

# **Guide to Studying Poverty and Homelessness in Small Municipalities**

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### **Introduction**

In the context of decreasing availability of local services, employment changes, and economic transition, there is an increasing need to understand service demands and options to assist people and communities. Some of these services may be dealing with worker transition. Some may be dealing with issues of poverty, or may be dealing with issues of homelessness. In particular, the question of poverty and homelessness has become more common in 2008 across northern BC as a topic of concern for local government.

To assist local governments in framing how they might investigate poverty and homelessness, this template guide provides an overview of issues and topics they might want to take into consideration.

This template is constructed in recognition that every place is unique, and every local government will have things that they are particularly more interested in, and thus, each local study would be different. This template, however, can provide a place from which to start the discussion.

## **Understanding Poverty and Homelessness**

Poverty and homelessness are very complicated issues. They do not just deal with people 'living on the street'. They also deal with a wide range of causal and service issues.

### ***Issues in Understanding Poverty and Homelessness***

- There are individuals who will be living on the street. In Canada and the United States, research has shown that a portion of this population also suffers from mental illness issues, and that efforts to change the way that we deliver mental health services actually resulted in more people living on the street due to a lack of follow up community care.
- There is another very large segment of the population which at any time is at risk of living in poverty or being homeless. Some of the groups that are at risk include:
  - those living in rental housing where they could lose access to this housing or where price increases could put them in the street;
  - lone parent households, particularly female lone-parent households with low incomes;
  - new immigrant groups to the community who may not know about the range of support options available and may not have an income base;
  - people with disabilities;
  - unattached adults;
  - women;
  - Aboriginal Canadians; and
  - low-income households.

For many households, a change in the structure of the household (i.e. divorce or death) or their employment status can quickly plunge them into a place where poverty and homelessness are facts of life.

### ***Additional Circumstances for Consideration***

- We know that in youth populations, where they are not well served by services or cannot stay in family environments, 'couch surfing' is a phenomena. These children are essentially homeless, but they are not living on the street.
- We know that seasonal pressures in the housing and employment markets may place people without access to affordable housing.
- Seniors on a fixed income are susceptible to losing their housing or living in poverty. This risk increases as seniors need higher levels of care as they age.
- New retirees can be susceptible to poverty, particularly during the transition between full employment income and retirement savings. This can also be a broader problem for communities that experience large scale layoffs.
- Tent communities may provide temporary accommodations, but are not suited to year round healthy living.

## **Broader Issues with Homelessness and Poverty**

As noted earlier, poverty and homelessness are very complex problems. There are a variety of issues that may cause or perpetuate poverty. Some of these may include:

- economic change (prolonged shut-downs, job losses, strikes, etc.);
- low wages or part-time work;
- availability and affordability of daycare options that may impact people's ability (especially women) to participate in the workforce;
- low education levels (low literacy rates and low high school completion rates) that can impact the ability of a labour force to adapt to changing labour markets and new opportunities;
- changes and losses in local services and supports;
- availability and affordability of housing options (i.e. social housing) and housing types;
- various types of physical or mental abuse;
- changes in health (job-related injury or health condition) that may be accompanied with high costs for medication, and the need for home support or travel to regional health care centres to access care; and
- social exclusion or discrimination.

As a result of the broad range of issues that may impact poverty, it is important to take a broader look at the economic, demographic, and service structure of a community. To make informed decisions, we recommend studies that include a full set of statistics that cover measures of these key issues in order to obtain a basic understanding of the service needs in a place. These measures may include examining:

- Employment (labour force participation, occupation, industry);
- Income (low-income cut-offs, low income rates, low income gaps);
- Education (high school completion rate, post-secondary education, literacy rates);
- Housing (owned versus renting, housing repairs needed, rental rates, mortgage payments, etc.);
- Household structure (lone-parent households, unattached individuals, number of children, living with relatives);
- Population structure (proportion of seniors, older workforce, gender, youth, aboriginal population, etc.);
- Ethnicity (language, immigrant status, etc.); and
- Transportation (by car, public transportation, walking, biking, taxi, etc.).
- General health and care services.
- Specific poverty and family support services.

## **Things for Small Local Governments to Think About in Studying Poverty and Homelessness**

Who do you need to talk to?

- You need to talk to service providers across a range of sectors that interact with those living in poverty (i.e. health, education, social services, food bank, thrift stores, drop-in centres, counseling, support groups, mental health, RCMP, churches).
- You need to talk to people who are using these services, including people who are homeless or who are living in poverty.
- You need to talk to the business community.
- You need to talk to industry and labour representatives.
- You need to talk to the leadership in both aboriginal and non-aboriginal groups in the community. For aboriginal populations, you need to get the views of those living on-reserve and those living off-reserve.

It is important to talk to such a wide breadth of groups because of the complex issues that cause or perpetuate poverty. It is important to understand the full set of needs of those living in poverty, as well as the challenges associated with delivering services to these individuals and families.

## The Importance of Tracking Services

It is important to create an inventory of service availability. This can help to determine service gaps that undermine community efforts to provide support to those living in poverty. Are there facilities for teaching healthy living habits, household budgeting, etc.? Limited service provision can also provide an important picture of the pressures confronting existing service providers, particularly for those providing services in multiple towns. As some services are shared across multiple places, they are sometimes provided on a part-time basis.

A service inventory should include the following services:

- community economic development groups,
- services available to members (unions, etc.),
- church and community group-based services,
- education,
- health,
- protection services (i.e. RCMP, fire, ambulance),
- legal services,
- transportation,
- services for children and the elderly,
- government services,
- recreation services,
- community / emergency services (personal aid, food banks, counseling, etc.), and
- social housing.

There is also a need to look at demand measures for these services. How many people use the food bank? What is the demand for soup kitchens? What is the demand for Christmas hampers or Christmas meals?

There is also a need to look at the organizational structure of those providing services. Which services are funded by the federal or provincial government? Which services depend upon local volunteer groups and clubs? Which services have long-term funding support and which are on annual contracts? Answering these types of questions can tell a good deal about how robust or fragile local services are.

## Recognition of Service Challenges

It is important to recognize some of the challenges faced by service providers in northern BC. Questions may be posed about the stresses being experienced by service providers. Some of these stressors may include staff skill levels, staff turnover and training, ability to have trusting relationships with their clients, management skills, where decisions are made, and the appropriateness of more general policies for local context problems, etc. What do service providers need to enhance the effectiveness and delivery of services provided? What would assist them? Would it be facilitating partnerships, more funding, access to space, or storage rooms? Both an inventory and a diagnostic tool about how these service providers are working are needed.

Second, a timeline should be created about service changes. It is not just about tracking what used to be available and what is no longer available, but also about the qualitative changes within these. Some services may still be available, but only because they have been offloaded onto the voluntary sector. Some full-time services may now only be available part-time.

There are important questions about how to effectively deliver services to those living in poverty. One of the key challenges in delivering services is confidentiality. In Elgin, Ontario, long-term social and health problems, as well as a lack of resources, led to the development of Guthrie House by volunteers. This is a community-based health and wellness centre managed by volunteer organizers that provides services formerly offered by mobile units. Services target specific groups, such as the elderly, and the larger community, such as substance abuse. It also plays a medical intervention and preventative role in community health. They provide multiple reasons why anybody might walk into this multi-service facility. A woman may want to talk to someone about spousal abuse. She may enter the facility to make a donation to the food bank, but she may also access counseling services during the same visit. It gets her in the facility and protects her confidentiality.

A needs assessment should bridge our understanding about service gaps and the needs of local residents in order to address complex issues related to local poverty. This needs assessment should also anticipate future needs. A community may not have any seniors at risk of poverty or homelessness right now, but they may have lots of older residents who are about to retire from the workforce, and, thus, we might identify a needs assessment as a tool that can help people with the economic, social, and mental health transformations they are about to go through in terms of having a steady income to relying on savings or pension.

The Union of BC Municipalities and the North Central Local Government Association are useful resources that local governments can turn to for local government policy responses. It is important that the responses be appropriate to the size of the local governments in northern BC. For example, bonus density zoning may be an appropriate incentive to encourage the development of social housing in urbanizing metropolitan areas, but other places may need something else as many communities do not have developers building up to the density limits.

## **Other Issues for Consideration**

- The informal economy. Some residents in rural and small town places are able to avoid living in poverty due to the informal economy. They hunt, grow their own crops, collect berries or mushrooms, can goods, exchange favours (i.e. shoveling snow), knit and sew their own garments, etc.
- Crime (i.e. family violence, break and enters, etc.).
- Child poverty.
- Understanding what types of costs are covered by social assistance benefits in a town. This will be different from place to place as costs for housing, food, daycare, transportation, and other services will vary.
- Understanding the social isolation of those living in poverty.
- Identifying access to informal support networks. Some residents may not have access to family and friends to offset some of these burdens.
- Poverty and HIV / AIDS.
- Exploring if rent increases are outpacing gains in income (i.e. minimum wage, social assistance, E.I., etc.).



## Sources of Interest

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### **Canadian Association of Food Banks**

Website: <http://www.cafb-acba.ca/main.cfm>

Information: National survey of emergency food programs in Canada (food bank use, meal program use).

### **Canadian Council on Social Development**

Website: [www.ccsd.ca](http://www.ccsd.ca)

Information: 2006 rates for low-income cutoffs (includes rural areas); literacy; income gaps; women with disabilities; part-time work; child poverty; children, schools, and poverty; incomes of immigrants, social exclusion, housing.

### **Community Development Institute, University of Northern British Columbia**

Website: [www.unbc.ca/cdi](http://www.unbc.ca/cdi)

Information: seniors' needs assessments completed in the Peace River Regional District, Terrace, Mackenzie, and Tumbler Ridge; Tumbler Ridge community transition study; innovative services and voluntary organizations; McBride and Area skills inventory assessment.

### **Institute for Research on Poverty**

Website: <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/aboutirp.htm>

Information: understanding poverty in the United States. Topics include education and poverty, health and poverty, nutrition and poverty, low-wage labour markets, inequality, and policy.

### **Introspect Poverty**

Website: [http://intraspec.ca/povertyCanada\\_news-and-reports.php](http://intraspec.ca/povertyCanada_news-and-reports.php)

Information: tracks news stories and available reports about homelessness and poverty in Canada.

### **New Rural Economy**

Website: <http://nre.concordia.ca>

Information: rural restructuring, innovative services, social exclusion and social support, building rural capacity, the informal economy in rural Canada, education levels in rural Canada.

### **North Central Local Government Association**

Website: <http://ncma.enorthernbc.com/Default.asp>

### **POVNET**

Website: <http://www.povnet.org>

Information: poverty-related news stories, online resources, and government information. Topics include: consumer debt, pay day loans, poverty research, poor bashing, panhandling, seniors, women, people of colour, homelessness, education, health, etc.

### **Statistics Canada, Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletins**

Website: <http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=21-006-X&CHROPG=1>

Information: comparison of rural and urban workers living in low income, part-time employment in Rural Canada, seasonal variation in rural employment, rural income disparities in Canada, migration to and from rural and small town Canada.

### **The Rural and Small Town Programme, Mount Allison University**

Website: <http://www.mta.ca/rstp/current.html>

Information: rural poverty discussion paper, social housing in the context of rural depopulation, housing needs of low income people living in rural areas, overview of rural poverty in Pictou County, overview of rural poverty in Cumberland County.

### **Union of BC Municipalities**

Website: <http://www.civicnet.bc.ca/siteengine/activepage.asp?bhcp=1>

### **Books**

Battle, K. 1997. *Persistent Poverty*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Cloke, P., Milbourne, P. and R. Widdowfield. 2002. *Rural Homelessness: Issues, experiences, and policy responses*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Raphael, D. 2007. *Poverty and Policy in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

### **Journal Articles**

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Fitchen, J. 1995. Spatial Redistribution of Poverty through Migration of Poor People to Depressed Rural Communities. *Rural Sociology* 60(2): 181-200.

Halseth, G. and A. Williams. 1999. Guthrie House: A Rural Community Organizing for Wellness. *Health and Place* 5: 27-44.

Jensen, L. 2006. At the Razor's Edge: Building Hope for America's Rural Poor. *Rural Realities* 1(1).

Peluso, N. L., C. R. Humphrey, and L. P. Fortmann. 1994. The Rock, the Beach, and the Tidal Pool: People and Poverty in Natural Resource-Dependent Areas. *Society and Natural Resources* 7: 23-28.

Saenz, R. and Peacock, W. 2006. Rural People, Rural Places: The Hidden Costs of Hurricane Katrina. *Rural Realities* 1(2): 1-10.

## **Government Reports**

Bernier, R. 1998. *The Dimensions of Wage Inequality Among Aboriginal Peoples*. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Catalogue 11F0019MIE1997109.

Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. 2008. *Beyond Freefall: Halting Rural Poverty*. <http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/Com-e/agri-e/rep-e/rep09jun08-e.pdf>