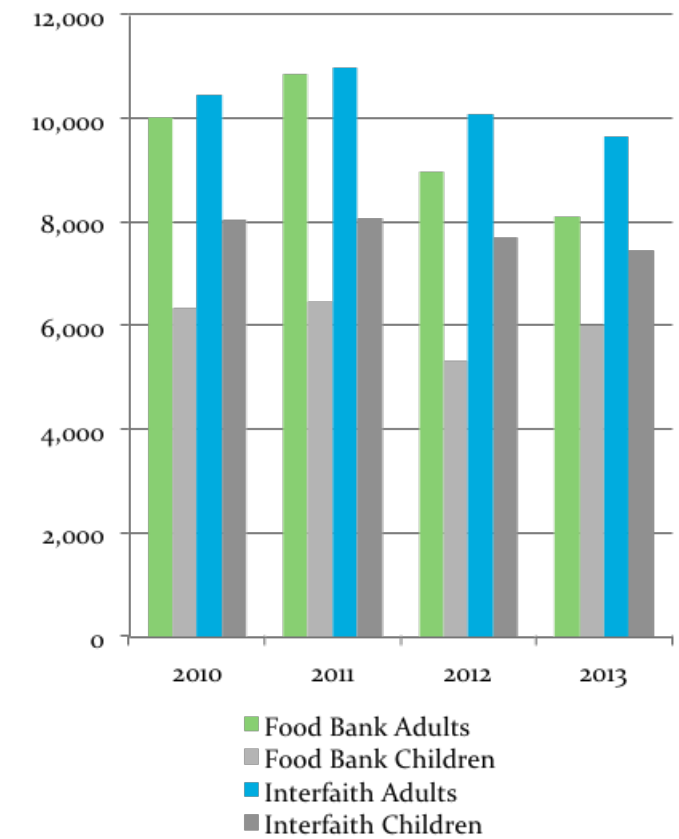
- In 2013, 6,928 food hampers were provided to assist 9,655 Adults and 7,455 Children in Lethbridge.
- In 2013, 432 food hamper recipients were first time users.
- An average of 577 hampers are distributed every month.

MONTHLY BREAKDOWN OF FOOD BANK USERS IN MARCH 2013:

- 555 children (under 18), 778 adults (18+ yrs) and 26 seniors (65+ yrs).
- 85 immigrants / 215 Aboriginal People (18+ yrs)
- 40 post-secondary students.
- There has been a significant increase in use by our Aboriginal population (27.63% of clientele).
- There has also been an increase in clients reporting they received employment income, suggesting an increase in people not receiving sufficient income to provide the necessities of life
 - This occurred during a simultaneous decrease of people reporting using social assistance.

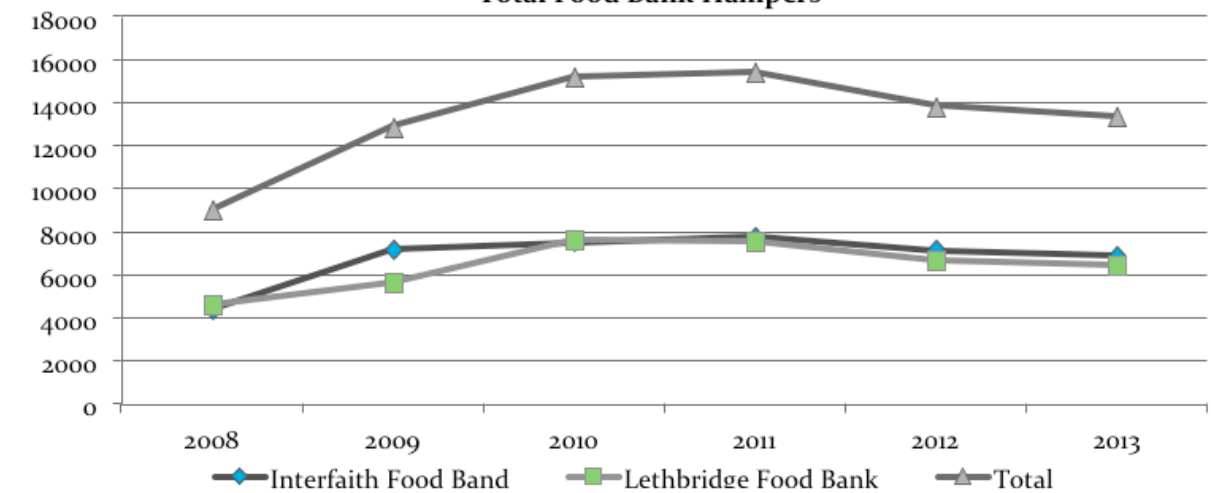
There has been an increase in food bank use until 2011 when a steady decrease started to occur.

Total Number of Adults and Children Served by the Food Banks



QUICK FACT:
On a yearly basis, the Lethbridge Soup Kitchen serves over 26,500 meals

Total Food Bank Hampers



COMMUNITY SERVICES: HOUSING

EMERGENCY YOUTH SHELTER

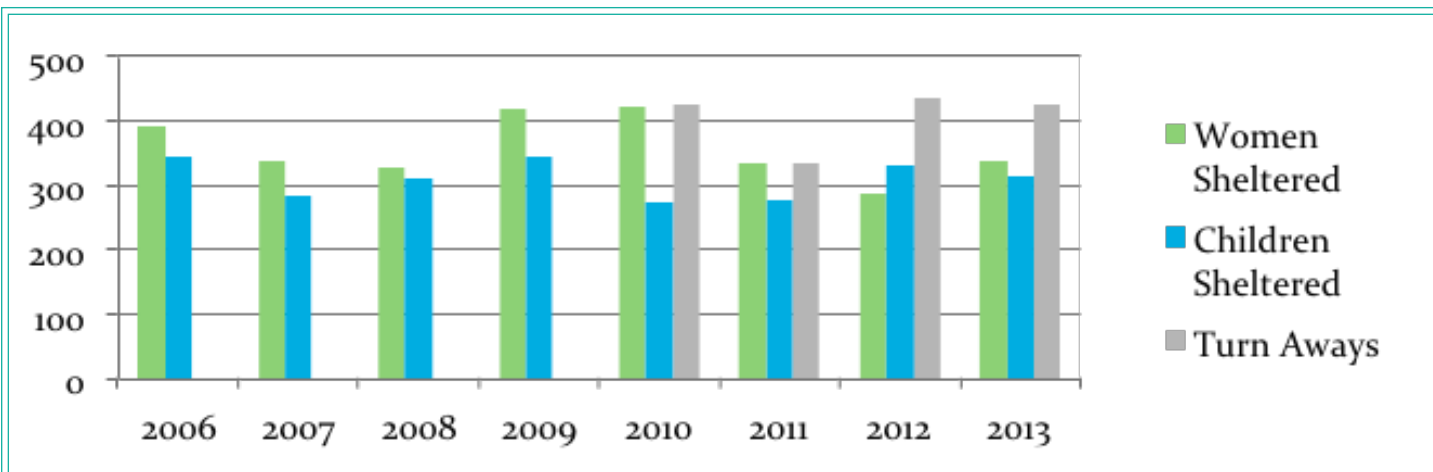
- Based on data collected from April 2012 to March 2013:
- 97 youth slept at the shelter
- 52 (54%) youth referred due to conflict with family/caregiver
- 172 Admissions and discharges
- Average length of stay was 15 days
- Total occupancy for the year was 51%

LETHBRIDGE EMERGENCY SHELTER

- An average of 75 people per night stayed at the Lethbridge Emergency Shelter, with a total of 25,373 occupants in 2012.
- An average of 78 people per night stayed at the Lethbridge Emergency Shelter with a total of 28,385 occupants in 2013.

YWCA HARBOUR HOUSE

- While 652 women and children were sheltered between April 2013 and March 2014, 425 women and children had to be turned away due to a lack of space.



TREATY 7 URBAN INDIAN HOUSING AUTHORITY

- Averages 20 to 30 vacancies per year from 2011 to 2013.
- Households on the waiting list:
 - 15 for 2 bedroom units
 - 18 for 3 bedroom units
 - 8 for 4 bedroom units
- Most common housing is 2 and 3 bedroom units
- There has been an increase in the waitlist, due to families moving into the city for education and/or employment and because of poor housing on-reserve or overcrowding.

LETHBRIDGE HOUSING AUTHORITY

- In December 2012, 526 individuals or families were waiting for housing assistance through Lethbridge Housing Authority:
 - 281 units in Community Housing, with 105 on the waiting list.
 - 403 units in Seniors Self-Contained Housing, with 19 on the waiting list.
 - 614 households receiving Rental Supplements through Lethbridge Housing Authority, with 402 on the waiting list.
- In December 2013, 498 individuals or families were waiting for housing assistance through Lethbridge Housing Authority:
 - 288 units in Community Housing.
 - 398 units in Seniors Self-Contained Housing.
 - The Lethbridge & Region Community Housing Corporation (L&RCHC) as 116 Affordable Housing units.
- Mar 2014 waiting list breakdown:
 - 126 units for Community Housing.
 - 33 units for Seniors Self-Contained Housing.
 - 377 to Rent Supplement.
 - 29 units for Affordable Housing.
- In April 2014, 702 households receiving Rental Supplements through Lethbridge Housing Authority.

- sector to innovate and collaborate when resolving challenging social issues.
- An increase of more than \$1 billion in spending for health, education, post-secondary and support for vulnerable Albertans.
- Continued investment in homeless support programs to help house about 2,000 homeless Albertans this year, as well as fund over 3,200 spaces in emergency/transitional shelters.
- Alberta is also increasing the capacity of women's emergency shelters by adding \$3.8 million, bringing total investment to almost \$33 million.
- Focus of investment to support low-income seniors through various benefits, an increase of more than 6% in Alberta Seniors Benefits from last year.
- \$1.1 billion for the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, including \$192 million for AISH health benefits.
- Investing \$703 million in programs that help underemployed and unemployed people find and keep jobs, and help eligible Albertans cover their basic costs of living.
- Investing \$288 million for child care programs, an increase of more than 6%.
- Investing \$6.5 billion in our Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system.

Source: Alberta Government, 2014c

ALBERTA BUDGET AND POVERTY

Future impacts on poverty in Lethbridge based on 2014-2015 Alberta Government budget:

- Operating expenses increased by 3.7 per cent in the 2014 budget. This is less than population plus inflation (five per cent), but higher than what it was in last year's budget.
- Increase in the operational budget of the Ministry of Human Services by more than 5% from last year (\$4.1 billion to be spent this year).
- The Social Innovation Endowment was established to bring more capacity to the social service and culture

Although the Alberta Government's budget has returned to an operational surplus, Momentum (2014) says it is difficult to see any real progress on poverty reduction in the budget and is concerned by the lack of support for Alberta's most vulnerable people.

ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF LOW-INCOME

How is the City of Lethbridge addressing the impact of persons living with a low-income?



ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR AGENCIES THAT PROVIDE UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE PREVENTION/EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS:

Family Centre
Meals on Wheels
Lethbridge Seniors Centre
Nord-Bridge Seniors Centre
Lethbridge Family Services
Big Brothers & Sisters
Boys & Girls Club

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:

Youth HUB
Vibrant Lethbridge
Seniors Community Forum
Bringing Lethbridge Home - SHIA
Aboriginal Opportunities Initiative
Community Substance Abuse Response Team
Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination (CMARD)
Prevention of Family Violence,
Elder Abuse & Sexual Assault

COMMUNITY SUPPORT/SUBSIDIZED PROGRAMS FOR LOW-INCOME INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES:

Go-Friendly
Access-a-Ride

Counseling Services
Home Supports for Seniors
YWCA Neighborhood Play Programs
Family Life Education
Making Connections
Meals on Wheels

FOOD SECURITY:

Community Kitchens
Lethbridge Soup Kitchen
Lethbridge Food Bank
Interfaith Food Bank

HOUSING SUPPORT:

HomeBase
Rent Supplement Program
Intensive Case Management Services
Affordable Housing and Homelessness Policy
Lethbridge Housing Authority
Habitat for Humanity

AFFORDABLE & EMERGENCY HOUSING:

Emergency Shelter
Community Outreach
Habitat for Humanity
Affordable Housing Policy
Supportive Housing & Outreach
Woods Homes Emergency Youth Shelter
Transportation to Detox and Treatment
Aboriginal Housing First Team
Youth Housing First Team
Mobile Urban Street Team
YWCA Hestia Homes
YWCA Residence

INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES:

Community LINKS
Recreation & Culture Guide
"Getting Connected" Booklets
Youth Directory

RESOURCES

Alberta Government. (2014a). 2013 annual Alberta regional labour market review. <http://work.alberta.ca/documents/annual-alberta-regional-labour-market-review.pdf>

Alberta Government. (2014b). Budget Highlights. <http://alberta.ca/budget-highlights.cfm#albertans>

Alberta Government. (2014c). Income support caseload, Alberta. Retrieved from <https://osi.alberta.ca/osi-content/Pages/OfficialStatistic.aspx?ipid=879>

Alberta Government, (2014d). Minimum wage. Retrieved from <http://work.alberta.ca/employment-standards/minimum-wage.html>

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH). (2012). AISH facts. Retrieved from <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/aish-tipsheet-facts.pdf>

Campaign 2000. (2012). Achieving the promise: Ending poverty in Alberta. Retrieved from <http://www.campaign2000.ca/reportCards/provincial/Alberta/2012ReportCardAB.pdf>

City of Lethbridge. (2014). 2014 census results. Retrieved from <http://www.lethbridge.ca/NewsCentre/Pages/Census-Results-2014.aspx>

CMHC. (2014). City of Lethbridge: Employment. Retrieved from http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/co/buho/seca/le/le_003.cfm

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). (2008, October). Low Income in Canada: 2000-2006 Using the Market Basket Measure. Retrieved from http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2009/rhdcc-hrscd/HS28-49-2008E.pdf

National Council Welfare. (2009). Poverty profile 2007: Methodology, definitions and information sources. Retrieved from http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/communities/reports/poverty_profile/2007.shtml
M. Haener Consulting Services. (2014). 2014 Grande Prairie Living Wage.

Momentum. (2014, Mar 7). No progress on poverty reduction evident in Alberta budget. Retrieved from <http://www.momentum.org/node/1127>

SHIA. (2007). Homelessness in Lethbridge. Retrieved from <http://www.socialhousing.ca/page.cfm?pgID=55>

Statistics Canada. (2007). Lethbridge, Alberta: 2006 Community Profiles. 2006 Census. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-591/index.cfm?Lang=E>

Statistics Canada. (2009). Income research paper series: Low income cut-offs for 2008, and low income measures for 2007. Ottawa, ON: Ministry of Industry. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2009002/tbl/tbl-1-eng.htm>

Statistics Canada. (2013a). Income research paper series: Low income lines, 2011-2012. Ottawa, ON: Ministry of Industry. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2013002-eng.htm>

Statistics Canada. (2013b). National Household Survey (NHS) Aboriginal Population Profile, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

Statistics Canada. (2013c). National Household Survey (NHS) Profile, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

Statistics Canada. (2013d). Lethbridge, CY, Alberta: National Household Survey (NHS) Aboriginal Population Profile. 2011 National Household Survey. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/details/page>.

LOW-INCOME IN LETHBRIDGE: A PROFILE

Published by: Community and Social Development,
City of Lethbridge - 2014

SECTION II:

“YOU’RE TRYING TO GO UP A WATERFALL”: A PROFILE

“Poverty is when you’ve got the weight of society pushing you down and you’re way down there, and it’s kind of hard to go back up because you’re trying to go up a waterfall, right? ...Once you are impoverished, it is very hard to get out. It’s like the mafia...you never get out, right?”

- Focus Group Participant

Authors:

Trina Filan, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Lethbridge, Department of Women and Gender Studies
 John Usher, Ph.D., Professor, University of Lethbridge, Faculty of Management
 Hoda Ghadirian, B. Ed. , Sub-committee leader and volunteer

Niche Focus Group Sub-Committee:

Hoda Ghadirian, B.Ed., Sub-committee leader and volunteer
 Trina Filan, Ph.D., University of Lethbridge
 Arlene Moore, Public Health Dietitian, Nutrition Services, Alberta Health Services
 Nicholas Townsend B.H.Sc., John Howard Society
 Roy Weasel Fat, Red Crow College and University of Lethbridge
 Rachel Hardcastle, student assistant, University of Lethbridge
 Sara Ketchmark, student assistant, University of Lethbridge

Data Analysis and Paper Review Team:

Trina Filan, Ph.D., Team leader, University of Lethbridge
 Amrita Deshpande, Family Centre Society of Southern Alberta
 Hoda Ghadirian, B.Ed., Sub-committee leader and volunteer
 Lyndia Peters, Southern Alberta Ethnic Association
 Rev’d Canon Erin Phillips, Chaplain, Ecumenical Campus Ministry
 Arlene Moore, Public Health Dietitian, Nutrition Services, Alberta Health Services
 Nicholas Townsend B.H.Sc., John Howard Society
 John Usher, Ph.D., University of Lethbridge
 Roy Weasel Fat, Red Crow College and University of Lethbridge

SECTION II CONTENTS

Message From The Chair	22
Abstract	23
Introduction	23
Methods	24
General Impressions of the Data	26
The cyclical and intergenerational nature of poverty	26
Self-esteem and connection to people, community	28
Interconnections of fear, stress, depression, health (mental and physical) and addictions	28
Inadequate, non-standard work	30
Emotional poverty	30
Structural support and systemic failures	31
Respondent Recommendations for Follow-up	33
Conclusions	35
References	35

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

The mandate of Vibrant Lethbridge, an initiative of the City of Lethbridge Community and Social Development Committee, is to elevate the profile of poverty in Lethbridge, engage multi-sectoral partners and identify community assets and systemic/programmatic interventions that could strengthen the community's response to poverty related issues.

Vibrant Lethbridge actively engages with people in our community who has lived experience and may be affected by the strategies we recommend. This serves to ensure we are building support within the community based on the needs and assets. Vibrant Lethbridge has ready access to an advisory group that can facilitate and support future proposed strategies and provide opportunities for collaborative approaches to reducing the effects of poverty in Lethbridge.

Vibrant Lethbridge engages a broad and diverse group of organizations; business sector and community leaders promoting a collaborative planning process to help integrate community efforts to address poverty in Lethbridge.

The development of this report "You're Trying To Go Up A Waterfall..." was one of Vibrant Lethbridge's strategic goals for 2013. The purpose of this research was to glean an understanding of community and individual experiences of poverty in Lethbridge from people who have lived experience with the effects of poverty. This community based research took over six months and a considerable number of volunteer hours to coordinate and execute and we are grateful for their dedication and perseverance to complete. We are most grateful to the people who participated in the focus groups; for their trust, openness, courage and willingness to tell their stories. This research along with input from community agencies, will inform the development of bold new steps to reduce the impact of poverty experienced by more than thirteen percent of Lethbridge citizens.

When people live in persistent financial distress, the whole community pays in increased costs to the health care, education, social services and criminal justice systems as well as impacting our local economy in lower spending on goods and services. Sustained poverty reduction will improve the quality of life for all members of our community and provide for a healthy and sustainable future.

I look forward to the next phases of this important work together.

Sincerely,
Rena Barlow
Chair, Vibrant Lethbridge Sub-committee
Chair, Community and Social Development Committee

For more information about our committee, please visit our website at www.vibrantlethbridge.com

"YOU'RE TRYING TO GO UP A WATERFALL": A REPORT

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to glean an understanding of community and individual experiences of poverty in Lethbridge, Alberta, from people who have lived experience with the effects of poverty, rather than from organizations that serve these individuals. This information was acquired using focus group methodology, as well as individual interviews. The research team sought input from a variety of groups considered to be particularly at-risk to struggle with poverty, including: single parents, First Nations people, people with disabilities, young adults (18+ years old), senior citizens, immigrants, and women. Ultimately, this research will add to collective knowledge about poverty in Lethbridge in order to appropriately focus poverty-alleviation efforts by the City of Lethbridge and local non-governmental organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Vibrant Lethbridge is a volunteer-based sub-committee of the Community and Social Development Group of the City of Lethbridge. It is a local manifestation of the Vibrant Communities movement founded by the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, which

seeks to reduce poverty throughout Canada by helping communities identify and implement locally appropriate measures, often through existing governmental and non-governmental organizations (Tamarack Institute, n.d.). The goal of Vibrant Lethbridge is to understand the impacts of poverty on different groups in Lethbridge, to raise the community's awareness of the effects of poverty on the lives of all community members, and to determine effective actions that can be taken to reduce the impact of poverty in Lethbridge. One of the means of achieving this goal has been to conduct focus group research with various populations in Lethbridge deemed by local service organizations to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing poverty either episodically or chronically. This focus group research is meant to help Vibrant Lethbridge members and the wider community more fully appreciate and understand the lived experiences of people in poverty. In October 2012, Vibrant Lethbridge formed a sub-committee comprised of volunteers from the larger committee to organize and carry out this research.

The mandate from the Vibrant Lethbridge committee to the niche focus group sub-committee follows:

"The strategic plan moving forward is to hold niche-focus groups for groups such as seniors, youth, First Nations, parents, immigrants and others to ask about their experience of poverty and learn first hand what issues/solutions may be presented. Individuals within these groups could also be identified to participate on the VL committee. The leads on this goal will be gathering information about the various groups in Lethbridge that will help us gain access to these niche groups."

Vibrant Lethbridge sees the results of this research as fundamental to the creation of viable solutions for alleviating poverty in the community. Poverty not only adversely impacts the mental and physical well-being of the people who live in it. It also is an impediment to people's ability to fully participate in daily and community life, thus stunting the ability of individuals, families, and communities to fully realize their potential. Poverty is both episodic and constant: people might move in and out of it due to temporary circumstances, or they may find themselves trapped in it for years or generations. Poverty also is systemic and a condition to which we all are vulnerable, regardless of the socioeconomic status we occupy or the social categories that comprise our identities.

The cost in purely economic terms of allowing poverty to continue to flourish in Alberta have been measured and elaborated by Briggs and Lee (2012). Lethbridge itself has the third highest poverty rate in Alberta (at 13 percent), after Calgary and Edmonton. Twenty percent of those in poverty in Lethbridge are children under the age of 15, 40 percent are single parent families, and 42 percent are Aboriginal people (Nash, 2012). The

- 20% of those in poverty in Lethbridge are children under the age of 15
- 40% are single parent families
- 42% are Aboriginal people

economic consequences of this systemic issue still need to be quantified. However, the impacts of poverty on individuals and communities can be measured in much more than economic terms. It is the experiential knowledge - this lived experience - of poverty that this report seeks to make plain.

METHODS

While a fair amount of statistical data on poverty, derived from census and other quantitative data collection methods, exists in Canada, Alberta, and even Lethbridge, very little information exists regarding the first-hand lived experiences of people who deal episodically or chronically with poverty. This qualitative data, these personal stories, are valuable additions to knowledge gained using quantitative methods,

such as the economic-cost information presented in "Poverty Costs" (Briggs and Lee, 2012). Both together allow researchers to test hypotheses, to bridge macro and micro theories, and to access and "give voice" to populations that otherwise are invisible and silent in society (Leckenby and Hesse-Biber 2007). Mixing qualitative and quantitative information also allows for triangulation, which can be seen either as a way to confirm results gained through different methods or as a way to inquire more deeply into inconsistencies in knowledge produced by one method alone (Nightingale 2003). Hodgkin (2008) argues that using both qualitative and quantitative methods allows researchers to highlight "issues of need," which can be discovered using quantitative methods, along with people's experiences of those needs via qualitative methods (299).



The Vibrant Lethbridge committee, understanding the value of combining these two types of information, decided to undertake a focus group methodology to collect this information on lived experience. Focus groups are group interview/conversation scenarios centered around a particular topic of common interest to or experience of participants (Kidd and Parshall, 2000). Focus groups have been cited as a way to allow cultures to speak for themselves, allowing them to give voice to their lived experiences in their own words and on their own terms, and as a way for people to discover that others share similar life histories and circumstances, thereby allowing new interpretations of those experiences to arise (Society for Research in Child Development, 2012).

As with all research methods, focus groups have both strengths and limitations; the latter can be addressed using mixed methods, as discussed above. Focus group responses are not independent of one another, but rather build upon each other as participants share their

insights and uncover the similarities and differences in their experiences (Society for Research in Child Development, 2012).

Focus group participants cannot be considered as representative of their group; instead, as was the case for this research, they often are selected based on whether they have the time, inclination, and expertise to participate (Palys, 2008). None of these facts makes the results of focus group research any less valid. As is the case with other qualitative methods, the knowledge derived from this process allows an exploration of lived experiences and their deeper meanings within and across cultures, rather than a statistical exploration of responses (Society for Research in Child Development, 2012).

The niche focus group sub-committee, consisting of volunteers from the Vibrant Lethbridge committee, recognized early on that the groups identified as vulnerable to the impacts of poverty also are considered particularly at-risk of manipulation and abuse by people in positions of power, such as researchers and government officials. Therefore, the sub-committee took extra precautions to guard against violations of these groups' and individuals' rights and freedoms. In particular, the sub-committee abided not only by guidelines for ethical human subjects research set forth by the University of Lethbridge, but also by those ethical practices particular to communities that were the focus of the project, such as local First Nations populations. All members of each focus group research team, the transcriptionist, all individual interviewees, and all members of the focus groups signed confidentiality statements; all focus group members and individual interviewees signed letters of consent.

Vibrant Lethbridge sought the experiences of people considered especially vulnerable to falling into and remaining in poverty...

Vibrant Lethbridge sought the experiences of people considered especially vulnerable to falling into and remaining in poverty, including single parents, First Nations people, people with disabilities, young adults (18+ years old), senior citizens, immigrants, and women. These populations were identified as vulnerable to poverty by the various members of the Vibrant Lethbridge committee who

provide services to these communities. Focus group members were recruited through non-governmental community organizations that serve the populations in question. Interview participants were recruited through acquaintance with research team members.

All participants were compensated for their time with a healthy meal, a gift card to a local grocery store, free childcare, if they required it, and a round-trip bus ticket for them and each of the children they had to bring with them to the meeting.

Research teams conducted eight focus groups and two interviews. Focus groups and interviews were held in locations that facilitated maintaining the confidentiality of participants but that also were comfortable and easily accessible to them. All participants were compensated for their time with a healthy meal, a gift card to a

local grocery store, free childcare, if they required it, and a round-trip bus ticket for them and each of the children they had to bring with them to the meeting. Each focus group meeting lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were digitally and manually recorded for later transcription.

Focus groups consisted of between five and nine participants plus a research team, consisting of a facilitator, a note taker, and a resource person from the Vibrant Lethbridge committee. The niche focus group sub-committee felt it was important that each research team have sub-committee member on it; the other members were volunteers from the Vibrant Lethbridge committee. The facilitator led the meeting, including asking questions and gently guiding the discussion without inserting any of her or his own opinions on what was being said. The note-taker was a silent participant who served as a back-up to the digital recorder, making extensive notes all verbal interactions. The resource person, another silent participant (unless required not to be), was present to offer emotional support to any participant requiring it and to assist the facilitator with logistical issues, such as moderating the room temperature and making sure everyone had access to pens and paper.

The niche focus group sub-committee invested many hours in determining the appropriate questions to ask

the research participants. Sub-committee members consulted academic experts on poverty at the University of Lethbridge, as well as the Vibrant Lethbridge committee, a group with a large amount of practical expertise in dealing with the daily impacts of poverty on people's lives. The sub-committee determined that fewer questions with a broad scope would allow a deeper and more meaningful exploration of poverty in Lethbridge than a greater number of more specific questions. We settled upon four guiding questions that could be clarified with prompts, if necessary:

1. *What does poverty mean to you?*
2. *What are some obstacles or barriers that hold a person back from coming out of poverty? (Prompt/clarifying comment: What do you think causes poverty?)*
3. *How do you think living in poverty affects a person's life?*
4. *What things could help a person come out of poverty? What could this community do to help more people have a better life? better opportunities? participate in society more fully? (Prompt/clarifying comment: Maybe there are things the community is already doing to help people have a better life that you think are useful/important... those ideas are good to share too.)*

All research participants - both focus group members and individual interviewees - were asked these four questions. As mentioned previously, each focus group and interview was digitally and manually recorded; manual notes assisted during data analysis when the digital recording failed to catch the conversation. All focus groups and individual interviews were professionally and confidentially transcribed then analyzed by a team of social scientists and NGO staff with experience assessing this type of data.

After each focus group, the research team held a debriefing session wherein they discussed what went well and what could have gone better during the session (in order to inform future research teams of

pitfalls to avoid and strategies that worked well in the management of the group), overarching themes that emerged from the group discussion, and individual stories that were particularly interesting or stirring. Notes from each debriefing session were typed up and added to the materials to be analyzed.

The data analysis team, consisting of a slightly different sub-set of participants from the Vibrant Lethbridge committee, examined all data both for overarching themes that all focus groups touched upon and for themes unique to individual communities. In this report, we present the overarching themes that have begun to emerge from our analysis. We expect that subsequent analyses will reveal even richer and more profound insights that will assist Vibrant Lethbridge in its efforts to alleviate poverty.

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS OF THE DATA

During data analysis, a number of themes common among all focus groups emerged, as did themes unique to specific populations. These themes suggest that while poverty has ubiquitous community consequences, it also touches the lives of individuals in unique ways. Therefore, addressing poverty in ways that offer long-term solutions to help people emerge from and remain out of poverty requires community-wide as well as individually tailored responses.

THE CYCLICAL & INTERGENERATIONAL NATURE OF POVERTY

Most focus groups discussed the ways in which poverty is perpetuated within and across generations. Many commented that when poverty is all a person knows, then it is difficult to imagine that life might be different.

[What causes poverty?] "Background. If you come from poor, like my family's poor, then you'll be poor."

"You grow up that way feeling very, you know, like you don't deserve certain things. You grow up poor you tend to grow up thinking that you're going to be poor for the rest of your life."

Importantly, though, some viewed this generational burden as not quite impossible to escape, perhaps indicating that with the right supports, it is possible to imagine and attain a different life:

"Once you're in that box and you don't understand why you're so dysfunctional you stay in that box, but if you step out of the box, you start learning."

In addition to generational issues, there are seemingly innumerable ways to fall off the path out of poverty, and there are not enough comprehensive ways to support people who are trying very hard to remain on that path. In some ways, poverty seems inescapable, especially because it is tied to other personal difficulties and social stigmas.

"...poverty is you've got the weight of society pushing you down, and you're way down there, and it's kind of hard to go back up because you're trying to go up a waterfall, right? So it's very difficult, and once you are impoverished, it is very hard to get out. It's like the mafia...you never get out, right?"

[W]hen in poverty "you feel trapped, insignificant, like... your opinion isn't worth anything"



"I got so used to living on next to nothing that I feel like I am next to nothing."

Furthermore, people may be vulnerable to poverty to a greater or lesser degree depending upon which social categories they occupy. Table A offers an array of sociocultural and socioeconomic identities that put people at more or less risk of falling into poverty, even briefly. In the center column is the aspect of a category that is least vulnerable. In the left and right columns are the marginal identities from which people are susceptible to falling into poverty. Some of these identities are inevitable: almost all of us will eventually become elderly, and many will become infirm. Some of these identities are fixed: for the most part, men will remain men and women will remain women. All of these identities overlap and often are simultaneous, making it difficult to pin-point which part of a person's identity is the key to their susceptibility to poverty. For example, is Person X poor because she is a woman, mentally disabled, an addict, poorly educated, or some combination of these traits?

"To me it's not so much what you can't buy it's the necessities that you can't get. I mean all the other stuff aside, I mean if you can't get your medication, if you can't get this to help yourself get up the ladder...that's where... people give up, you know, they're anti social because I mean, who's going to want someone like that hanging around them, and you know, all the stigma and such that goes along with that in society."

TABLE A: Sociocultural and socioeconomic causes and consequences of poverty

Created by Dr. John Usher

MARGINAL	IDEAL	MARGINAL
Immigrant	Canadian	
Youth	Middle - aged	Seniors
	Able	Disabled
FNMI	Not FNMI	
	Married	Single
Parent	Without children	
	Male	Female
Addicted	Clean	
	No criminal record	Criminal record
Limited education	Educated	
	Possessing ID	No ID
Limited skills	Skilled	
Visible minority	No generational experience with poverty	Generational experience with poverty
Homeless/shelter living	Housed	
	Financially Literate	Not able to budget, save, plan
Not resilient (job, health, legal issues)	Resilient	
	Community/family connections	Socially isolated
Loss of status, stigmatized	Respected	
	Useful	A burden to family, society
Dependent	Independent	
	Job (standard) + benefits	Non - standard work
Ignored	Consulted	
	Positive future outlook	"Climbing the waterfall"
Poor nutritional choices	Eats properly (healthy food and enough to eat)	
	Intact	Natural disaster
Visible minority	Caucasian	

SELF-ESTEEM AND CONNECTION TO PEOPLE, COMMUNITY

Yet another common theme was the link between poverty and feeling useless to society, a sense that lends itself to low self-esteem, depression, and other factors discussed above.

"Self-esteem is the number one - if you don't think highly of yourself, how could you get up in the morning and get ready and try and go look for work? How could you even begin...?"

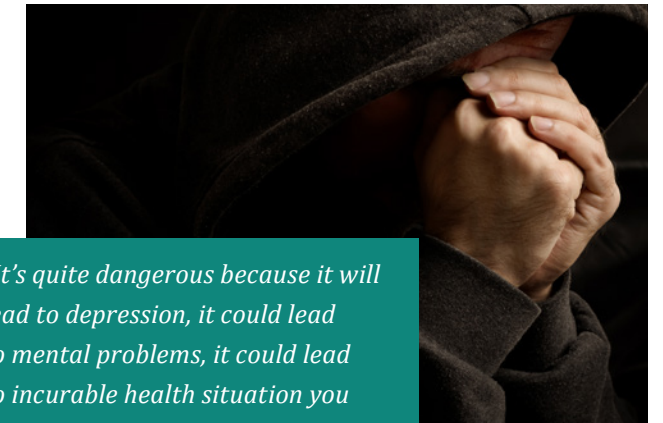
Many of the participants in this study mentioned their desire to be useful members of society, to be visible and valuable, to contribute in some meaningful way, even if they are not able to hold down a steady job and contribute economically. Although many respondents were at a loss for how they might begin to contribute, others offered solutions to their dilemma, including volunteering with community organizations, participating in public art projects, and offering their knowledge to people in greater need than themselves.

"Volunteerism. That is something that can be used as a job. Now if you take people that were once homeless that were helped by volunteers and volunteered to help someone else then they're not only gaining skills at an aspect but they're helping someone else. ... It doesn't necessarily have to be money right off the bat but it could end up that way."

Also related to the desire to contribute is the need to be connected to people other than themselves, to see and talk and interact with others. Loneliness, the scarcity of human contact, is in fact another form of poverty, one that plays upon emotional and mental health and contributes to the cycle of poverty.

"[P]eople are usually lonely. They don't have people to open up to, you know? Back home in Africa you have the extended relations, uncles, aunties, cousins, you know, and people have a way of socially getting together."

"I've only lived here maybe a year in August and I maybe can say in a year that I've lived here I'm meeting, oh, maybe 40 people. The rest are just kind of locked up in their rooms and that's a scary thing. Shuffleboard disappeared..."



"It's quite dangerous because it will lead to depression, it could lead to mental problems, it could lead to incurable health situation you know, because of it, we face it...the developed world is such a busy place so that people are usually lonely."

INTERCONNECTIONS OF FEAR, STRESS, DEPRESSION, HEALTH (MENTAL AND PHYSICAL) AND ADDICTIONS

Another theme common across focus groups was the constant stress and fear they experience regarding their financial situation. There is fear of not being able to meet all their basic expenses, such as food, shelter, medical requirements, child care, transportation, and utilities. There is the fear of being kicked out of their living spaces or of having to settle on living in dangerous, violent, or otherwise inadequate housing situations. There is fear of not being able to help the people who rely on you, whether family or friends, and also of alienating the people you must rely on to meet basic needs.

"Sometimes you've got to decide between going, alright, do I pay my full electric bill or do I make sure I have enough food for the month for my family?"

"Cause you've got six kids you're going to need a big house, you're going to need a big rent. You've really got nothing leftover."

"If kid's got bad teeth and you've got to watch them suffer because there's nothing else you can do; you can't afford to go and get the teeth looked at in order to get the teeth fixed."

"You know, parents are used to suffering but they don't like to see their children suffer."

This type of preoccupation makes it difficult to navigate already complicated systems and to find ways to address immediate and long-term needs. Recent research published Science (Mani et al., 2013) suggests that poverty – considered to be a form of scarcity – diminishes people’s cognitive abilities, including their ability to make critical decisions about daily life. Someone dealing with scarcity subconsciously is devoting much of their mental capacity to thinking about that scarcity, leaving less mental “bandwidth” available to consider other parts of life. This diminished capacity to address multiple problems manifests in people’s lives as, among other characteristics, diminished impulse control and the inability to plan and problem-solve.



“I haven’t had any [positive, affirming] experiences in a really long time and I’m starting to feel, like the full effect of them. I’m getting physical pain, I can’t sleep, I can’t function and it’s exhausting.”

These problems often require medication that becomes an extra expense that cannot be paid – even \$50 for diabetes medication can push a tight budget over the tipping point – or can even lead to addictions that exacerbate the other symptoms of this complicated puzzle. Trying to break free from addiction often becomes an inadvertent path back into poverty, as systems are set up to help those with addictions, not those who have emerged from them:

“[Y]ou could be a crack head and because you’re on crack you’ll get paid to pay for your addiction. You can’t work, you can’t do anything; you’ll get paid to have your place in all this but all your money’s going to crack. I’m not going to start doing crack to get help from the government because I can’t afford to have my own place. I don’t understand why they can’t help. That’s what they’re supposed to be there for is to help the citizens when they need the help.”

Thus, the need to deal with scarcity makes it harder for people to engage in daily decision-making and planning, for example the requirement to understand and navigate the complicated bureaucratic systems that exist to manage individual and community poverty. This diminished cognitive bandwidth also has a direct impact on whether people are able to make decisions that might extricate them from poverty.

“I remember staying up at night before I left my ex, you know, and we were behind in rent and bills were unpaid, they were shutting off my electricity every week, and I would go back in and beg them to turn it on ‘cause I had a brand new baby at the house, and I would just lay in bed at night and just, what am I going to do? Like, what am I supposed to do? There’s nothing I can do. My parents won’t help me, friends won’t help me anymore, Social Services won’t help me. Like, I had nothing. I had absolutely nothing....to live like that for so long...it was terrifying.”

The fear experienced by people in poverty is compounded by the stress of working daily to meet basic needs in a system that is sometimes irrational and often biased against the people it is meant to serve. Stress and fear combine and lead to depression, which can lead to both physical and mental health problems.

“It would be – that’s a lot of anxiety for immigrants and the anxiety leads to depression and depression is probably the entry to mental ill health. And the system would be bearing the cost.”

INADEQUATE, NON-STANDARD WORK

Of course, lack of access to adequate work – meaning full-time work with benefits and a living wage – was a priority for every group. This set of problems is integrally linked with lack of education and job-relevant skills, which will be addressed later in the report.

“[The] minimum wage is too low.”

“It’s hard to get a full time job.”

“One of my shocks, you know, one of the shocks I encountered is why should people be doing three jobs, two jobs to make the good living standard that we see on TV or we see from abroad? Why? I think that is fundamental poverty.”

“I think companies should give people at least a chance to – you know, even 30 days, two weeks to four weeks just to see – you know if they don’t have experience just give them a chance to prove themselves and see, you know, if I were the guy hiring you know, I’d say, ok I’ll give you a couple of weeks see how you do.”

“Not going to school and getting a high paying job so you’re working down lower where everybody else is trying to fight with that, right, and get into a good career or whatever they want experience. Well, how do you get experience if they’re not going to hire you so you can gain experience, right?”



“If you’re a single mom and you don’t have an education you’re working for minimum wage how do you even live on that? You can’t.”

EMOTIONAL POVERTY

While it is a ubiquitous symptom of poverty, emotional poverty seems particularly impactful on two groups, primarily due to compounding factors of the inability to speak English (immigrants) and societal prejudice (First Nations people). Many immigrant respondents discussed how the process of becoming a refugee and moving to a new land with new customs meant a loss of their traditional measures of status, independence, and importance in their society. Because they no longer own land and grow crops to feed their families, elder immigrants are the least important members of their households, often having to rely on their grandchildren to be wage earners. These people then lose their personal autonomy and their sense that they are contributing to their families, thereby straining essential social and emotional relationships.

“Poverty is like he was independent from the age of 13, like, but when he comes to Canada from the day he arrived he is not able to get any kind of-to get into the work or make himself independent so he has to depend on the government support from the day he arrived here in Canada.”

The multiple adverse impacts on First Nations people of racism and poverty have been studied and documented (Currie et al., 2011). Stories of daily dealings with disdain and prejudice and the knowledge that whatever one does, one cannot escape one’s indigeneity and the implications for it on one’s circumstances, underscore the necessity of addressing societal ill-will toward the First Nations population in Lethbridge – and everywhere.

“There’s a lot of things that happen to Native people because of just being Native.”

“The non-Native person that’s in front of you will be greeted, will be treated so well but when you’re up on the next line you’re totally ignored or you encounter a lot of people that are right out ignorant. Uh, I was able to overcome that by...when I do go out into the city and have to encounter I don’t look at them directly anymore as I used to. I look above their heads so that I don’t have to see how their reaction is to me.”

Poverty is: “Being treated – because of how you’re being treated, the poorness that comes along with it. Unable

to work yourself out of being Native. I can never change [into] a White person and be successful."

"I have to live [in a really unsafe place] 'cause I have no money...My relative was murdered, and I tried to leave Lethbridge and another relative was killed...in a car accident. A lot of dysfunction. But that caused me poverty because of all those poverty stricken dysfunctional things that happened to me. My mental state and - that's poverty when you're not able to work yourself or be able to choose a safe place to live and live like, you know, those White people down the street and - that's poverty."

Unfortunately, there is also a burgeoning mistrust between these two vulnerable populations in Lethbridge, a mistrust it would behoove both communities, as well as the wider public, to address.



"I had a chance to work...and they said they're accommodating people from Mexico, bringing them here into Lethbridge, finding them accommodation and helping them get to work. A lot of them are at that [local company]. They're all working there. A lot of these people - you could see people that it seems like they get more help than the Native people, so again we have to look at that situation and give our Native people more a priority."

STRUCTURAL SUPPORT AND SYSTEMIC FAILURES

A final theme, and one which might be fairly readily addressed by the City of Lethbridge, is the need for more comprehensive, multi-faceted support systems that are set up to help people succeed at critical moment in their progress out of poverty. At the moment, there are gaps and loopholes in existing systems that contribute to the sense of uncertainty and fear that already plague vulnerable populations. Several people across focus groups mentioned that it is easier to get support when one is addicted to drugs or alcohol than when one is sober.

"I want to find out why there's more support for people with addictions than for somebody who's trying and really stuck in a tight spot. There's no exceptions to the rule. There's no - there's just no help. I've been dealing with social workers for the past three years and I haven't been able to get anything for myself. And I'm the one that's suffering because when I suffer my kids suffer and I see that in all my girls...It's really hard for me. I don't understand why I can't get this help."

Several other respondents mentioned that there are more supports for people who are in dire need or avert poverty than there are for people who are slowly making their way out.

"Some families are still lower income but they don't qualify for the food bank"

"I'm still living like this and I still can't find a job, I still can't find anyone to help me with my daughter, and I don't have a home. And everybody's okay with it. That's what it feels like to me...I don't know what I have to do because I'm really stuck. I have no family support right now because everyone is as bad off as me, if not worse, and they want me to turn to my family and ask my friends for help. Everybody is just as bad off as me. How are we supposed to help each other? I don't understand how any of this is supposed to work."

Many respondents had suggestions for making the system work better, from offering better and more connected transportation services to getting organizations to work more closely together to having individual support workers with the knowledge to

connect people to services they might not be aware of.

"There is a lot that this community can do, like again, to begin first they have - I think what they have to do is really work, like I said, with all the different organizations here. Have an in depth look at exactly what they're doing. Are they being effective?"

"[B]ecause a lot of us women, what we go through to get to this point, there still needs to be on a continuous basis a follow-up worker to make sure that everything that they're told, let's say for social workers, if they're telling them to do something that that is followed through. Like, let's say you have to go look for work, you know? Okay, how can we help you to go and find this work? You know, if you have to be up at 6:00 in the morning to get somewhere or to get down to a job workforce can something be provided for them or - cause the buses - we're encountering with that right now. The buses don't run at 6:00 in the morning. Some of these women have to be up at 6:00 too. So there's a lot of obstacles that - but I think the way I see it all these different companies or organizations like this employment service here, Home Base, they all need to really work close together in order to help an individual. And if they have, like let's say for an example if they have problems too, like I'm not going to be afraid to say that a lot of these women because of what they're going through, like they turn to addictions so we need to have something there to help them too with their addictions to overcome their addictions too, you know?"

The desire to be treated as human beings, rather than with the disdain reserved for the stigma of poverty, also was frequently mentioned.

"Most of the time young women walk out of there crying and just will not go back, and they figure, ah, I've done my job, I've saved the government a cheque this month, and that is basically their job to save the government money. So you really got to get hard and, you know, prepare yourself for these kinds of things before you go into these places."

"I'm learning how to hate. I hate the social workers I have to deal with, I hate all these people that keep telling me go do this, go do that, get this signed, bring it to that person. And all the time you go to these people they're never there. They're in meetings or they're out of town or they're on vacation. I don't understand. It's really upsetting for me...It's very frustrating...They'll tear you

down but [they won't] help you up and they keep on doing it. They encourage each other to do it."

Many discussed the difficulties of working with an inflexible and apparently arbitrary system whose rules they do not understand, for example, this respondent referring to an interaction with a social services employee:

"Well, you have to follow our policies. Well, you don't meet the requirement so we're not going to - you can't come into our program."

Not all is dire in the social system, however. There were many references to the kindness and compassion of service providers, and many local NGOs were discussed with great appreciation. It is this kindness, this acknowledgment of shared humanity, that can make a difference in the daily mental health and stressful lives of vulnerable people.



"I remember going to the food bank and I just cried the first time I went there. I cried and cried. And the lady that was behind the desk, she came around and she said, don't you ever cry when you come here. This is for you; don't feel bad about taking - and that really meant a lot to me. And I still go the food bank once in a while. And I think that if it wasn't for the food bank, I don't know, some of these people would be starving to death."

RESPONDENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP

From the results elaborated above, a number of systemic problems can be identified and responses to them considered. Unfortunately, poverty reduction strategies often are cast not in terms of potential systemic change, communities of care, or citizen empowerment but rather in terms of the personal failures of the people living in poverty, which can lead to the stigmatization of those who struggle with poverty. Addressing the stigma associated with poverty is crucial to removing barriers to accessing services and encouraging alliance-building across the multiple communities that could benefit from collaborative anti-poverty efforts (Kingfisher, 2002 and 2007).

Fortunately, the respondents in this research had the opportunity to express their opinions on changes that can be made to improve their access to services and to help lift them out of poverty. The recommendations and suggestions that follow derive both from the knowledge produced by respondents during focus groups and individual interviews and from the discussions among the research and data analysis teams about the results.

For example, as one First Nations respondent pointed out, "For a lot of our people, our Blackfoot language is a more soothing language. Non-Native [the English] language is right to the point and sometimes it could come in a really blunt, like rude [way]." Providing native speakers of local First Nations languages at social service points would be one way to ease communication with First Nations clients. This also is undoubtedly true for the many immigrant populations in the city. A dearth

of translation services means that many people are not fully aware of the services that are available to them. One of the most common suggestions for making the lives of people in poverty better is the provision of more educational and vocational training opportunities. Many people felt that their inability to be properly trained for decent wage-earning positions left them stuck in the cycle of poverty. Skilled immigrants were particularly incensed that they were not able to contribute their existing abilities to their new country:

"Canada is losing a lot of income by allowing professionals, trained people, to waste in the country."

"...we were new in Canada, we have not contributed to the Canadian government. Like, we have never worked in Canada, we didn't pay any tax to this government and how can we expect [the government to take care of us]?"

One respondent offered a solution to this problem, one that the City of Lethbridge, in conjunction with Lethbridge College and the University of Lethbridge, might consider – assisting immigrants who are already skilled in their own countries attain licensure here. The respondent offered this solution as a comparison to how people are trained to drive in Canada:

"In the place of the driving school, you could have [retraining] for jobs. [The government says] that there is a lack of labor in Canada, so [it goes] all out to say, 'Skilled laborers from other continents, from other places, please come.' How do they get here? They don't fly here just like that. You get your credentials in Nova Scotia, you get [them] assessed. [They] say, 'Oh...this person is good, this person is okay.' [The government] gives them the permission to get the process going. They get it done, they're successful, they land into the country, [the government says] they are not skilled. Yeah, that's

the meaning because you don't give them the job that they are qualified for. [Skilled people] are all over the place in Canada, they come every year, but [there are] no jobs for them. Now, if there are standards and things that you want to achieve in your country, beautiful, it's perfect, it's a good thing. Just like the case that I gave as an example of the driver's license let there be institutions that could train and adapt [their skills] and a kind of internship because Canada is losing a lot of income by allowing professionals, trained people, to waste in the country. There are a lot of them. They are wasting. They don't have access to the job. They have knowledge; they need adaptation. Maximum maybe six months, a year, whatever, and you make them to work to pay tax. Then the country is more prosperous."

Many respondents across focus groups felt a keen need for learning and practicing life skills that might help them exit poverty, such as cooking, smoking cessation, shopping, making healthy food and life choices, saving money, budgeting, and money management. A number of people in each group already possessed these skills as well as the knowledge of what it's like to be in poverty and make use of these skills in that context. Perhaps making use of these people by employing them as experts in their field would be a way to empower, to value, and to engage these skilled people with the broader community.

A better, more flexible, and more affordable transit system that can accommodate irregular work schedules was mentioned by several respondents. An improved, accessible, lower-cost bus system also would allow disconnected people to access activities that might help them to be both physically healthy and better integrated with the community at large.

One of the strengths of Lethbridge is its value of and focus on supporting families with children. Many resources already exist that can be harnessed to even further support parents and children living in poverty. This group is caught in a particular bind: they want very badly to be good parents but do not have access to the material and financial resources that society has deemed necessary to be good parents. Parents must simultaneously deal with the expenses of raising children and the inability to work/feeling of exclusion from social services because they are parents. Lack of affordable childcare was of particular concern.

"Always having to be behind on either your bills or food or being to get anywhere. Childcare; having to pay 140 dollars a month for preschool. That just boggles my mind."

"You have to have child care to go to work."

"... poverty does cause educational barriers as the choice to go back to school is almost selfish as it costs a child precious time with their parent or parents. How can this be seen in the best interests of the child?"

"My daughter's suffering a lot. I didn't think it was fair. I went [to work] before she got out of school, after lunchtime, and I was there until after she got out of school, and I talked with this woman, and she called [a support organization] for me, and they spoke on my behalf, and that's how I was able to get there. But I was ready to give my daughter up so she wouldn't have to live like that. I want her to have good experiences. It's very heartbreaking, and I have been through a lot of experiences in the past year and a half, and it doesn't seem to be over yet. I'm just wondering how long I'll be able to hold onto my daughter before she does get taken 'cause they expressed to me that they felt she was in danger because she didn't have a home, nothing secure."

As mentioned previously, one of the consequences of this loneliness is the feeling of being silenced, of being unable to communicate with anyone who will commiserate and of becoming stuck in solitude and depression as a result: another vicious circle. However, some respondents offered solutions to this issue that can potentially be operationalized in the context of already existing services in Lethbridge. They suggest strongly that having an outlet for communication, access to a person or a group willing to listen and offer kindness and encouragement offers a way to emerge from depression and the feelings of inconsequence and invisibility that people in poverty often experience.

"[I]f people were allowed to speak...[to have] someplace you can go and talk over your situation....[You feel like y]ou're not going anywhere; you're staying dormant, you know? And to be able to go out and say I can do this, I don't have that stigma anymore, I can do this. But when you get stuck you're stuck, you know, so to be able to go out and talk to somebody that'll really give you that push you need."

"It's very important to be [together] once in a week...[so we] can explain [our] feelings to [each] other[. It is] a great help to share [our] experiences and it might give some relief to [us]."

"I think the one barrier that we all encounter is still the prejudice, but again, as an individual I see if we get help from our reserve, utilize more people from the positive background like Elders to come in and help young people [who] are going through self-esteem [issues] and helping them out. I think we can overcome that. ... I was able to overcome that but I went back to the reserve too and I started attending, like our [ceremonies] and that brought me my strength to understand how to live in a society where we encounter prejudice everyday. But it's hard. It really takes a lot of work to be able to overcome that."

Finding ways to assure people have access to compassionate community can be a solution to at least some of the difficulties experienced by people in poverty.

A final suggestion stems from many respondents' satisfaction with the assistance provided to vulnerable populations by many non-governmental organizations in Lethbridge. A variety of participants in all focus groups felt very strongly that these organizations give them invaluable support that makes their lives easier. However, they also felt that many people who could make use of these services are not aware that they exist.

One recommendation consistently derived from this observation was that there should be an effort to find ways to build community awareness about and provide easier access to these organizations and for there to be more funding given to them to enhance their outreach and impact.

CONCLUSIONS

As is demonstrated in the knowledge shared above, day-to-day living is quite difficult for people living in poverty. They must negotiate the daily requirements of participating in community life, including going to work and caring for their children and extended families, but they must do so in the context of limited physical,

economic, mental, and emotional resources and while enduring the community skepticism and stigma that adhere unremittingly to people in poverty.

This research also has shed light on the intersectional nature of poverty: the burden of poverty is compounded when a person or group not only experiences poverty but also racism, the difficulties associated with aging, the challenges of managing mental or physical disabilities, the extra time, money, and emotional resources required to care for children, and/or the constant pressures associated with being immersed in or emerging from addiction.

We would like to emphasize that this social problem is not inescapable. There are any number of viable solutions within our reach. Lethbridge, as any other city or region, has a unique population with unique needs and means of addressing those needs. The participants in this research readily acknowledged the systems in place that are greatly beneficial to them as they maneuver through their complicated lives. Many local NGOs provide the time, compassionate connection, information, and resources that vulnerable individuals and groups need in order to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles and everyday indignities of a life in poverty. If the resources within Lethbridge can be interconnected more fluidly, if systems of support can be simplified, if loopholes can be closed and tenuous safety nets can be secured, people vulnerable to poverty may well find themselves in a better position to emerge from their circumstances - in full collaboration with a wider community of care and mutual responsibility.

Much more analysis of the data collected during this project must be done, and further avenues for solutions derived from local strengths and resources must be explored. Furthermore, other vulnerable populations should be included in further research, for their experiences will enlighten and enhance any future decision making around poverty alleviation. For example, Lethbridge is home to two institutions of higher education. Recent research has shown that students at these institutions are particularly vulnerable to issues deriving from poverty, such as food insecurity (Nugent, 2011). Students, therefore, should be

included in further research and outreach endeavors by the city.

Ultimately, we recommend that further steps be taken to understand the scope and depth of impact of poverty on the lives of people in Lethbridge. While the people we spoke with feel that there are many positive aspects of their lives and many tools available to them to meet their immediate needs, the long-term needs they have in order to permanently leave poverty still need to be addressed and the systems that assist with this goal need to be strengthened and made more dynamic and responsive. The Vibrant Lethbridge committee is actively pursuing immediate and long-term next steps toward its ultimate goal of poverty alleviation and is committed both to keeping research participants informed about existing progressive actions and involved in the planning and strategizing of new initiatives.

REFERENCES

- Briggs, A. and C.R. Lee. 2012. Poverty Costs: An Economic Case for a Preventative Poverty Reduction Strategy in Alberta. Calgary: Vibrant Communities Calgary & Action to End Poverty in Alberta. 39 p.
- Currie, C.L., T.C. Wild, D.P. Schopflocher, L. Laing, P.J. Veugelers, B. Parlee, and D.W. McKennitt. 2011. Enculturation and Alcohol Use Problems Among Aboriginal University Students. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 56(12): 735-742.
- Hodgkin, S. 2008. "Telling It All: A Story of Women's Social Capital Using a Mixed Methods Approach." *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 2(4): 296-316.
- Kidd, P.S. and M.B. Parshall. 2000. "Getting the Focus and the Group: Enhancing Analytical Rigor in Focus Group Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 10(3): 293-308.
- Kingfisher, Catherine. 2002. "How the Housed View the Homeless: A Study of the 2002 Controversy

in Lethbridge." Report produced for Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

- Kingfisher, Catherine. 2007. "Discursive Constructions of Homelessness in a Small City in the Canadian Prairies: Notes on Deconstruction, Individualization, and the Production of (Raced and Gendered) Unmarked Categories." *American Ethnologist* 34(1): 91-107.
- Leckenby, D. and S.N. Hesse-Biber. 2007. "Feminist Approaches to Mixed-Methods Research." In *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. 249-291.
- Mani, A., S. Mullainathan, E. Shafir, and J. Zhao. 2013. "Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function." *Science* 341(6149): 976-980. DOI: 10.1126/science.1238041
- Nash, Kayla. 2012. "Vibrant Lethbridge: Working to Reduce Poverty in Our City." *Lethbridge Living* May/June: 37-46.
- Nightingale, A. 2003. "Feminist in the Forest: Situated Knowledges and Mixing Methods in Natural Resource Management." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 2(1): 77-90.
- Nugent, M. 2011. "Journeys to the Food Bank: Exploring the Experience of Food Insecurity Among Postsecondary Students." Master's Thesis, University of Lethbridge, Faculty of Health Sciences. 304 leaves.
- Payls, T. 2008. "Purposive Sampling." In L.M. Given (Ed.) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA. Volume 2: 697-698
- Society for Research in Child Development. 2012. "II. Overview of Focus Group Methodology." *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*. 77(3): 26-33.
- Tamarack Institute. No date. "Vibrant Communities." Accessed May 20, 2013. <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g2.php>

SECTION III:

COMMUNITY AGENCY CONSULTATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Erin Phillips with Gail McKenzie

MAY 20TH, 2014

On January 16th, 2014 over eighty participants from over twenty organizations met at the Lethbridge Lodge to hear about and discuss the results of focus groups conducted by Vibrant Lethbridge in the spring of 2013 with people living in poverty in Lethbridge. After Dr. Trina Filan presented the report, *You're Trying to Go Up a Waterfall*, which summarized the experiences and concerns shared by participants in the focus groups, each table group was asked to respond to three questions:

what do you and your organization do?
what gaps do you see in services provided?
what could be done to address them?

The following summarizes the responses given by the participants.

GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY COOPERATION

Not surprisingly given that the participants in the round table were largely from government and non-profit agencies working with the poor the issue that generated the most discussion and ideas was the issue of inter-agency cooperation and communication. There was a general consensus that silos needed to be dismantled with a variety of suggestions made about how this might be accomplished.

- a unified intake process so that people aren't required to duplicate applications
- chart out process for clients looking at ways to stream line the process
- a centralized phone number with multiple first languages provided
- a 211 call system to help connect people with the right office
- a centralized location (not only to facilitate access but to allow greater community building between clients)
- shared departmental funding to facilitate cooperation between departments
- adopting an "every door is the right door" attitude
- better advertising of services including better communication across offices/agencies
- bulletin boards with material from other offices and agencies posted
- materials in more than one language
- an agency based community guide like Community Links but with more detail
- better hours for working people
- more outreach workers and less in the office
- more connections with businesses and faith groups
- using a team approach involving more people including the police to assist clients
- creating opportunities for agencies to become familiar with each other's services through things like breakfasts, "speed dating" event, or regular meet and greet gatherings perhaps linked to the

client service fair

- addressing the needs of people for whom English is not their first language and the needs of those who do not have basic literacy
- using AB Child Health benefits card as ID for supplements
- working more closely with faith communities and ensuring that they are kept informed about programmes and events

STIGMA

Many people identified stigma as a significant issue in working with people living in poverty. Education was one suggestion to address the problem. Another was the breaking down of barriers between people of different income groups by creating more mixed neighbourhoods and by providing gathering places for community building. These would include green spaces but also community halls that were affordable and accessible. Other suggestions included:

- a media campaign showing the public the real face of the poor
- the involvement of people living in poverty being part of this kind of campaign and including them on committees
- helping people see the hidden poor like the elderly and youth
- addressing the stigma of mental illness
- having businesses publicize their successes
- having an anti-discrimination programme addressing perceptions of First Nations peoples and immigrants
- encouraging people working with people in poverty to respect their clients' time and to put the servant back in service

TRANSPORTATION

The third issue which received a significant number of dots was transportation. There was a general agreement that transit was inadequate for the working poor. Several suggestions were made:

- free or subsidizes bus passes
- better routes especially to the industrial park
- better hours for shift workers
- free rides after 9:00 pm to ensure people get home safely
- bikes available for rent
- improvement of Access-a-ride service

EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

There was agreement that the minimum wage does not represent a living wage and that that coupled with a lack of benefits ensured that many working people were living in poverty. Suggestions for improved employment included:

- increasing the minimum wage
- identifying employers who support living wages for their employees
- teaching employment skills
- encouraging business startups
- microcredit loans
- mentorship and support

CHILD CARE

The greatest need identified was for child care subsidies and for child care that was accessible outside of daytime hours to accommodate shift work.

EDUCATION

A variety of issues were raised around the theme of education. It was suggested that employers needed to find ways to encourage training and skill building among their employees. Many people identified the need for life skills training like budgeting and cooking. It was suggested that more needed to be done with children in the schools to break cycles of poverty. Expanded school lunch and snack programs as well as more Head Start programs were suggested. Employment skills and self-employment skills were identified as needs. Further suggestions included:

- incentives to small and medium enterprises to provide educational opportunities to low wage employees
- gap and skill building opportunities
- financial literacy education for children as well as adults
- programs for young parents
- great access to gaining high school equivalency
- establishing the "Clemente Course" here to make humanities education for free possible (<http://clementecourse.org/>)

HEALTH CARE

There was a general consensus that we need to be addressing the health of people living in poverty more, taking into account the social determinants of health. Suggestions included:

- more family doctors with better access to health care recognizing that there are issues like missed appointments for people living in poverty
- training for front line health workers like Emergency staff
- access to counseling to follow up on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- address the issues of nutrition and malnutrition
- address issues of isolation and depression
- greater supports for people leaving institutional care
- greater access to supports for drug and alcohol cessation
- greater drug and alcohol education for children
- more supports for people with Aspergers and autism
- more care centres like Claresholm

HOUSING

Greater access to adequate and affordable housing was a general concern. This involved:

- more mixed neighbourhoods with the integration of low income housing

- greater attention paid to safety
- more common space/central space/community space was suggested to allow people to get to know their neighbours and to build a sense of community
- incentives to landlords for low income housing
- more housing for the disabled
- changes to secondary suite bylaws to allow laneway suites
- education to counter NIMBY

FOOD

There were a variety of suggestions of ways in which people living in poverty could get better access to affordable, healthy food besides food banks. These included:

- community gardens established in more central neighbourhoods
- community kitchens
- urban farming initiatives
- creating a food charter for the city
- the city planting fruit trees
- Good Food Box
- education around gardening and cooking
- better hours for the food banks
- the establishment of a food charter
- addressing the existence of food deserts in the city
- establishing rooftop gardens like the one that exists at Park Place Mall
- becoming aware of cultural issues around food

RECREATION

There is general agreement that there needs to be greater access for low-income families to recreational facilities in the city. It was suggested that Jump Start/ Kid Sport subsidies be expanded.

IMMIGRANTS

It was suggested that supports for immigrants are not in place long enough. Transition programmes and employment supplements were suggested and it was thought that more could be done with the university and college to facilitate their integration.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Comparing the responses of participants in the roundtable event with the participants in the focus groups reveals, not surprisingly, common themes and concerns. Both groups identified specific issues around services such as transit, health care, and day care. Both also reveal concerns to break down barriers between groups in the city. The government employees used the language of silos to speak of the need for more inter-agency cooperation but one could extend the metaphor of silos to say that there is a general concern to overcome the isolation of the poor in their own silos of poverty.

In 1987 William Julius Wilson wrote a seminal book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, in which he argues that when people live in poverty in concentrated neighbourhoods it intensifies the social and economic impact of that poverty making it much more difficult for people to change their circumstances (Wilson, 1987). Further, when that poverty is experienced over generations it becomes even more entrenched (Sharkey, 2013, for an extensive discussion of Wilson and Sharkey's work see Rothstein, 2014). There are a number of theories about what this is so including arguments that when the poor live in isolation they lack the kind of mentoring or 'role models' that help people make changes in their lives or that they lack the social networks that enable them to access resources in the community (Chaskin and Joseph, 2011).

Specific suggestions that we move away from neighbourhoods of concentrated poverty by creating more mixed neighbourhoods and that we create more affordable, accessible "third spaces" where communities may gather, reflect a concern that poverty often translates into isolation both physical and social.

The stigmatization of the poor which may feed into this isolation is also exacerbated by that isolation, an isolation which often leads to depression and other forms of mental illness. In both the focus groups and the roundtables we heard repeatedly that the more people live in silos of poverty the more likely they are to suffer physically, mentally, socially and economically.

Many of the suggestions that were made by both people living in poverty and people working in agencies reflect a desire to create broader networks between people living in the city. Suggestions like creating opportunities for people in poverty to volunteer have the potential not only of enabling people to develop skills but also affords them the opportunity to form connections with other people in the city. In his study of how people find jobs Mark Granovetter found that most people find work through informal networks of what he calls "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973). We are most likely to share the same information and resources with those with whom we share strong ties, close friends and family, but acquaintances or casual friends are more likely to provide access to a broader network of information and connections (Beck, 2014). Granovetter suggests that communities with large networks of weak ties are actually better able to mobilize resources to address communities problems as well. The benefits of these kinds of programmes, therefore, accrue to the entire city and not just to people living in poverty.

Beck, Richard (2014, April 1) "How Friendship Saves the World: Sacramental Friendships and the Strength of Weak Ties." *Experimental Theology* <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.ca/2014/04/how-friendship-saves-world-sacramental.html>

Chaskin, Robert J. and Mark L. Joseph (2011) "Social Interaction in Mixed-Income Developments: Relational Expectations and Emerging Reality." *Journal of Urban Affairs* (Vol. 33, no. 2):209-237.

Granovetter, Mark S. (1973) "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 78, No. 6): 1360-1380.

Rothstein, Richard (2014) "The Urban Poor Shall Inherit Poverty." *The American Prospect* (January 7) <http://prospect.org/article/urban-poor-shall-inherit-poverty>

Sharkey, Patrick (2013) *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Toward Racial Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, William Julius (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Understanding the Impacts of and Finding Community Solutions to Poverty in Lethbridge

LOW INCOME IN LETHBRIDGE: A PROFILE
"YOU'RE TRYING TO GO UP A WATERFALL": A REPORT
COMMUNITY AGENCY CONSULTATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vibrant Lethbridge

Community and Social Development
City of Lethbridge | February 2015