



Covering All the Basics: Reforms for a More Just Society

Executive Summary

Final Report of the
British Columbia Expert Panel on Basic Income

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We Nisga'a have always organized our lives and society around a concept called Saytk'ilh Wo'osim, which means "Our Common Bowl." Under this principle, it is understood that since everyone relies on the same resources and community, all must contribute. It's about sharing energy, wisdom, spirit, joy, and sadness and it touches all aspects of life. It means no one gets left behind. Nisga'a government uses this principle to guide the delivery of healthcare, education, and social services.

—Chief Joseph Gosnell, "A First Nation, Again: The Return of Self-Government and Self-Reliance in Canada's Nisga'a Nation," 2003

All the members of human society stand in need of each others [*sic*] assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices.

—Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759

Our work has been guided by a vision of British Columbia becoming a more just society. A society where, in Adam Smith's words, the assistance we need from each other is "reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem." A society where the recognition of the richness of life so eloquently described by Chief Joseph Gosnell leads us to the conclusion that we must act so that "no one gets left behind." While there are almost as many visions of what a just society looks like as there are people in this province, we believe that the shared vision of these expressions of hope and principle coming from such different cultures and times points to a way forward. All notions of justice arise from the idea that we owe each other the bases of self-respect and dignity and that we should treat each other as equals deserving of our respect.

The American philosopher Elizabeth Anderson (2017) provides a more concrete description of these bases of self and social respect: "We owe each other the rights, institutions, social norms, public goods, and private resources that people need to avoid oppression (social exclusion, violence, exploitation, and so forth) and to exercise the capabilities necessary for functioning as equal citizens in a democratic state."

Clearly, government policy on its own cannot deliver everything on this list of what we owe each other. But we believe that making positive changes in government policy can

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help in moving B.C. toward becoming a more just society. Our charge was to think about both whether a basic income in and of itself is the most positive change B.C. can make, and how the principles that underlie the basic income concept can be used to inform other changes in policy.

We were guided by notions of what constitutes a just society, comparing existing and potential policies against a list of (always competing) characteristics that must be balanced to achieve just policies and programs: adequacy, accessibility, security, responsiveness, opportunity, social connection, policy stability, and reciprocity.

A central theme in our approach is that changes should be made not from the top down but in close consultation with groups who are affected by those changes: a consultation ultimately rooted in the human rights recognized in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and through Canada's signature on international agreements. Indeed, this is what it means to consider policy from the perspective of creating a more just society. It means a shift from seeing the most vulnerable as others in need of help, to seeing them as equal participants in creating a better society.

We approached our task through consultations and discussions with affected groups, with citizens in general, and with the people in government who would be charged with making changes real and effective. We were greatly heartened by those conversations and the way they reflected the spirit of the words of Adam Smith, Chief Joseph Gosnell, and Elizabeth Anderson. We also commissioned and based our work on over 40 research projects from experts across Canada and beyond, examining elements of a basic income and of other prospective policies. This work also delved into the complex web of existing income and social support programs, as well as their gaps and interactions.

From our investigations, we have come to realize that the existing set of policies and programs provides a solid basis for reform. These policies and programs have been introduced and adjusted by various governments over decades and, in our opinion, have been substantively improved by changes in the last three years. Nonetheless, the current program environment does not constitute a system. Many gaps and inconsistencies remain, hampering the ability of the committed resources to provide the self-respect and social respect associated with a just society. Moreover, the program complex—built like a house that has had many renovations undertaken without an overall plan—treats some people without the dignity they deserve, despite the best efforts of the people working within the system to provide quality service. One of our

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goals as a panel has been to propose changes that create a more complete, purposeful, and interactive approach to fulfilling society's common aims.

We were asked to “consider the viability of a basic income in B.C.” We have concluded that moving to a system constructed around a basic income for all as its main pillar is not the most just policy option. The needs of people in this society are too diverse to be effectively answered simply with a cheque from the government. A basic income is a very costly approach to addressing any specific goal, such as poverty reduction, which is part of our reasoning. We also found that many of the claims of the advantages of a basic income put forward by proponents are hard to substantiate and that the policy goals implied by these claims can be achieved as well or better with other approaches. Beyond that, though, we have concerns about what a basic income approach would imply for society. A basic income emphasizes individual autonomy—an important characteristic of a just society. However, in doing so it de-emphasizes other crucial characteristics of justice that must be, in our view, balanced: community, social interactions, reciprocity, and dignity. The basic income approach seems to us to be more individualistic than the way we believe British Columbians see themselves.

We share the belief in individual autonomy that proponents of a basic income express, but we believe that true autonomy is found only partly in monetary resources. It is also found in building supportive, mutually beneficial communities, and that is one of our underlying goals. In keeping with that goal, we believe all of this should be done with careful concern for building public trust—not just among those who most need support but also among those who will see themselves mostly as paying into the system. Our guiding philosophy is one of reciprocity, which inclines our analysis to address issues of economic impacts, incentives of policies, financing requirements, and B.C.'s fiscal capacity.

We were also asked if there were any areas that require further exploration with a basic income pilot. We have concluded that a pilot is not warranted. Many of the proposed benefits of a basic income have to do with changes people might make because they have a long-term, stable income source—changes such as investing in an education or starting a business. Even a five-year pilot would not be long enough to allow us to assess these claims. We already have plentiful evidence on shorter-term impacts from other research and pilots. Our preferred approach is to implement new policies incrementally, evaluating them rigorously and, most importantly, consulting thoroughly and widely, then making adjustments.

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Finally, we were asked whether the spirit of a basic income could be applied to transform and enhance the current income and social support system. We have concluded that this is the best approach. B.C. needs a mixed system that applies different approaches in different circumstances. Our approach is twofold: identifying those groups most in need of improved support and proposing improvements focused specifically on them; and identifying how the system can be improved by enhancing consistency and the benefits delivery platform on which specific programs are built. Our evidence led us to conclude that the broad group whose basic needs are least well served are single, working-age adults, both single parents and those without children. Within that group, people with disabilities, youth aging out of care, women fleeing violence, the long-term unemployed and the working poor would benefit most from reform and expansion of specific supports.

Our set of 65 recommendations, summarized below, combine short- and longer-term measures to reform the current system using a diverse set of tailored policy approaches:

- Generally available basic services addressing unmet basic needs, like extended health supplements and rental housing assistance
- Targeted programs that combine cash transfers with wraparound social support for groups in transition, like youth aging out of care and women fleeing violence, and those facing high barriers to employment, who have more specific needs
- Targeted basic incomes where they are most helpful, such as for people with disabilities and youth aging out of care
- An overhaul of the Disability Assistance system, including for those with mental health and addiction issues, that emphasizes dignity and support for work for those who want it
- A reformed Temporary Assistance program, providing monetary benefits in a dignified and respectful way to those able to work and better facilitating transition to employment
- Adjustments to tax system–delivered benefits, such as an improved earnings supplement for the working poor and targeting the Child Opportunity Benefit more directly to children living in poverty
- Regulatory reform to create a more just labour market, improving wages and job conditions for low-skill, low-income workers—particularly beneficial for people

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whose often precarious situations have been highlighted by COVID-19: women, people with limited education and work skills, and Indigenous and racialized people

- Reforms to make the current set of programs more of a coordinated, consistent, and accessible system

Another way to look at our conclusions and recommendations is from the perspective of work. We have found that, despite claims to the contrary, any viable basic income would have disincentives to work similar to those of the current Income Assistance system. Throughout our recommendations we have sought to encourage work, including by lowering the “welfare wall” across the Income Assistance program and by providing extended health benefits generally to low-income individuals; providing supports to lower barriers to work; reforming labour regulation to improve wages and conditions for low-wage, low-skill jobs; and enhancing earnings supplements to benefit employed people with low incomes. All of these changes will improve the attractiveness of work more effectively than receiving cash benefits, reducing the emphasis on a requirement to work in favour of support for work. The result will be the dignity and self-respect provided by work for those who are encouraged to work, and economic and fiscal gains for society.

What does the future we envision look like? It is a future in which British Columbia is a place of mutual concern and mutual respect, where each person is supported to make the fullest contribution they can. Where no one is left behind. It is a place where government policy supports a strong sense of mutual concern, striving to use the full set of tools at its disposal to balance the desire for individual autonomy and the need for community. And it is a place where the reciprocity needed to build and maintain public trust is at the core of public discourse. Where everyone, from those whose contributions bring them the largest incomes to the most vulnerable, is treated as an equal whose opinions are listened to with respect. In short, it is a vision of a British Columbia that always seeks the elusive balance inherent in a just society, knowing that it is a never-ending quest.

Summary of recommendations

Reform Disability Assistance (DA) into a targeted basic income

1. Replace disability-related designations
2. Reform application process
3. Revise application forms
4. Eliminate DA asset test
5. Relax DA income test
6. Reform adjudication process
7. Eliminate reassessment
8. Convert DA to a targeted basic income
9. Increase DA benefit to the poverty line
10. Lower DA benefit reduction rate and maintain income exemption
11. Create public and community employment
12. Integrate support for addiction and mental health
13. Review addiction support

Reform Temporary Assistance (TA) to reduce the “welfare wall”

14. Eliminate work-search requirement
15. Engage federal government on COVID-19 recovery benefit rationalization
16. Initially maintain current TA income test
17. Increase TA income test threshold in medium term
18. Eliminate TA asset test
19. Extend TA streamlined reapplication
20. Increase TA benefit levels by making COVID-19 emergency \$300 supplement permanent
21. Lower TA benefit reduction rate and maintain income exemption
22. Evaluate training support
23. Expand earnings supplement

Provide extended health-care benefits to all low-income individuals

24. Convert extended health supplements to a basic service

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Provide housing support to all low-income renters

25. Combine Income Assistance support and shelter allowances
26. Expand targeted supportive housing
27. Institute a B.C. Rent Assist refundable tax credit

Provide intensive work support to targeted groups

28. Establish Assisted to Work basic service
29. Establish a joint rehabilitation and work support agency

Enhance support for low-income families with children

30. Refocus the Child Opportunity Benefit

Enhance financial and support services for young adults

31. Increase Ministry of Children and Family Development resources
32. Enhance transition planning and community support capacity
33. Extend Agreements with Young Adults education and training duration
34. Enhance Agreements with Young Adults life-skills support
35. Extend Assisted to Work eligibility to former youth in care
36. Create targeted basic income for former youth in care
37. Initiate basic income with community support engagement
38. Mandate a ministry to support former youth in care
39. Establish a B.C. Learning Bond
40. Contribute to B.C. Learning Bond for children in care
41. Create a B.C. Career Trek program

Enhance financial and support services for people fleeing violence

42. Enhance housing for people fleeing violence
43. Create a three-tiered domestic violence program

Improve precarious employment through labour regulation reform

44. Develop gig work employment standards
45. Review *Employment Standards Act* exclusions

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46. Enhance proactive *Employment Standards Act* enforcement
47. Improve employment standards for fissured work
48. Review *Labour Relations Code* unionization provisions
49. Proactively facilitate industry advisory councils
50. Extend *Labour Relations Code* successor rights
51. Rationalize employee definitions across programs

Improve the way benefit delivery platforms function

52. Combine refundable tax credits into Dogwood Benefit
53. Rationalize income definition for income-testing purposes
54. Engage federal government to reduce tax-filing barriers
55. Engage federal government to increase tax and benefit delivery responsiveness
56. Engage federal government to streamline administrative tax data-sharing
57. Develop an identification and verification platform for non-tax filers to increase benefits access
58. Automate informing applicants of eligibility for other programs
59. Enhance cross-program system navigation
60. Establish system governance
61. Index Income Assistance rates to changes in the poverty line
62. Increase Income Assistance staff resources
63. Rigorously evaluate major reforms
64. Create linked administrative data for policy development

Make ongoing engagement a permanent part of all policies

65. Set up a human rights-based approach to engagement with those affected