How Poverty Can Impact Our Lives: 
Stories from FCSS Staff, 
Volunteers and Clients 

POVERTY AND FCSS

Poverty has a huge impact on FCSS and the communities we serve. As families struggle with inadequate incomes, they are caught in cycles of despair, isolation and anger as they try to make a decent life for themselves. Families need more than the bare necessities that income supports sometimes provide.

Low income families increasingly turn to FCSS for support and services. As a result, more staff hours and more programming is required to support these families. Additionally, FCSS programs receive more grant requests from community agencies trying to meet increased demands for their services. In turn, the need for increased provincial FCSS funding is intensified and the cycle of pouring more dollars into services rather than addressing the issues of poverty, increases government spending.
March 2004

We are pleased to present the 2004 FCSS Story Book. The theme of this edition is poverty and how it can impact our lives.

We have gathered stories from FCSS programs across the province – stories from FCSS program staff, volunteers and clients – to illustrate how poverty affects individuals, families and communities.

Some of the stories describe how FCSS programs have been involved in initiatives to address poverty and in raising awareness about poverty issues, while other stories from clients show how FCSS is an important community resource for support and services.

Research has shown that income is the most significant determinant of health and well-being. Income determines living conditions such as the kind of housing families can afford and the ability to buy sufficient, nourishing food. Research also shows that people with low incomes use more health, social services and child welfare services. Further, a key recommendation of the Mazankowski Report dealt with reducing poverty, particularly as it relates to children, as a method of improving the overall health of Albertans.

We, in the FCSS community, believe income support levels need to be increased immediately to avoid a crisis for poor children in this province and to ensure Albertans with low incomes have a decent quality of life.

We would like to thank everyone who shared their stories with us. We would also like to thank Jim MacQuarrie for his work in preparing this Story Book.

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“I want to tell my story so that other people will know how it feels to be on social assistance. This story is only a snapshot, a glimpse into my life. I choose to share this with you so others may learn from me.”

I am a single mom with two daughters. One is fully grown and living on her own. The other is entering the junior high years. I have recently ended my marriage. My daughter and I are in the process of not only building ourselves a new home, but also a new life.

The path that I have chosen has many potholes and bumps. Some I can see and others catch me unaware. One of the biggest bumps for me is being on social assistance. It’s like when you are going into surgery and they make you write out all your information. If it is an emergency, the paperwork can wait. When you go to social services, your family is broken and it is an emergency, it is not elective surgery. It would be like sitting and filling out paper work with a brain aneurysm.

It is enough of a struggle to be a single parent, ending your marriage, and trying to budget on what social assistance allows you. On top of this mountain, I struggle daily with a panic anxiety disorder. I look just like everyone else. I want everyone to know that I am just like other normal people. I still have a brain, feelings, take care of my family. I have dreams, ambitions, desires and hope. I hope that my dreams will come true.

“I feel judged as being lazy, stupid, spoiled …

Living with a panic anxiety disorder creates extra stress for me because of the way other people view me. I am an intelligent woman, though I appear stupid because of being confused, overwhelmed, and then my body shuts down to protect itself. I feel judged as being lazy, stupid, spoiled, and therefore feel less than. It’s like asking a person in a wheelchair to get up and walk. A physical disability is visible for all to see. When a person is in a wheel chair you can see the hurt. I look just like every other person you see in the mall, at church or at the corner store.

The price I pay for relying on social assistance is that I forfeit my self-esteem. It takes a continual beating. Although they keep you from starving to death, they don’t feel an obligation to the person. I feel that it leads to perpetual poverty. When the system tells you that you can’t, then sooner or later you believe that you can’t.

I wonder how the system would change if the worker felt the same level of obligation and accountability towards their clients as the clients did towards the worker. I feel that social assistance is like a strict parent (i.e. they can take it away from you; it is like being sent to bed without any supper). The odd thing is, though, I believe that everybody should pull their own weight. But what do we do with the people who can't?
My dream is to get better. To be able to go back to work and get off social assistance. To give my daughter the same opportunities that other children from more well-to-do families receive. The teen years are hard years. They see what others have. I tell her the way out is through education. To go to college or university.

My hope is that if I work at getting better, I will. I can’t imagine living the rest of my life in fear.

I wanted to tell my stories so that others will know that my work is to get better and to build a life for my daughter and myself. It is no less valuable than anyone else’s work.

“A recent study by Statistics Canada found that wealth inequality significantly increased from 1984 through 1999 – while the poor were steadily getting poorer, the three wealthiest categories of Canadians increased their prosperity by 27% or more.”

*Canadian CED Network*

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**The Vulcan Experience**

In Vulcan, we assist the Food Bank with ads, volunteer screening and appreciation, travel, etc. We also attend anti-poverty meetings through the local coalition, and run credit and budget counseling classes.

We organize courtesy transportation for seniors, assist with a village transportation service, conduct the Poverty Game, and advertise to start and run a Community Garden and Chat Club, where we would bring in business and self help speakers.

We also refer people to various agencies that may be able to assist families. A local church group provides quilts, many individuals knit, and the hotel will provide emergency accommodation. As well, used furniture and clothing is sometimes provided free from a local group, if we have someone in desperate need.
In June 1995, individuals within the Hinton community gathered to discuss concerns regarding the resources available for adults with special mental health needs. Many issues arose from the review - most notably the lack of housing and employment available to this group of citizens. B.R.I.D.G.E.S. evolved from the vision that individuals with special mental health needs could enjoy a more meaningful and independent lifestyle if housing and employment opportunities were readily available with appropriate support services.

With assistance from FCSS, this group of volunteers became an incorporated society, developed policies and procedures, obtained backing and resources from Alberta Mental Health and went on to hire a part-time paid coordinator.

The group now has three part-time paid staff and holds weekly lunches serving up to 25 people. It has a number of outreach programs, including a depression support group and a resource bank for the families of persons with mental health diagnoses. It also offers public information sessions and has developed a relationship with the Hinton Youth Centre to use their facility for gatherings several times each month, during the day. A major project for B.R.I.D.G.E.S. is the painting of a mural on the wall of one of the local shops.

During the mid 1990s, the Hinton Ministerial Association attempted to introduce a Neighbour Link project to the community. The Association, recognizing the need of assistance, called on FCSS to help them achieve their aim. In 1998, the FCSS board agreed to grant the necessary funding and staff time to support the churches in the initial stages of establishing this worthwhile initiative.

Six of the original seven collaborating churches now have a flourishing organization, which last year handled more than 300 calls for assistance and expect to double that total for the current year.

Two of the main needs for help are transporting people to medical appointments, often into Edmonton, and the furniture exchange. People with useable, but unneeded household goods can contact Neighbour Link, who will accept the donations and store them until there is a need. Sometimes the call comes from someone who is leaving the Women's Shelter and setting up home, or someone who lost everything in a fire, or people in need because of hard times.
“Unity Centre of Northwest Edmonton is a valuable resource for my family, my friends and myself. Unity has helped us to survive through my hard times.

I have been utilizing services at Unity for at least eight years. I enjoy the support and caring shown by the staff and patrons alike. Even though I have moved several times, I have always made an effort to attend Unity’s programs.”

I regularly use their food programs to supplement my groceries. This enables me to make ends meet throughout the month. I am a single mother of four children and am currently on social assistance. Budgeting the small amount of income I receive has always been extremely difficult for me. Through Unity’s food program and budgeting advice and aid from the staff, I have been able to recover from major financial problems.

In the past year, I have been coping with coming to terms with addictions to gambling, alcohol and drugs. Unity has put me in control with valuable resources and helped me deal with the depression I have had associated with these addictions. I have accessed peer support, counseling and other help through Unity.

When I lost temporary custody of my children for four days in April, Unity staff helped me control and overcome my suicidal thoughts and concentrate on what I needed to accomplish to get my children back.

“Unity staff helped me overcome my suicidal thoughts.”

When one of my daughters had to serve community hours due to a shoplifting offence, Unity gave her a place where she could help others and realize that although our family is struggling, others are having similar difficulties and still managing. She continues to volunteer occasionally at Unity.

My children have accessed programs at Unity that allowed them to interact with peers at a price I can afford. These programs are not offered elsewhere, or are too expensive elsewhere. All of my children have taken a babysitting course at Unity that has allowed them to earn their own spending money and become more independent.

When my friends have come to me with problems, I have referred them to Unity for help. Many of them have accessed Unity’s services more than once and all have received some help.

There are so many things that Unity has done for me and my family that I feel it is impossible to list them all. They have helped me to meet the nutritional, financial, social and emotional needs of my family and myself in everyday life. They have helped me to prepare for school, deal with the emotional side of medical issues, prepare for seeking work and many other things.

I feel many people in the community benefit from Unity’s services. I hope to continue accessing their services and support and know that Unity will remain a valuable resource to others.
This family lives in a rural, isolated community. Mom is employed at a large department store in Lloydminster and Dad is unemployed due to a chronic health condition that he does not cope with, as he also suffers from chronic depression. Several broken-down vehicles line the driveway, along with toys and a variety of litter.

Mom works the night shift so that she can be at home during the day for the children and can put them to bed at night before she leaves. Because her job is physically demanding, she is usually too exhausted to clean up the house and the yard. Keeping her family fed is her main priority. Dad often does not get up until late in the morning, as he has insomnia and is not able to provide support with housekeeping duties or child care.

The children spend the days in the house playing or watching television. Playschool is out of the question, as it is far too expensive for this family, and they would not be able to take their turn providing the group snack and parent volunteering. The children therefore do not get equal access to books and learning activities and are already going to be behind their peers when they reach school. Mom often naps, Dad is self-absorbed, and these children are lacking for a stimulating learning environment.

Stress, worry and frustration overwhelm this family at times.

Money becomes tight a few weeks before Mom’s pay cheque arrives. Sometimes, there is not enough food. Mom would access the food bank, but it is in another town 20 miles away, and she must conserve gas so that she can drive to work the next day. One of the children is frequently sick with respiratory infections, but trips to the doctor are not always possible and the result is a hearing loss due to infection and fever. This child is not talking yet, or meeting developmental milestones.

Stress, worry and frustration overwhelm this family at times. The children are at risk for physical and emotional abuse.

Eventually, one of the children enters the school system. He is behind his peers due to a lack of the quality learning experiences you get from normal, everyday life. At times, he does not have an adequate lunch or the “right” clothes. He lacks social skills, which further isolates him. The teachers conclude he has some learning problems and low self-esteem. We, the support workers, worry that we will not be able to break the cycle of poverty that he seems heading for.

You can never have international peace as long as you have national poverty. *Stephen Leacock*
**High River Helpers**

In High River, we have had quite an increase in the number of people utilizing our Food Bank. Due to this increase, the “Community Foods Connection Committee” was created to assist our town’s Food Bank year round.

The committee’s first initiative was the “Food Box Program.” Volunteers distributed and picked up labeled boxes to various businesses, and advertising ran in our local papers, radio and on Shaw cable.

The program was quite successful. Monetary contributions were also welcome, and tax receipts issued.

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**Caring in Camrose**

Poverty can have a huge impact on families expecting babies. I know of a prenatal mom, expecting twins, who is suffering from an often-debilitating panic disorder. Because she is on a fixed income from AISH, her resources are limited for preparing for the arrival of the babies, and not being prepared only makes the panic disorder worse.

Through her involvement with the Leduc County FCSS Family Connection Home Visitation program, she was able to access Second Glance for free clothing (not for the babies since they are not here yet) and a bouncy chair. The Emergency Clothing and Furniture Depot in Camrose provided a high chair, rocking chair, baby clothes, crib sheets and blankets, and maternity clothes.

This assistance has been crucial to creating a more secure maternal mindset that directly impacts on the prenatal environment for these babies.

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“The high school dropout rate for children from poor families is 2.5 times greater than for children from non-poor families.”

Drumheller FCSS hosts interagency meetings and from discussions around the table, it was agreed that a sub-committee should be formed to host a Poverty Symposium for the region.

The planning was carried out by Patrick Dillon, Hearthstone Child and Family Services and myself, as Director of Community Services. Agencies were on board and in order to ensure that politicians were aware and supportive of the project, a presentation was made to the Mayors and Reeves Network. With their support in place, the logistics of planning the day came together quickly with the generous support of the City of Calgary and Alberta Community Development.

The symposium was held in November of 2002 and brought together human services representatives from Drumheller, Hanna, Kneehill County and points between. A portrait of poverty in Alberta and the region was provided by Derek Cook – a social planner with the City of Calgary. The participants then had an opportunity to discuss the presentation and identify actions which could be implemented to better address poverty in the area.

These sessions were facilitated by Dwayne Van Bavel from Alberta Community Development. The results of the Symposium were presented to the Mayors and Reeves Network, and they indicated three primary issues which required further study:

1. provision of a rural transportation service
2. provision of rural child care services
3. provision of affordable housing

To date, two projects are being pursued. The first is that the Town of Drumheller held a series of workshops in cooperation with the Alberta Real Estate Board to learn about opportunities and requirements when pursuing affordable housing options for a community. The second committee consists of a group of agencies that are exploring the establishment of an emergency housing service for youth. Work will be continuing through 2003 on these initiatives.

The honest poor can sometimes forget poverty. The honest rich can never forget it. G. K. Chesterton
**Cardston Cares**

Mary walked into our office with a broad smile on her face. “I have good news! Let me show you!”

She hands me an envelope that reveals a cheque from Alberta Seniors. She is very grateful for the $400 she has received for the Special Needs Assistance program. It will go towards paying for the higher utility bills she hadn’t counted on this winter. She gives me a big hug and thanks me for helping her fill in the application. “I couldn’t have done it without you!”

I remember when Mary came into my office a few months earlier. She was worried about her ability to pay for her rising utilities costs. She told me how she wears warm clothes around the house so that she can keep the heat down and that she keeps only one small light on at night until bedtime, when she turns it off. But her bills were still too high. She does not own a car and walks to do her errands and shopping whenever she can, or uses taxi passes when she can’t. She eats at home and has a vegetable garden. Mary is now a very independent woman who does the best she can to live on a fixed low income. Utility costs were a special consideration until May 30 this year. I was glad I could help out, but what about next year?

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**So Does St. Paul**

“I have used the Community Counseling Service for many years. I started using the service for marriage counseling, which over a short period of time turned into individual counseling. During this time, I saw a great deal of things that needed changing in my life. I grew a great deal. I saw what I was capable of doing and started changing. I also saw that I was in a very negative, unhealthy relationship.

I have been through many changes over the year, one of which was a divorce. Even though it was extremely difficult, I knew it was for the best for my children and myself. Counseling helped me though this difficult time.

My children also went for counseling later on. Being a single parent on a fixed income, I really appreciate the fact that I could get counseling that suited my limited budget.

I have grown into a more secure, independent, assertive individual. I have a much stronger self-image. The Community Counseling Service helped me change my life in a very positive way.”

*What’s in the Basket?*
Jake Kuiken, MSW, RSW
Joe Ceci, MSW, RSW

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*Welfare rates were cut by approximately 20% in 1993, and remained the same for nearly 10 years. In June 2003, rates were increased by $20 per family, or 2%, the first increase in 10 years during which time inflation eroded the 1993 rates by 25%*
Nadine is from east central Alberta. She has a husband and two children and struggles with living in poverty. Nadine says “There is a stigma attached to being poor,” but she deals with that. She works and so does her husband.

“We live in rural Alberta, so the wages for our jobs probably tend to be lower, but I have lived in a bigger city in the past and didn’t like it.” She doesn’t think uprooting her family and moving to a larger urban centre would improve her economic outlook. They would just be more isolated and more anonymous.

Nadine and her husband both have fairly steady employment, therefore they pay taxes, so the government knows they are living below the poverty line. “The government should have a way of communicating with people living in poverty,” she adds. “We don’t know what kinds of programs are available to us, but the government knows what is available and they should be telling us what is out there, to help us improve our lives.”

Nadine says something as simple as a newsletter detailing programs available for low income families would be a great help for families like hers. In rural areas, the government offices are few and far between. You usually have to drive a fair distance to find a lot of information and even forms that have to be filled out. Nadine has accessed help through her local FCSS, and they have provided some counseling. Nadine says FCSS has helped her in the past, but she knows they don’t have the answers to all her problems.

When asked how long she has been living in poverty, Nadine states: “As soon as we had children, things changed.” When asked if she can see the light at the end of the tunnel, Nadine says: “I expect things won’t be as hard when the children are grown and on their own, then there might be more money to stretch out the month.”

...because of BSE, her husband has been laid off

Nadine loves her husband and children but sometimes things get a little stressful. Her husband has recently been laid off from his job through no fault of his own. He works in the agricultural industry (a big employer in rural Alberta) and because of BSE (mad cow disease), he has been laid off.

Nadine’s husband will get unemployment benefits, but not soon enough to cover monthly expenses. Government help never comes soon enough, and they don’t have money saved up for a rainy day.

Poverty is to be without sufficient money, but it is also to have little hope for better things. It is a feeling that one is unable to control one’s destiny, that one is powerless in a society that respects power. The poor have very limited access to means of making known their situation and their needs. To be poor is to feel apathy, alienation from society, entrapment, hopelessness and to believe that whatever you do will not turn out successfully. Canadian Royal Commission on the Status of Woman, Report, 1970
...Nadine’s story (continued)

Every penny they make at their jobs goes to feeding the family, paying the rent and the utility bills. More money goes to the schools the children attend for all the “extras”; then there is the phone they just managed to get hooked up again. Nadine says they lost their phone because they couldn’t keep up with the bills, so they paid a huge deposit to get it back and only local calls can be made from it.

There are a lot of things in life people take for granted. Nadine’s family considers everything they have a little luxury. “We have a car and struggle to pay the huge insurance premiums, but we need the car to get to the nearest city (Camrose) to buy food in bulk, so we can save a little money,” she says.

Nadine has been able to pick up a few extra shifts at her place of work, but there won’t be enough money to pay for her daughter’s grade nine graduation so her daughter just won’t go. “It’s another little extra we just can’t afford,” Nadine says.

She is hoping the BSE mess is cleared up soon, so her husband can go back to work. While unemployment cheques may sound nice, they are not full pay and won’t cover all the bills.

Nadine knows her family will take a few steps backward before they move forward. She says you can’t give up, you know it can only get better sooner or later. She looks toward the future with hope. Nadine is employed and she hopes her husband gets his job back soon. Her children are growing up and maybe things will turn out better for them.

Just the facts...

The infant death rate is twice as high in poor families.
Childhood disability occurs twice as often. The United Way of Calgary and Area, Focus on Children and Youth, October 1998

“A 1997 OECD study calculated that Canada would lose some $4 billion in taxes and social costs because of the 137,000 Canadian young people who dropped out of school in 1994 alone. A high percentage of the dropouts came from poor families.” M. Hurtig, Pay the Rent or Feed the Children, 1999
A man walked through the door of the Stettler FCSS office. He had just arrived in the community and needed help. Social Services referred him to us.

The family, consisting of a husband and wife, and four children are here with virtually nothing but the clothes on their backs. No furniture, no food, and certainly no money.

Through Social Services, they have found a place to live. The staff at the FCSS office began making calls to the local support groups in the community asking for donations.

The director of the local food bank put together a food hamper for the family while they were shopping for clothing and small household items at the local second hand store, where FCSS has provided them with a voucher. After the family has collected what they can, the director from the food bank gives them a ride home.

In the meantime, FCSS staff and other people in the community are bringing in extra furniture to be donated to this family. Volunteers from numerous organizations are picking up and delivering a variety of items to the family, as well as providing them with transportation. This is just one example of how FCSS can enrich a community. The above organizations are all sponsored by or partnered with FCSS.

A gentleman in his mid to late fifties came into our office one day to file for employment insurance. The man was very upset by his situation but we reassured him that this was a temporary setback and something in his field would come along.

At the time, we honestly believed this to be the case. After all, he has a mechanic’s license, so there was bound to be a job him in a short time. Time passed and still the gentleman was having no luck in obtaining employment and the weeks of his E.I. were running out quickly. Things were looking bleak. His age was posing a large employment barrier.

Shortly thereafter, a man came in with three job orders to be filled, one for a service truck operator. We immediately thought of our middle-aged client and called him at home. We gave him the information we had received and wished him luck.

Two hours later, a beaming client came through the door and gave us a hug and informed us he had gotten the job.

“Calculated using the new Market Basket Measure, 13.1 per cent of Canadians – almost four million – are poor.” Globe and Mail May 27, 2003
Another Stettler Story

An 18-year-old who had attempted to commit suicide in the past, and is diagnosed with depression, asked the youth worker to facilitate a family discussion on the ramifications of the suicide attempt. The youth has found the strength and insight to realize that all family members had been affected, but were not dealing appropriately with the effects of the action. The youth wanted everyone to be able to face what had happened, ask any lingering questions, and discussion feelings associated with “then and now”.

Because trust had been established between the youth worker and the family members (with the guidance and blessing of the mental health professional), the family discussion took place and the topic was opened for examination. The discussion was successful. Everyone was able to realize their feelings were valid, the situation was better understood, and the youth was able to ensure everyone that open communication was important at any time when dealing with emotion and life in general.

Wanting this discussion, realizing the need for it, and feeling strong enough and supported enough to face the consequences of the attempt was a huge indication of how far this youth has grown in a fairly short period of time. The youth worker had been told most youth would rather not deal with the feelings and consequences of attempts and family counseling normally occurred after a completion. The youth continues to mature and make better decisions and cope with the consequences of those decisions.

Report from Redwater

The Redwater Food Bank is run by a fellowship of churches and is very active in our community. The Alliance Church also has an annual clothing exchange, which is free and open to anyone.

Gently used items (clothing, toys, kitchen utensils, etc.) are dropped off and sorted by volunteers and then the community is able to access the items and take what they need.

There is no cost for this program, but it only runs once a year, usually during May.

“...those who live in poverty are living in deep poverty, well below what is needed to have a decent quality of life.”
This is a look at poverty through the eyes of an FCSS program in Camrose. The Family Violence Action Society, while not specifically mandated to deal with the issue of poverty, sees on a daily basis how it affects the lives of its clients.

We have chosen a couple of examples to focus on - clients dealing with abuse issues in two different ways but both of them fighting poverty.

Poverty affects people greatly when they choose to leave a marriage because of abuse. A client has left her marriage, but the court has chosen the father as the interim custodial parent because he had a good lawyer, while the mother doesn’t have access to enough money to provide herself good legal representation. The client must now leave her home, her children and the abusive situation. She was a stay-at-home mother in a rural area. The client must now move to the city (Camrose) and find a job in hopes of starting her life over. Poverty has hit home for the client. She has been lucky enough, however, to find two part-time jobs paying a little above minimum wage.

**the client struggles with poverty, but she aims to be a success**

She has entered the life of the working poor: No benefits, low wages and shift work. The shift work affects both her ability to see her children on a consistent basis and her ability to attend therapy sessions on a consistent basis. These therapy sessions may allow her to deal with the abuse she has escaped from, and the therapy may also be aimed at making sure she does not repeat the same sorts of behaviour in her next relationship or the relationship she will build with her children. The client struggles with poverty, but she aims to be a success. She has found a job, but feels she has lost her children, because she couldn’t afford to house or feed them. She will continue to work, as she wants to improve her life.

Affordable housing is hard to find for one person, let alone a newly single mom with children. The new job has given her a sense of control over life, and new workmates have become new friends.

She has not had to go on SFI (Supports For Independence), she has kept her pride and even though the struggle that lies ahead may be a tough one, she knows the Family Violence Action Society will be there to help her out in some ways when she needs it.
Another client in a similar situation is dealing with it differently. She has recently left an abusive relationship. She has also left her community, her extended family and friends, to escape the conflict and fear.

The client has a baby and therefore has chosen SFI to help her out as the transition takes place. She has found affordable housing, but it is in the part of the city (Camrose) with the “poor” stigma attached to it. Her child is already being identified by others as being from a “bad neighbourhood”.

The mother’s struggle is compounded by poverty. She does not have a phone, because she has made the decision that a phone is a luxury she just cannot afford. Without a phone, she is isolated; she cannot even apply for jobs in hopes of getting an interview because they cannot contact her by phone.

As the baby grows older, she knows she will have to find employment, but that also means her new job will also have to cover the cost of childcare. The question will also arise of how to get the child to care, then get to her job and then back again afterward (and on time) to pick up her child. Poverty means she does not have a car. If she had a vehicle, she could not afford the high cost of insurance anyway.

*her feelings of isolation lead her to miss appointments for therapy*

In Camrose, there is no public transportation, so she would have to rely on taxi cabs if she cannot find child care close to her job or the affordable housing she has found. Her feelings of isolation also lead her to miss appointments for therapy with Family Violence Action Society. The program helps her find out about another CDSS (Camrose and District Support Services) program, the Family Resource Centre. The Family Resource Centre allows her to get out of the apartment and interact with others. These programs will not solve her poverty issue, but with the feeling of inclusion, her self-confidence level will rise and hopefully her life will take a few more turns for the better.

“*The greater the poverty today, the larger the economic and social costs tomorrow.*” *The Right Thing to Do, Sept. 2000*

Poverty not only affects those choosing to leave a marriage because of family violence. Sometimes, the Family Violence Action Society deals with families suffering from multigenerational abuse compounded by multigenerational poverty.
These families have made a choice to stay together even though abuse is taking place. One or both parents may be dealing with abuse inflicted upon them as children, and while the abuse can be dealt with in therapy, once again it is hard to get long-term therapy when just feeding your family becomes the utmost priority in your life. Long term therapy can also be very expensive and these families just can not afford it.

The families often do not work and have multigenerational dependency on SFI (or welfare, as many still refer to it). If they happen to get a job, quite often they don’t know how to handle the money, and then tend to sign up for credit cards (these are very easy to get if you can prove ongoing income of even a few months) and build up unwanted debt. Housing is hard to find for families in the city, so they tend to end up on “the wrong side of the tracks”. These families often live without a phone, either because it is a luxury they cannot afford, or because in the past they have had phone service cut off because they didn’t pay their bill. Now, to get the service, they have to pay a deposit that they just can’t afford.

**Affordable Housing in Strathmore**

Several years ago, the province restructured the way in which mentally ill consumers would be cared for. Community Advisory Councils (CAC) were established throughout the health regions to address issues pertinent to these consumers. As a CAC member representing Wheatland FCSS, I became aware of the obstacles facing persons struggling with mental illness.

In the Strathmore area, a lack of affordable housing was identified as a priority issue. The CAC in conjunction with Alberta Mental Health started a new program called “Step One Housing Society”. It was granted non-profit status in June 1999.

The long range goal of Step One Housing was to assist persons, referred by Alberta Mental Health, to have affordable housing. While striving to accumulate funding for this venture, it was decided that for very little cost, Step One Housing could gather up unwanted furniture and household items from the community and redistribute them to consumers. This has been a very successful program with many individuals/families being helped. A storage unit was rented and persons wanting to donate items, or those needing the items, were able to make arrangements through our FCSS office.

Through grants, fundraising and donations, the Step One Housing Society has been able to provide low income housing for several people in Strathmore and throughout the county. They are presently negotiating on a complex to house an additional eight people in Strathmore. This program is successful due to the dedicated and determined efforts of a few people who refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer. They are living proof that no obstacle is too great for a community that cares.
The City of Fort Saskatchewan (population 13,346) is located approximately 30 miles east of Edmonton. Rich in history, service and program amenities, natural and industrial resources, we are a trading centre for an additional 38,700 people who live in neighbouring communities.

Following the release of the January 2000 “Summary Statistics on Poverty in Selected Alberta Communities” report stating that Fort Saskatchewan has a 14% poverty level, the Family and Community Support Services Board met to determine how best to address this startling discovery.

Their first consideration was to inform and involve the community. This included hosting three successive Poverty Workshops in 2000, 2001 and 2002.

An FCSS Poverty Committee (Social Action Committee) was created following the first Poverty Workshop (May 2000). The mandate of the committee was to focus on current and emerging social and poverty based needs, and determine how best to research, address, partner and/or delegate responsibility for addressing these objectives.

Among the initiatives we have developed:

- A Human Services Directory has been developed and distributed to all homes in Fort Saskatchewan.
- The Food Bank took a lead role in addressing a school snack initiative. They will be giving several grade schools $1,000 each to provide a daily snack program to all the children.
- Fort Saskatchewan now has a half-day youth AADAC program and a half-day adult AADAC program to respond to drug, alcohol and gambling addictions and related issues.

“...the SFI allowance for a family of two adults with two children is $13,236 per year, compared to the most conservative of the new market basket measures at $20,942.”

“Poverty is a strong predictor of a child’s future. The poverty cycle will continue through generations if Alberta cannot find a way to intervene.”

“The greater the poverty today, the larger the economic and social costs tomorrow.”

*The Right Thing to Do*, Sept. 2000
Child Poverty:  
It's more than just a numbers game

by Marcel Lauzière

People on opposite sides of the child poverty issue in Canada often play the numbers game. So when we at the CCSD reported last Fall that despite years of economic growth, Canada's child poverty rate is largely unchanged and those who are poor are, in fact, getting poorer, skeptics jumped on the conclusion, arguing that the problem is ameliorating. After all, didn't Statistics Canada find that the number of children below the low income cut-off (LICO) decreased by 2% in the late 1990s and that family income improved during the period? How can both studies be true?

Well, they can and are. No matter how you count them, too many children go to bed hungry, aren't doing well at school, have poor health, don't get involved in organized recreation, or live with a depressed parent. These are the messages that come through loud and clear in the sixth Progress of Canada's Children report released by the CCSD last November. And for many children, life is getting worse, not better, even in boom times.

That's because while the latest overall numbers - which do show some improvement for poor families, but far below that of their wealthier neighbours - tell one side of the story, they miss an important aspect of poverty. What the CCSD study shows is that the depth of poverty - which is the amount of money needed to move out of poverty - has remained relatively stagnant at around $8,500 below the low-income cut-off. In other words, those who live in poverty are living in deep poverty, well below what is needed to have a decent quality of life.

Equally telling are the changes in the distribution of wealth in this country. Wealth is defined as a family's assets minus its debts, with assets including such items as houses, cars, stocks and bonds. Assets are said to be the key to a family's future, while income represents how a family is coping now. The wealth of the poorest 20% of couples with children under 18 went down by 51.4% between 1984 and 1999, whereas that of the wealthiest 20% of couples increased by 42.7%. The wealth gap in this country is staggering.

And while families in poverty may be making some modest income gains, even if they can't accumulate any real assets, they are being hit hard with rising costs for items they desperately need - education, health care and housing. Between 1992 and 1999, family expenditures for things like textbooks and school fees almost doubled to more than $1,400. Two-parent families spent an average of $1,500 on health care in 1999, up considerably over the decade. And adequate housing in major Canadian cities is out of reach for poor families who may spend more than 50% of their income on shelter.

These numbers show the need to acknowledge two things about child poverty in this country: things are not getting better, and these trends will have a profound impact on Canada's future prosperity. We can't pat ourselves on the back if the best we can do for poor children at the height of an economic boom is to reduce their poverty rate by only 2%, see their family wealth drop significantly and charge them more for the things they desperately need. And we can't ignore the fact that a significant segment of our child population may never have access to quality child care, organized recreation, safe and affordable housing, or food security – important ingredients to their healthy growth and development. Canada will pay a big price down the road for this failure.
The painful irony in all of these findings is the apparent disconnect between the rhetoric of our political leaders and the actions they take to ensure that our country prospers. On the one hand, they tell us about the importance of productivity, skills and innovation, and the need to improve our economic performance vis-à-vis the United States. On the other hand, they refuse to admit that too many children are being excluded and they will not take the bold steps required to narrow the great divide between rich and poor, ensuring that all our children have a fair chance to succeed in life.

It's time for all sides to reach the obvious conclusion that while jobs and a strong economy are essential ingredients in the fight against poverty, they are not sufficient. The slight progress we have made in the best of economic times should tell us this. There is no way around the need to invest more substantially in our social supports: the National Child Benefit must put more money directly into the pockets of people in low-income, including those on welfare; the Early Childhood Development Agreement needs to have new money specifically targeted to quality child care; and social housing programs must be set up to give more families access to decent, affordable places to live.

Governments are now looking at investing billions to repair the physical infrastructure of our cities. They need to repair our crumbling social infrastructure as well. For the last decade, they have focused on deficit elimination and tax reduction. This has taken a heavy toll on social supports and we are seeing the impact on our children and families.

Let's not kid ourselves - there will be no progress without new investments and without a substantial effort from all levels of government. No matter how you crunch the numbers, there are far too many families with children in this country who can't make ends meet. Governments need to help level the playing field. Moving on the National Child Benefit, child care and housing fronts will go a long way in getting the job done.

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WHAT IS THE MARKET BASKET MEASURE (MBM)?

In 1997, the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers responsible for social services requested a new measure, using a market basket approach, to assess low income. Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) released the new MBM on May 27, 2003.

The MBM is based on the costs of specific items in 29 communities in the ten provinces. The items in the basket of goods and services reflect, according to HRDC, a balance between minimums for physical survival and costs for some participation in society (social inclusion).

WHAT IS IN THE 'BASKET'?

The basket has five components: food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other (to cover costs for personal hygiene, non-prescription medicines, newspaper subscription, etc.)
The reference household is based on the cost of living for a family of four composed of two adults and two children. The figures are adjusted for single people and other household sizes (50% for a single person, 70% for two person household, 85% for a three person household).

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT THE MBM?

A unique feature of the MBM is how it determines disposable income in order to analyze the number of persons and households with incomes below the MBM threshold.

The five cost items in the basket are virtually universal in that they are required by everyone. The question is how to handle costs that are specific to different family formations and/or to different circumstances. The MBM addresses these through the way it defines disposable income. Their definition is:

- Gross Income - Income from all sources including government transfers
- Net Income - Gross income less deductions at source (taxes, employee share of pay roll tax, union dues, medical insurance premiums, pension contributions)
- Disposable Income - Net income less expenditures for health costs (such as prescription drugs and disability related expenses) and child care costs.

This definition of disposable income is the income measure used to determine if a household lives in poverty. Households with disposable income above the Market Basket threshold are not poor, and those with disposable incomes below the threshold are considered to be poor.

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