



# **School of Social Work**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**



## **Report on the Proceedings of the Symposium on Basic Income, Social Security and Poverty Reduction**

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Prepared for the UBC School of Social Work  
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The proceedings of this Symposium took place at the Creekside Community Centre, which occupies the traditional and unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̅əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Highlighting Human Rights</b> .....	4
<b>Overview of Basic Income</b> .....	5
BC's Political Context.....	5
Potential Issues with a Basic Income Strategy.....	6
Feedback from the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition.....	6
<b>Breakout Discussion Groups</b> .....	7
Constituency groups.....	8
Guiding questions for breakout discussions.....	8
What we heard .....	9
<i>First Nations</i> .....	9
<i>People with Disabilities</i> .....	10
<i>Seniors</i> .....	11
<i>Youth</i> .....	11
<i>Children &amp; Families</i> .....	12
<i>Newcomers (Immigrants &amp; Refugees)</i> .....	13
<i>Social Assistance Recipients</i> .....	14
<b>Overarching Themes</b> .....	15
<b>Cautions</b> .....	16
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	17
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	18

## Executive Summary

In March 2018, the UBC School of Social Work co-sponsored a Symposium on Basic Income, Social Security and Poverty Reduction (“the Symposium”). This Symposium was part of provincial government consultations that sought feedback on the upcoming poverty reduction strategy. UBC invited a range of experts, stakeholders and people with lived experience of poverty to share their insights, experience and suggestions for a provincial poverty reduction strategy. The Symposium sought specific feedback on whether or not a basic income proposal could become part of a broader poverty reduction strategy and each constituent group expressed concerns about its viability.

Guest speakers and facilitators included:

- Diego Cardona (Fresh Voices)
- Trish Garner (Provincial Organizer, BC Poverty Reduction Coalition)
- Patsy George (Past President, United Nations Association in Canada)
- Seth Klein (Director, CCPA-BC Office)
- Adrienne Montani (First Call BC)
- David Piachaud (Professor Emeritus, London School of Economics)
- Michael Prince (Lansdowne Professor of Social Policy, University of Victoria)
- Tim Stainton (Professor, UBC School of Social Work; Director, Centre for Inclusion and Citizenship)
- Miu Chung Yan (Director, UBC School of Social Work)

### *Symposium Partners*



## Introduction

In July 2017, the newly elected Premier of British Columbia, John Horgan, issued mandate letters to the 22 Ministers, including the Honourable Shane Simpson, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The mandate letter outlined a number of priority areas, including: - “develop a basic-income pilot to test whether giving people a basic income is an effective way to reduce poverty, improve health, housing and employment” and “design and implement a province-wide poverty-reduction strategy with legislated targets and timelines” (Horgan, 2017, p.3). The BC Confidence and Supply Agreement, signed by representatives of the BC NDP and Green caucuses also includes reference to a poverty-reduction strategy, which includes “addressing the real causes of homelessness, including affordable accommodation, support for mental health and addictions and income security” (Confidence and Supply Agreement, 2017, p. 4). Since October 2017, the BC government has been soliciting feedback across the province to better understand what poverty looks like in BC and how to best take action.

## Highlighting Human Rights

Globally, income security has been identified as a key human rights issue. As the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states,

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (UNDHR, 1948, Article 25).*

The human rights language and analysis were a hallmark of the Symposium, as many attendees referred to the importance of a rights-based system that upholds the dignity and wellbeing of all people living in BC, regardless of their income status. This perspective is reflected in the BC Association of Social Workers’ (“BCASW”) own Advocacy efforts regarding the BC Poverty

Reduction Strategy. The BCASW calls on the provincial government to take up a cohesive approach to eliminating poverty that involves all citizens, because “we can reduce poverty, increase well-being and enable each citizen to make the contribution they can” (BCASW, n.d., p. 2). People living with poverty and the professionals, advocates and communities that seek to support them have a deep understand of how we can achieve collective well-being. The following summary of the Symposium and its proceedings makes this apparent and provides concrete solutions to address critical issues.

## Overview of Basic Income

In some jurisdictions, basic income has been put forth as a key intervention to address income inequality. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2016) defines basic income as “a ‘no strings attached’ transfer from government to individuals or families that can be simpler to administer and provide more dignity to recipients than welfare payments and other forms of social assistance” (CCPA, 2016, p. 5). This type of transfer becomes a right of citizenship, available to everyone (CCPA, 2016, p. 9).

### *BC’s Political Context*

On June 30, 2017, a coalition government was formed by the BC NDP and Green Parties. The Confidence and Supply Agreement, outlining agreements held by the NDP and Green caucuses specifically prioritizes exploring basic income as a potential aspect of a poverty reduction strategy, and states that the provincial government should design and implement a basic income pilot to see if this approach could reduce poverty (2017, pp. 7-8). The 2018 provincial budget provides \$4 million over two years to test the feasibility of basic income in BC, a strategy which includes convening an expert panel and consulting with stakeholders (Ministry of Finance, 2018, p. 24). The Symposium similarly sought this information from all attendees, to better understand how a basic income could potentially address poverty and inequality but could also potential negative or even deleterious impacts on various constituency groups or individual recipients.

### *Potential Issues with a Basic Income Strategy*

The proceedings of the Symposium highlighted these concerns and emphasized the need for broad interventions to address poverty, rather than singularly-focused income security programs such as basic income.

David Piachaud, Professor Emeritus of Social Policy at the London School of Economics opened the Symposium with his analysis of basic income. In his keynote, Professor Piachaud outlined 5 key elements traditionally associated with basic income and questions these raise for policy makers:

- (1) Unconditionality: what are the implications of an unconditional, un-means-tested basic income benefit that is available to the general populace? Would it be more or less fair?
- (2) Individualization of Benefits: would attaching basic income benefits to individual rather than family units produce a disproportionate gain of income for larger households?
- (3) Types of Leisure: is it any longer possible to distinguish between unwanted leisure of un/underemployed individuals and leisure that is a personal choice, as social security systems have tried to do?
- (4) Impact of the Changing Labour Market: how will increasing automation in the labour market change the distribution of employment and unemployment and how far could a Basic Income cope with this?
- (5) Political Feasibility: is an unconditional basic income likely to be politically acceptable?



### *Feedback from the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition*

Trish Garner, Community Organizer with the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (“BCPRC”), was the respondent to Professor Piachaud’s keynote, grounding the discussion in a BC context. Notably, the BCPRC takes no official position on basic income, as the 400 groups it represents (including community, non-

profit, faith and health organizations) have varied and divergent opinions on the matter. Garner's response included the main benefits of a basic income scheme: lack of stigma for recipients and unconditionality of benefits. She also noted potential drawbacks: (1) subsidizing low-wage employers; (2) defunding or dismantling existing social services; and, (3) turning all benefit recipients into shoppers in a neoliberal market. The BCPRC is advocating for a 7-pillar poverty reduction strategy, and their guiding questions are a useful launching point:

- (1) What is a basic income pilot actually testing, given that we already know that increasing the incomes of poor people has a beneficial impact? Is it actually trying to test (dis)incentives to work based on the damaging assumption that "poor people are lazy"?
- (2) What social policy is the most sustainable and the hardest to dismantle in a changing political context?
- (3) What social policy enables the collective rather than the individual? What social policy builds the collective power of the poor and the working class?

With these framing questions in mind, constituency-focussed groups shared discussions of the poverty reduction strategy and the potential role of basic income in alleviating inequality.

## Breakout Discussion Groups

In order to promote tailored perspectives and feedback from key stakeholders on broad poverty reduction strategies, attendees broke out into constituency-focussed groups with the intention of: clarifying key issues, note what is working/not working within current systems, identify major gaps, propose solutions, consider the role that basic income might play within these solutions, identify key provincial, federal and municipal roles and actions in poverty reduction, and identify community anti-poverty actions.



### *Constituency Groups*

The constituency groups represented at the Symposium were: First Nations; Persons with Disabilities; New Canadians; Children and Families; Youth; Social Assistance Users; and Seniors. Each constituency-focussed group was comprised of a facilitator with demographic expertise, who was supported by a social work student who acted as note-taker/recorder. Groups were composed of individuals with lived experience, friends or family members of individuals with lived experience, activists, and paid professional supports.

### *Guiding Questions for Breakout Discussions*

- (1) What are the key income security and related supports for this population?
- (2) What are the three most critical issues related to poverty and income security for this population?
- (3) What are the three most important changes to the current system of income supports that are required to reduce poverty and improve income security: changes, additions, eliminations, etc.?
- (4) What are the potential benefits and risks of a basic income system for this population?
- (5) What key elements would you like to see in a basic income system?
- (6) What do you not want to see in a basic income system?
- (7) What are the three key elements of a poverty reduction strategy in addition to or as an alternative to a basic income system?

After the breakout discussion groups, facilitators and reporters shared their insights with the collective group. There was the opportunity for feedback, followed by a panel discussion and Q&A. Powerful perspectives and experiences were shared within group feedback and commonality in hope and concern for poverty reduction strategies and basic income emerged through the panel discussion and question and answer period. Through facilitated discussion, the constituency-focussed group clarified the key issues facing them, noted what is and is not working within current systems, identified major systemic gaps, provided solutions and addressed the potential role of basic income in alleviating the impact of poverty.

## *What We Heard*

### First Nations

The First Nations group expressed concern that a basic income would not meet the needs of their community and will be guided by a paternalistic colonialist approach. The participants expressed frustration having to re-tell their truths about the same issues and see nothing being done to address them. It was also expressed that if the government introduces a poverty reduction strategy, no matter what that looks like, First Nation groups need to be consulted throughout the process, not only in the beginning phases. The discussion leaned toward developing more resources and services that are decolonized and easier to access. One member explained that “it is our human right to have a home [and] food. The system needs to change” (personal communication, March 16, 2018). Some solutions shared in this group included free childcare for low-income families, better access to ministry workers to assist with system navigation, better accessibility to legal aid, lower bus fares, more community advocates, discontinuing the practice of removing First Nation children from their homes, and streamlining services for youth aging out of care.



### *Highlights*

Ending paternalistic & colonial approaches  
Ongoing consultation | Streamlined systems

## People with Disabilities

The people living with disability group discussed the supports that are currently available for British Columbians living with disabilities. It was discussed how these supports are fragmented, have onerous criteria requirements, not streamlined through the life trajectory, and extremely stigmatized. Newcomers living with disabilities was also discussed. Refugee claimants who have disabilities can only apply for welfare, not Persons with Disabilities (PWD), and have to navigate getting federal funding for physical and psychological health needs. The disability group feared that despite the fragmented and stigmatizing system that we have, a basic income will not take into consideration the heterogeneous population of disabled people. The solution for this group focused on restructuring the current income assistance program, considering social services as social utilities, making the system less stigmatized, restructuring to increase accessibility, and having case workers available to assist people navigate the system. “Whatever we design should be informed by a culture of human kindness, not charity” (M. Prince, presentation, March 16, 2018).

### *Highlights*

Fragmented supports | Restructuring Income Assistance |  
Social utilities | Support to navigate systems



## Seniors



Notably, the senior population has basic income, but it results from a complicated mix between provincial and federal benefits. The issue for this group is the senior population is not homogenous and there needs to be an intersectional approach when determining basic income needs for seniors. The group suggested that all government agencies should become more efficient, for example, when registering seniors for benefits once they qualify. A suggestion was the federal government use the data they keep on people when they file their yearly taxes to automatically enroll seniors for the benefits they qualify for. Social determinants of health were discussed including the need for development and access to more senior appropriate housing that is affordable, safe and supportive as a poverty reduction mechanism.

### *Highlights*

Complicated benefits | More efficient administration | Seniors Housing

## Youth

The youth group reviewed the current supports in place for youth aging out of care, such as tuition waivers, Agreements with Young Adults, Youth Education Assistance Funds. They also discussed the barriers youth face when accessing services and government support including age, parental income, education plans, welfare rules, being pushed to take low wage jobs, and social housing wait lists. High student debt levels and the lack of supports for youth caring for family members were also identified as problematic. The concerns around basic income for this group related to ensuring rent, transit, education, and other services do not increase if basic income is introduced.

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A large barrier for youth currently is affordable housing and transportation. Careful consideration of youth living in urban versus rural settings is necessary to address when considering a basic income. If the system does adopt basic income, or expansion of services, the government needs to move away from the stigmatizing and oppressive practice of requiring proof that the person is deserving of support. The experiences and circumstances of racialized/marginalized/oppressed groups are often ignored within universal systems and a basic income scheme might do the same. Everyone deserves support, and no one should be worse off from a poverty reduction strategy. Three key elements of a poverty reduction strategy were identified as rent controls, un-barriered access to education, and access to full health care. Young people's input should be sought in any basic income modeling.



### *Highlights*

Youth aging out of care | Access to education | Healthcare  
Managing the high cost of living | Less oppressive systems

### *Children & Families*



The children and families group discussed the growing impact of poverty on working families. The current supports and process involved in assessing whether or not families meet criteria for social assistance is a dehumanizing process. Work that parents who do not participate in the labour market are seen as valueless in the current system. Basic income is a less dehumanizing way of receiving services and provides payment for the parent that stays home and invests their time into their children.

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*Children & Families continued*

This group cautioned that any changes to social assistance should be difficult to dismantle, should the political environment changes. The group agreed that a basic income should not be the only program for children and families and that government needs to consider housing, childcare and healthcare.

*Highlights*

Child & Family poverty | Housing | Childcare | Healthcare

*Newcomers (Immigrants & Refugees)*

The newcomer group identified a current system that is complicated, fragmented, and challenging to navigate. The current supports for newcomers comes from federal sponsored refugee programs, private sponsored refugee programs, and blended sponsorship. Refugee claimants receive some basic support from the provincial government. The newcomer group felt that a basic income could move away from categorizing people and make eligibility and support easier to access and understand. However, the group cautions that if basic income is an alternative to the supports in place now, it would not work in practice. A basic income will not make housing more affordable, improve education, and improve employment. Most importantly, a basic income will not solve systemic racism and discrimination. Discussion of alternatives to a basic income included raising the minimum wage and creating rent control.

*Highlights*

Stratified immigration system | Easier access to benefits | Addressing racism & discrimination

### *Social Assistance Recipients*

The social assistance recipient group discussed how the current system is degrading and that a basic income strategy could reduce the stigma. The current system is riddled with hoops to jump through to receive access to services and financial support and relies on constant oppressive surveillance strategies to ensure the person still needs the support. The proposal of basic income raised many concerns for social assistance recipient, including a loss or reduction in existing social services, or the potential for future policymakers dismantle basic income. There was also concerns of loss of universal essential services including health care, housing, and food security. Rather than solely



supporting basic income, social assistance recipients emphasized developing diverse strategies of social and economic care, such as: expanded healthcare benefits (including dental), improved employment transition programs, reopening ministry offices, increase access to services, and engagement with communities and stakeholders. This constituent group specifically identified issues with the current WorkBC Employment Services model, proposing that it could include expanded access to education and training.

### *Highlights*

Degrading & stigmatizing systems | Fear of losing existing services | Diverse Programming

## Overarching Themes

Consensus among the groups was that whatever path basic income or poverty reduction strategies take, it will need to be guided by a human rights framework. All groups spoke about application of intersectional approaches and the development of guiding principles when considering the feasibility of basic income given the heterogeneity of the population. The importance of building kindness and dignity into a poverty reduction strategy is critical to set the stage for humanity and basic human rights for all people moving forward.

Other themes included:

- Consulting and engaging with groups affected by poverty;
- Promoting less intrusive and less stigmatizing means testing;
- Developing or improving social services;
- Investing in affordable housing, rent control, and appropriate housing supports;
- Investment in human capital at all ages through education, employment, and healthcare;
- Developing an accessible social service system with no barriers or gaps;
- Creating a poverty reduction strategy or basic income that is difficult to dismantle by future governments;
- Moving away from a patriarchal and hierarchical system toward a person-centred system.



## Cautions

A poverty reduction strategy that includes basic income has not been attempted at a provincial level to date and stakeholder groups at the symposium were apprehensive of such a strategy. Given the novelty of basic income, and the absence of a poverty reduction strategy, the cautions and concerns raised by the stakeholder groups must be considered. This report summarizes the fear of introducing basic income to British Columbians: loss, reduction or elimination of existing benefits. Basic income, alone will not be enough to assist people who require more than financial support in their daily life. The constituency-focused groups cautioned that when developing a basic income, or any poverty reduction mechanism, diverse groups cannot be treated as homogenous. No group came up with a one-size-fits-all strategy, recognizing their many intersectional needs. If basic income was introduced, means testing would be minimal and thereby reduce stigma of benefits. Basic services, however, should continue to be available, offered and accessible. People's needs will change over the life span and a basic income needs to accommodate that.

All groups described the need to move away from the practice of surveillance and policing of people living in poverty.



Any poverty reduction strategy must ensure that all people have their needs met – regardless of gender, nation, race, age, sexuality, family composition, ability etc. All constituents identified shortcomings and gaps in our current income security and social service regimes. Application processes and review should be streamlined, gaps should be identified and closed, and there should be case workers to assist people navigate the system. Advocates should receive funding to educate people about basic income, or any poverty reduction strategies that are deployed, and promote the needs of their community. Constituents were all looking for systems informed by kindness, care, dignity, and humanity.

## Conclusion

The Basic Income, Social Security and Poverty Reduction Community Symposium brought together groups of people from the community who experience, or work with people who experience, the impact of poverty in British Columbia. The effects of poverty reduction and basic income strategies will have a varying impact on the way individuals and groups are able to live in community. This Symposium recognized how critical the potential harms or benefits of poverty reduction strategies are for many different communities.

Thoughtful discussions and debates occurred regarding what British Columbia's poverty reduction strategy should look like and how to proceed with development, so it effectively captures the needs of those living in poverty. Consensus among the constituency-focused groups was that a mono-approach of basic income will not address the structural inequalities and oppression of people living in poverty experience. Moving forward, a person-centred approach needs to be adopted and the current stigma and barriers people living in poverty experience need to be eliminated. Gaps in the systems need to be closed and people living in poverty need to be treated with dignity and respect.

The provincial government must understand that implementing basic income is not a panacea and poverty reduction will require ongoing supports, investment in social services, and development of a system that is difficult to dismantle. Most importantly, basic income, or any poverty reduction strategy adopted, needs to be built on the foundation of human rights, human dignity and kindness.

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