

LIVING ON WELFARE IN BC

EXPERIENCES OF LONGER-TERM "EXPECTED TO WORK" RECIPIENTS

By Seth Klein and
Jane Pulkingham

with Sylvia Parusel, Kathryn Plancke,
Jewelless Smith, Dixon Sookraj,
Thi Vu, Bruce Wallace and Jane Worton



RAISE THE RATES



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
BC Office

APRIL 2008

AN ECONOMIC SECURITY PROJECT REPORT

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April 2008

Co-published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – BC Office and Raise the Rates

FULL RESEARCH REPORT

Copies of the summary are available from the CCPA, and can be downloaded from our website

This study is part of the Economic Security Project, a research alliance led by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – BC Office and Simon Fraser University. The ESP is a five-year research initiative studying how public policy changes in BC are affecting the economic security of vulnerable populations. The ESP is funded primarily by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through its Community-University Research Alliance Program. Thanks also to Vancity, the Vancity Community Foundation, SFU Women’s Studies, and the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group for their financial support of this project.



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Research Council of Canada

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Printed copies: \$10. Download free from the CCPA website.

Copyedit and layout: Nadene Rehnby, www.handsonpublications.com

Cover photos clockwise from top left: Barry Calhoun/PIVOT, Donna Gorrill/HOPE IN SHADOWS, Nicholas Fatisis/PIVOT, and Kevin Russ/ISTOCK

ISBN 978-0-88627-580-8

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Acknowledgements

The authors extend great thanks to Chris Atchison for his help designing the surveys used in this study and for inputting and processing the data, and to Jennie Haw and Hansee Kha for the painstaking job of data cleaning and initial data runs. Special thanks to Brant Cheetham, Thi Vu and Carole Karkhairan for their logistical and administrative assistance. Thanks to Dixon Sookraj of UBC-Okanagan School for Social Work and to Bruce Wallace of the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group for serving as collaborators, supervising the Kelowna and Victoria research, and for their guidance in the research design. Thanks to all the advocates and community groups who helped with the recruitment and location of study participants.

Thanks to Whitney Borowko, Shauna Butterwick, Shannon Daub, Michael Goldberg, David Green, Marc Lee, Lesley Moore, Marge Reitsma-Street and Jean Swanson for reviewing this report and for their helpful feedback.

Our heartfelt thanks to Robin Morgan, Sylvia Parusel, Kathryn Plancke, Jewelles Smith and Jane Worton, who served as the research assistants on this project. They recruited the study participants, conducted the interviews, and stayed in touch with participants throughout the two-year study period. Your contribution cannot be overstated.

Most of all, our considerable thanks to all the people who took the time to participate in this study.

Glossary

THE MINISTRY OF EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE (MEIA) is the BC government ministry that administers income assistance and disability benefits and programs under the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act (EAPWDA) and the Employment and Assistance Act (EAA).

An **EMPLOYMENT PLAN (EP)** is an “agreement” outlining the activities and expectations which BC income assistance applicants and recipients are required to follow in becoming employed or more employable, including the time frame. When required by the ministry, entering into and complying with an employment plan is a condition of eligibility for assistance.

EXPECTED TO WORK (ETW) is a designation given to a person receiving BC income assistance benefits who is expected to find and sustain employment.

EXPECTED TO WORK – MEDICAL CONDITION (ETW–MC) is a designation given to a person receiving BC income assistance benefits who has what the ministry considers a temporary medical, drug or alcohol, or mental health condition that interferes with their ability to gain employment.

PERSON WITH PERSISTENT AND MULTIPLE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT (PPMB) status is defined in the Employment and Assistance Act (EAA). To qualify for PPMB an individual must have received regular income assistance for 12 of the 15 months before they apply and have a severe barrier or a medical condition that is likely to continue for two years and preclude or impede their ability to search for or accept continuing employment. The PPMB designation is not permanent and is reviewed every two years.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY (PWD) status is defined in the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act (EAPWDA). To qualify for PWD an individual must have a severe mental or physical impairment that is likely to continue for at least two years and majorly restricts the person’s ability to perform daily living activities either continuously or periodically so that significant help or supervision is needed. The designation is not “permanent” so although people with PWD designation are not required to seek employment as a condition of receiving benefits, their status may be reviewed every five years.

Summary

Public discussions about welfare policy are too often dominated by myths: that welfare benefits are too generous; that it is too easy to get on welfare; and that it is too easy to stay on welfare rather than “get a job.”

The reality is starkly different. Living on welfare (or income assistance, as it is officially known) is hard – very hard. This research finds that, all too often, it forces people into making harmful and desperate “choices.” Generally speaking, people remain on income assistance for more than one year only if there is a compelling reason for their inability to secure stable employment.

The number of people receiving welfare has been dropping in BC since 1995. Yet despite this downward trend, the provincial government introduced sweeping changes in 2002 (see *Key BC Welfare Changes Introduced in 2002* on page 20). New eligibility rules made it much more difficult to access welfare when in need, and more demanding work-search and employment rules were added for those already getting assistance. Consequently, between 2002 and 2005, the number of people receiving welfare (the “caseload”) plummeted.

The provincial government claims this as a good news story. Yet it has never put adequate studies in place that would allow it to legitimately make such claims. In the absence of such studies, the Economic Security Project has examined the reasons for the declining caseload, and the consequences for those unable to get or keep assistance – and a much more nuanced and often disturbing story emerges.

A 2006 Economic Security Project report, *Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC*, examined the new rules and procedures for applying for income assistance. It found that the application process systematically discouraged, delayed and denied help to people in need, and that many experienced harm and homelessness as a result.

Living on welfare is hard – very hard. Generally speaking, people remain on income assistance for more than one year only if there is a compelling reason for their inability to secure stable employment.

This report is the companion study to *Denied Assistance*; it documents the impacts of welfare rules on those who have been on income assistance for some time, and who are designated as “Expected to Work” (meaning the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance considers them employable and requires them to be actively seeking work). The study aimed to find out more about the realities of daily life on welfare and how people make ends meet; how the new rules – particularly the tough new employment obligations – affect people on welfare; and to compare the experiences of those who stay on assistance with those who leave voluntarily and those who are cut off.

Together, these studies help to explain a paradox: Why do we continue to see deep and persistent poverty and rising homelessness, even after years of steady economic growth, record low unemployment and declining welfare caseloads?

What is Welfare?

Welfare is income assistance (money and/or benefits) provided by the provincial government to people considered eligible under a set of strict rules. Welfare is a program of last resort – it is available only to individuals and families who have no employment, have used up their savings, and have exhausted all other options.

There are several categories of welfare with different eligibility criteria. Those in the “Expected to Work” (ETW) category are considered employable by the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance and are required to actively seek work unless they have a temporary exemption (for example, because they have a medical condition or a child under age three). There are two other main categories: “Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers to Employment” (PPMB), and “Persons with a Disability” (PWD). (See the glossary on page 6 for more definitions.)

Welfare is not, and has never been, “generous.” At the time this study was conducted:

- A single person considered employable received \$510 per month – \$325 for shelter and \$185 (or about \$6 per day) for all other needs, including food, clothing, transportation, telephone, etc.;
- A single parent with one child received \$846 a month from the province (plus \$422 in various federal tax credits and child benefits);
- A single person with PPMB status received \$608 per month; and
- A single person with PWD status received \$856 per month.

In April 2007, these monthly amounts were increased modestly (to \$610 for a single person, \$946 for a single parent with one child, \$658 for a person with PPMB, and \$906 for a person with PWD status). These increases merely reversed the impact of inflation since the mid-1990s.

Two Years of Living on Welfare

In the summer of 2004, 62 people on income assistance from three British Columbia cities (Metro Vancouver, Victoria and Kelowna) were recruited for this study. All were in the “Expected to Work” (ETW) welfare category, and all had been on assistance for at least 15 months (and on average for a cumulative total of eight years). They agreed to remain in contact with researchers every month, and to be interviewed every six months for the following two years.

At the 2004 intake stage, the study asked participants a series of baseline questions about hardships (such as housing and food security), their health status, and their history in the labour market and the welfare system. This information was then tracked in subsequent interviews.

When the final interviews were conducted in the summer of 2006, researchers were able to interview 45 people.^a

Of these 45 participants:

- 48 per cent (22 people) remained on income assistance throughout the study period;
- 27 per cent (12 people) left assistance voluntarily;
- 16 per cent (seven people) left assistance temporarily at some point during the two years, but by the end of the study were back on assistance; and
- 9 per cent (four people) had come under sanction and were cut off assistance.

Thus, combined, 64 per cent (29 people) remained on assistance. Of these:

- Only nine participants remained in the basic Expected to Work category. Significantly, the remaining 20 were all re-categorized at some point during the study period: about half were “upgraded” to Persons with Disability (PWD) status, while the remaining were re-categorized as either Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers to Employment (PPMB) or ETW – Medical Condition status (temporarily exempting them from work-search obligations).

After two years, were the study participants better off? The short answer is, it depends.

- Of the 29 people who remained on assistance, a majority seem to be slightly better off, primarily because most were re-categorized. But the degree of housing and food insecurity remains troublingly high. And those who were not re-categorized saw no improvement in their income or other basic needs.

All 62 original participants were in the “Expected to Work” category, and all had been on assistance for at least 15 months (and on average for a cumulative total of eight years). They agreed to remain in contact with researchers every month, and to be interviewed every six months for the following two years.

^a The retention rate, at 73 per cent, was very high for a study of this kind. We also know a fair amount about the 17 people who did not complete the study. Four arguably found themselves in improved life circumstances by virtue of finding work or going to school. The circumstances of a number at the end of the study period were simply unknown, but many were clearly no better off, or were indeed worse off, and one man died while living in a single room occupancy (SRO) hotel in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.

- All of the 12 who left voluntarily were doing better. They have seen a sizable increase in their incomes (all but one was employed). Even so, notably, the vast majority were still left with an annual income below the poverty line.
- The four who were forced to leave welfare were clearly worse off; they were homeless and reported a staggering drop in income.

Key Findings

What emerges is a public welfare system that is structurally dependent on food banks and other charities in order for people to meet basic needs. Disturbingly, even those who were re-categorized continued to rely on food banks or soup kitchens an average of four times per month, and those who were not re-categorized reported a significant increase in their use of food banks or soup kitchens.

- **Much of day-to-day life on welfare is about survival** – a constant and frequently unsuccessful struggle to look after basic needs for food, shelter, health and personal safety – making the task of seeking employment hugely difficult if not impossible for many:
 - At this study’s intake stage, 39 per cent of participants reported being without a fixed address at some time during the previous six months, and only half had a phone number in service – a distinct disadvantage in finding employment.
 - Even by the study’s end, 29 per cent of those who completed the final interview reported being at no fixed address at some time during the final six months of the study.
 - In contrast, the minority of study participants who had stable housing to begin with were much more likely to leave welfare for employment.
- **Welfare rates are too low.** Inadequate benefit rates mean many simply cannot make ends meet on income assistance alone:
 - For this sample of longer-term welfare recipients, what emerges is a public welfare system that is structurally dependent on food banks and other charities in order for people to meet basic needs. At the start of this study, 46 per cent of participants reported they had often been hungry during the past month, and 77 per cent reported receiving food from a food bank, soup kitchen or drop-in centre during the previous month, with 43 per cent reporting they did so 10 or more times.
 - When the hardship questions were revisited in the final interviews, small improvements with respect to housing and food security were evident overall, but these were concentrated only among the 12 who left welfare voluntarily and to a lesser extent among those who were re-categorized. Reliance on food banks and soup kitchens remained very high for those on assistance. Disturbingly, even those who were re-categorized continued to rely on food banks or soup kitchens an average of four times per month, and those who were not re-categorized reported a significant increase in their use of food banks or soup kitchens.

Lorraine*

When we first met Lorraine, she was living in a stable SRO room. She had just successfully fought a battle with cancer, although in the course of that, she reported visiting an emergency room 30 times in the previous six months. Compounding her situation, she was dealing with severe food insecurity: skipping meals 30 times a month, and getting food from food banks or drop-in centres 20 times a month. She'd had past employment, but had to quit for health reasons.

Lorraine struggles with severe addictions that consume a majority of her income, and lead her to engage in panhandling, illegal activities, prostitution, and to go without food. They have led to the loss of housing, to her losing custody of her child, and she reports it as the main factor preventing her from holding steady work.

By the second interview, her situation had worsened. She'd given up her SRO due to lack of money, gone back to an abusive ex-partner (for financial reasons – he paid half the rent), and was in the process of leaving him again (at the time of the interview, she'd been on the street for a week).

At the time of the third interview, Lorraine was cut off assistance, and had been cut off for almost the entire time since the previous interview (i.e., six months). She'd been accused of not following her employment plan. But Lorraine felt this to be unfair. She reported being in a required program, being told to leave it for a different one, and then getting cut off for quitting the first one.

Lorraine was homeless (staying on the streets, with friends and in shelters), skipping meals and using a drop-in centre. She'd returned to prostitution (and reported this as her main activity), but was also volunteering in the Aboriginal community. Then, in an effort to get out of the sex trade, she returned to her abusive ex-partner. He ended up assaulting her so badly that she sustained broken bones, had to have surgery and was hospitalized for several months.

She was clearly worse off since being cut off. She was demoralized by having to return to prostitution, and had lost a lot of weight.

By the fourth interview, Lorraine had just managed to get back on income assistance a month earlier (thus, she was off for nearly a year). The process of re-applying had taken 12 weeks, during which time she continued in the sex trade. She'd just been told to take a training course, which she hoped would be good. She reported that she is "not using," has not returned to her ex-partner, and is living in transition housing for women.

By the final interview, Lorraine was still on assistance. She was getting treatment, still working sometimes in the sex trade, her health was improved although she still skipped many meals, and she was back in an SRO room.

** Participants' real names are not used in this paper.*

At the third interview, Lorraine had been cut off assistance for not following her employment plan. She was homeless, skipping meals, and had returned to prostitution.

People Cut Off Assistance

In practice, the provincial government has all but abandoned its controversial two-year time limit rule for people on welfare (only a few dozen people have been officially cut off as a result of the rule). Each year, however, hundreds of people are nevertheless cut off assistance. According to data acquired through a Freedom of Information request, in 2006 alone, 490 welfare files were “sanctioned and closed” (meaning, individuals were cut off). In the vast majority of cases, the reason given was “non-compliance with employment plan” (the employment “agreements” ETW clients must sign with the ministry). In some cases, people regain assistance after one or two months, while in others, people may be cut off for extended periods of time, or indefinitely.

In 2006 alone, 490 welfare files were “sanctioned and closed” (meaning, individuals were cut off). Seven people in this study were cut off assistance for various durations. All were deemed “expected to work,” yet our analysis indicates none were in fact job-ready. The four who remained cut off at the end of the study were all effectively homeless.

Seven people in this study (four women and three men) were cut off assistance for various durations; three were cut off temporarily during the study, and four remained cut off at the time of the final interviews. Their experiences merit special attention, as they speak directly to the appropriateness of the government’s new tougher employment requirements, and lead to the following observations (also see profile for *Lorraine* on page 11):

- All were deemed “expected to work,” yet our analysis indicates none were in fact job-ready. And none had paid employment while cut off.
- All seven have a history of addiction.
- Of the four cut off at the time of the final interview, all were sanctioned for alleged non-compliance with their employment plans.
- All four have hepatitis C, which presents serious employment challenges. Yet having hepatitis C alone does not qualify for gaining PPMB status.
- All four were effectively homeless at the end of the study (at least one as a direct consequence of being cut off assistance).
- At the beginning of the study, these participants reported using food banks/soup kitchens to meet food needs a mean 19 times per month. By the final interviews, this had risen to 36 times.
- When asked how they made ends meet after being cut off:
 - The one female in this group reported staying with family/friends, going to food banks, and prostitution as her main source of income.
 - Two men were living rough on the streets (one staying intermittently with friends), using food banks, skipping meals, and stealing. Their health had deteriorated.
 - One man (see profile for *Frank* on page 24) had been evicted from his stable SRO room and was living for free with a friend. He was demoralized, had no income, was using soup kitchens, and had returned to alcohol use for the first time in many years.

- **Society pays for an inadequate/inaccessible welfare system in many ways.** The findings shed light on why some people on income assistance feel compelled to resort to panhandling, survival sex, or various illegal activities, and why some remain in or return to abusive relationships. And the findings point to the various ways in which society at large pays for welfare's failings – through higher health costs, higher policing and justice system costs, and increased demand on innumerable community and charitable agencies.
- **Too many people are cut off assistance, and for inappropriate and unfair reasons.** Being cut off helped neither the seven people in this study, nor society generally. When reviewing their cases, it is clear that what these people needed and desired was support in tackling their addictions, help managing their hepatitis C and other health problems, and stable housing. They have experienced the policy stick without the needed supports.
- **Many people remain inappropriately categorized in the expected to work category for far too long.** Most people in this study who remained on welfare were ultimately re-categorized. However, it was obvious from our first interviews that most had long-standing and serious health conditions that limited their day-to-day activities. This should have been apparent to the ministry long before it was “officially” recognized. Fifty-five per cent of participants reported having a long-term physical or mental health condition or health problem, and 26 per cent reported having a long-term disability that limits their activity. Almost half reported addiction problems. Significantly, 20 per cent reported having hepatitis C. Yet all were in the ETW category at the time of the first interview (and most had been there for many years).

*“It took me a long time to get disability status. I relied on my husband to help me with daily activities. I get more money now, but nothing else... I have HIV, severe scoliosis, cancer and a big drug problem. Daily life is too tough... They shouldn't make it so hard to get the basics.”
— Margot, who was homeless throughout most of the study*

PROFILE

John

John struggles with health and addiction issues that make immediate employability unrealistic. He uses intravenous cocaine and has ongoing psychiatric problems he believes are linked to drug use. He lives in a rooming house. Though John applied for PPMB status, he was denied. He has hepatitis C, for which he receives a \$40 diet allowance, but still remains underweight most of the time. John's hepatitis is worse than for many, but he has not consistently tested poorly enough to qualify for treatment.

John uses various charitable services to help make ends meet, but his overall approach to getting by is going without. He is an active volunteer with an advocacy group.

John's caseworkers have changed frequently, and while some have been good, all have been constrained by the system to help him as he felt he needed. A key exception was that he was able to secure “medical condition” status, which temporarily excuses him from looking for work. Having this exemption has been very helpful for John. His primary concern is his addiction, and he wants to beat it. Following that, he hopes to get the hepatitis C treatment and be able to start again.

Liz

Liz was one of the study's voluntary leavers, but it was a struggle. And while she is happy to be off welfare, her income is virtually unchanged from what it was while on assistance.

Liz has a young child with a disability. She is no longer with the child's father, but they share custody. Both were on welfare at the start of the study. At the intake stage, Liz had custody more hours in a week and her child ate more meals at her house, but slept more nights at the father's. This eventually shifted, with the child spending more days and nights with Liz. Despite this, Liz never succeeded in getting her child onto her welfare file; she was always considered a single person. Welfare rules require her child's father to sign a document agreeing that the child is with the mother more, and should therefore be on her file, but because this would have reduced his own welfare income, he refused to sign the document. While Liz was able to secure the appropriate portion of the federal child tax benefit (using letters of support from doctors, daycares and teachers), the ministry would not accept any other proof but her ex-partner's acknowledgement (or an expensive court order).

Thus, Liz was left with a vastly inadequate income, even while facing the need to secure adequate food and shelter for her child, as well as the many additional medical costs associated with her child's disability.

Liz had little time for work search. Her child had numerous medical appointments during the day, which made it hard for Liz to comply with her employment plan requirements. Different workers treated this in varying ways, though she did briefly secure an exemption from the work search obligation. Liz had, by her own description, a terrible diet, because she disproportionately put money into feeding her child.

Eventually, Liz was placed with a non-profit employment agency that gave her up to \$1,500 to spend on training programs she wanted to take, and that allowed her to get her high school completion and a variety of office and computer skills she needed for the kind of work she wanted.

After an unhappy and unsuccessful job placement, Liz volunteered at a small non-profit in the hopes of gaining better skills. She was subsequently hired part-time at the organization and eventually her hours increased sufficiently for her to leave welfare. The income is close to the same, but she is much happier not having to deal with the ministry.

- **The high incidence of re-categorization represents both a good and bad news story – and a significant finding.**
 - On the positive side, once re-categorized (to PWD or PPMB status), people receive modestly higher monthly benefits. With re-categorization also comes the welcome relief of being excused from onerous and inappropriate work-search obligations.
 - However, **re-categorization took much longer than it should have**, and often happened only after repeated unsuccessful applications. People were forced to wait minimally two years, and frequently much longer, for their medical condition, disability, or other barrier to employment to be officially recognized. And even the higher benefit levels PWD clients receive still leave people living well below the poverty line. The sad reality is that, for many, in the absence of a significant increase in benefit levels, this will be as good as it gets.

- **Under current welfare rules and benefit rates, women often feel they have no choice but to stay in or return to abusive relationships, or to engage in survival sex/prostitution.**
 - One third of the women in the study (four out of 12) who reported being in an intimate relationship said they experienced abuse at the hands of their partners during the study period. Three of these four women stayed in or returned to an abusive relationship for financial reasons.
 - One fifth of all women who participated in the study (eight people) reported engaging in prostitution/survival sex at some point during the study. For four of these women, this was tied directly to welfare rules.

- **The findings cast doubt on the government’s stated commitment to offering employment supports to longer-term income assistance clients**, even though the government had significantly boosted the employment expectations of those on assistance.
 - At the start of the study, about a quarter of the participants reported not having an employment plan. Surprisingly, given the government’s frequent touting of its job training and job placement programs, 54 per cent reported never having been offered training or education by the ministry, and only 15 per cent reported ever having been offered a job placement (either voluntary or mandatory).
 - Throughout the study, almost half the participants on assistance reported not having a consistent caseworker (who would know about their individual circumstances and needs).

- **BC’s welfare policies do not help people find a path out of poverty.** Only a small fraction of the participants in this study left poverty. Those who remain on assistance remain very poor, even if re-categorized. Those forced off even more so. And while those who shifted from income assistance to the labour market were better off, most are now counted among the working poor.

*“I miss working. I want to get a job. But they aren’t making it easy. I need somewhere to live first. The security of having a place, being normal, will help.”
— Alice, at the intake stage. She was later cut off assistance.*

Policy Recommendations

Among this study's recommendations are the following:

- **Welfare benefit rates must be increased and indexed.** And earnings exemptions should be reinstated for all income assistance recipients (not just those with PWD or PPMB status).
- **The government must make a commitment to categorize welfare clients appropriately, and in a timely manner,** so that people are not held in the ETW category for years, with less income and forced to jump through employment hoops that are fundamentally inappropriate.
- **The regulations and administrative practices that permit people being cut off, even temporarily, must be revisited** – they are too arbitrary, they are applied inappropriately, and they cause unacceptable hardship and harm.
- **More meaningful supports must be provided.** If more people are to move from welfare to work, they must be provided with housing, help with addiction and health problems, better access to quality affordable child care, and a level of individualized education and employment supports that can make this possible, and that truly represent a path out of poverty.

We urge that the ministry (and government overall) change its overarching goals, from a narrow focus on welfare caseload reduction and “moving people from welfare to work,” and move instead to the broader goals of poverty reduction and elimination, and health promotion.

As with previous Economic Security Project reports, we reiterate the need to see greater accountability at the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance. This is a ministry charged with helping poor, needy and often vulnerable people. We urge that the ministry (and government overall) change its overarching goals, from a narrow focus on welfare caseload reduction and “moving people from welfare to work,” and move instead to the broader goals of poverty reduction and elimination, and health promotion.

Introduction

In the summer of 2004, 62 people on income assistance from three British Columbia cities were recruited for a study entitled the Living on Welfare project. All were in the “Expected to Work” (ETW) welfare category, and were longer-term income assistance recipients. They agreed to remain in contact with researchers every month, and to be interviewed twice a year for the following two years. What follows are the results of this study.

The project’s goals were to:

- Better understand the impact, over time, of BC’s new and existing welfare policies for those people on income assistance who are “expected to work” but who have been on welfare longer than average, and to explore how welfare rules interact with the realities of people’s lives;
- Explore, in particular, how BC’s two-year time limit rule (and the many exemptions to it) is administered and enforced in practice;
- Examine the content and enforcement of the “Employment Plans” (EPs) those on assistance in the expected to work category are required to sign;
- Track what happens to individuals when they leave income assistance, either “voluntarily” or because their assistance is terminated, and to determine whether the experiences of “forced” welfare leavers differ from those of “voluntary” leavers; and
- Study how people make ends meet (and the hardships they experience) when they are on income assistance, and when they leave.

The report’s introduction highlights key welfare policy changes in recent years – the rule changes and restructuring that was the backdrop to the study. It then outlines the study’s methodology.

One of the goals of the project was to track what happens to individuals when they leave income assistance, either “voluntarily” or because their assistance is terminated, and to determine whether the experiences of “forced” welfare leavers differ from those of “voluntary” leavers.

The bulk of this paper reports on the findings of our interviews. First, we present the circumstances of the study participants at the intake stage (when they were first recruited in the summer of 2004), and offer initial policy observations. Then we examine how these circumstances changed over the next two years.

The conclusion summarizes the overall findings and analysis, and sets out policy recommendations.

Throughout the document we have included quotes from the study participants, and profile boxes that seek to capture their circumstances. Their real names are not used.

PROFILE

Alan

Alan remained on income assistance throughout the study. He is an example of someone who, while initially categorized as “expected to work,” clearly faced significant barriers to employment.

Alan has children but is separated from their mother. He misses seeing them, and dreams of being healthy and together enough to one day be more active in their lives and to have another child. When the study began he was living in a shelter, later stayed with a few friends, and finally moved into a series of residential rehab houses.

Alan has hepatitis C. Though he has a diet allowance, it is insufficient. He is always hungry and underweight. He accesses all the soup kitchens and food banks for which he is eligible. He applied for PPMB status, but his income never increased. He did, however, attain a medical exemption from looking for work, which enabled him to focus on his addiction. When Alan is ready to look for work again, he will need dental care. He says he is missing too many teeth to get work, and what teeth he has hurt him all the time.

Alan has a serious heroin and cocaine addiction. He has been in various forms of recovery programs since the study began. For the last year he was staying in rehab houses. Moving cities (and away from the drug connections he had) was very helpful.

Part way through the study Alan had several people close to him (including his fiancée and some family members) die in a short period of time. This knocked his recovery backwards and his caseworker was very helpful in getting him some grief counselling. Alan has also taken some life skills training he found very helpful.

Alan is working hard at recovery. As of the final interview, he’d been clean for six months, and had gained weight. But throughout this time, he has consistently noted that a little bit more money (e.g., \$100 per month) would make all the difference in his success and how long recovery takes him. Having enough food, money to get around, to have a basic social life – Alan says these things would keep his focus on where he wants to be, and help him avoid the temptation to numb himself from poverty through drug use.

Policy Context

Living on welfare has never been easy. At no time has income assistance in British Columbia been “generous.” It has always been subject to tight eligibility rules, accessible only to those without income and virtually exhausted assets. And people who rely on income assistance have long felt the rules to be punitive and humiliating. Because making ends meet while on welfare has always been a trial, historically the vast majority of people on income assistance got off as fast as they could. Prior to the current decade, approximately 80 per cent of welfare recipients in BC left assistance within a year; although in more recent years, the much smaller numbers of people on assistance are more likely to remain on assistance for longer. Generally speaking, people have remained on assistance for more than one year only if there is a compelling reason for their inability to secure stable employment.

In the mid-1990s, the NDP provincial government made a series of welfare policy changes – including cuts to welfare benefit rates for those without children, and tighter eligibility rules – that pushed some people off welfare and discouraged others from claiming support. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and many community groups are on record criticizing these welfare cuts as harmful, mean-spirited and unjustified.

As a result of the welfare policy changes implemented over the past 13 years, along with broader economic trends (e.g., the falling unemployment rate), BC’s welfare caseloads have been dropping since 1995. Following changes introduced by the NDP government, the welfare caseload trended downwards by 1.3 per cent per month during the period from 1995 to 2002.¹

Yet, in spite of ongoing and significant declines in the welfare caseload, the current Liberal government determined that the welfare cuts implemented by the NDP did not go far enough. In 2002, the current government introduced its own sweeping changes to the legislation, policies and regulations governing income assistance in BC. This study was launched in the context of these latter cuts.

In January of 2002, the provincial government announced that it intended to implement a dramatic program of welfare restructuring, and that it would cut the operating budget of the Ministry of Human Resources (now called the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance) by 30 per cent over the next three years.²

The budget reduction target was achieved by a combination of cuts to welfare benefits,³ a further tightening of eligibility rules,⁴ and by operational cuts (the ministry’s staff was reduced by about 450 full-time equivalent positions, and 36 welfare offices across the province were closed).⁵ A summary of these cuts and rule changes is provided in the accompanying box, *Key BC Welfare Changes Introduced in 2002*, on page 20.

A number of BC’s new welfare policies implemented in 2002 are unprecedented in Canada, and represent a fundamental shift in Canadian social policy: the arbitrary denial of welfare when in need as a basic human right. These include the two-year time limit rule and the “two-year independence test.” The two-year time limit rule limits “employable” welfare recipients (without children) to two years of support during any five-year period.⁶

In 2002, the current government introduced its own sweeping changes to the legislation, policies and regulations governing income assistance in BC. This study was launched in the context of these latter cuts.

Key BC Welfare Changes Introduced in 2002

- Cuts to benefit rates for single parents (of \$43 per month), for people between the ages of 55 and 64 (of \$47 to \$98 per month), and to the shelter allowances of families with three or more people (of \$55 to \$75 per month), excluding those categorized as a “Person With a Disability” (PWD) or a “Person with a Persistent Multiple Barrier to Employment” (PPMB).
- Elimination of earnings exemptions for those without PWD or PPMB status. Meaning, those in the expected to work category are no longer able to earn and keep a small amount of income each month. Previously, individuals could earn and keep a flat rate of \$100 per month, and parents or couples could keep a flat rate of \$200 per month, with additional income earned subject to a 75 per cent clawback. Now, any income earned is clawed-back dollar for dollar.
- Elimination of the child support exemption. Previously, a parent on income assistance receiving child maintenance from a former partner could keep \$100 per month. All child maintenance is now clawed-back from a welfare cheque dollar for dollar.
- “Employable” single parents are now expected to work when their youngest child is three years old (down from seven years of age).
- Those seeking to apply for income assistance must now wait three weeks (and, in practice, sometimes longer) before they can formally apply, during which time they must demonstrate they are engaged in “reasonable work search.” An “Emergency Needs Assessment” (ENA) may be conducted that can expedite this wait. The government claims that, currently, a majority of those seeking assistance are granted ENAs (now re-dubbed an “urgent eligibility interview appointment”), but this was not the case during most of the period covered by this study.
- The process of applying for assistance was made more complicated and onerous, including directing those seeking assistance to a 1-866 telephone line (at which point many are discouraged from applying), and requiring applicants to complete an on-line orientation that is fundamentally inappropriate for many of those in need of help.
- People on income assistance must complete “employability screens” and “client employability profiles,” which are then used as a basis for caseworkers to develop an “employment plan” that sets out the client’s work search, training and/or job placement obligations. These “agreements” must be signed by those on assistance, and failure to abide by the terms of one’s plan is grounds for the suspension of benefits.
- The two-year “independence test”: this new rule stipulates that, to be eligible, new welfare applicants must demonstrate that they have been financially independent for two consecutive years (earning a minimum of \$7,000 of employment income or engaged in 840 hours of employment per year). The rule does not recognize other forms of independence, such as surviving on the streets. This new rule can arbitrarily deny benefits to someone regardless of financial need.

Key BC Welfare Changes Introduced in 2002 continued

- The two-year time limit: this new rule applies to those in the expected to work category. Clients without children can see their benefits terminated for three years, while those with children may see their benefits reduced by \$100 per month (for single parents) and \$200 per month (for couples).
- Clients without PWD are no longer permitted to pursue post-secondary studies. Full-time students are not eligible for assistance, but must instead seek student loans.
- The process of applying for and gaining PWD status, and the newly-created PPMB status, was also made more complicated and onerous.
- The options for appealing individual welfare decisions (concerning the denial, discontinuance or reduction of benefits) were limited.
- Funding for poverty law legal aid was eliminated.

The two-year independence test stipulates that new welfare applicants must demonstrate that they have been financially independent for two consecutive years to be eligible for benefits.

These policy changes have been critiqued in more detail elsewhere.⁷ The purpose here is simply to provide the context within which the current study took place.

Since these welfare reforms were implemented, the rate of decline in the welfare caseload accelerated sharply, with the caseload shrinking by 3.2 per cent per month between 2002 and 2006.⁸

When this study was in its planning stages, the research team was particularly interested in tracking whether any of the study participants would find themselves subject to the two-year time limit rule, and how knowledge of this new rule may affect the experiences and choices of people on income assistance.

However, public concern about the two-year time limit rule mounted during the fall of 2003 as the first cohort of people potentially affected by the rule approached the two-year wall and faced being cut off assistance (for a period of up to three years).⁹ And in early February 2004, a significant victory was won by anti-poverty advocates when the provincial government announced a 25th exemption to the rule.¹⁰ This new regulation exempts anyone who is abiding by his or her employment plan (i.e., is searching for work or engaged in training, as committed to in their “agreement” with the ministry responsible for income assistance). The exemption had the immediate effect of removing thousands of people from imminent risk of being cut off. It also made the original time limit rule virtually moot, as it was already the case that people could be cut off assistance or subject to other penalties for failure to abide by one’s employment plan (and many have been, as is discussed below). Even so, the time limit rule remains in BC’s income assistance legislation, and according to the government, a few dozen people have been cut off or denied assistance (or, if they have children, subject to a reduction in their monthly benefit) due to this rule (see Table 1 on page 22).

“Treat people as individuals, and gear resources more to specific individual needs.”

— Mary

While the actual number of people affected by the time limit rule is dramatically less than would have been the case prior to the introduction of Exemption 25, people have been subject to the rule and are consequently ineligible for assistance for a period of up to three years.

According to data acquired through a Freedom of Information request, in 2006 alone, 490 welfare files were “sanctioned and closed.” In the vast majority of cases, the reason given was “non-compliance with employment plan.”

Moreover, the actual numbers of people being cut off assistance, and experiencing hardship as a result, is much greater than appears in Table 1. For example, according to data acquired through a Freedom of Information request submitted by Vancouver anti-poverty activist Jean Swanson, in 2006 alone, 490 welfare files were “sanctioned and closed.” In the vast majority of cases, the reason given was “non-compliance with employment plan.” In some of these cases, files are opened again and people find themselves back in receipt of assistance after one or two months without support, while in others, people may be cut off for extended periods of time, or indefinitely (only in cases where criminal fraud has occurred and where people do not have children are people subject to lifetime ineligibility).¹¹

And so, this study remained interested in how the two-year time limit affects the experiences of people on income assistance, the effects of the 25th exemption to this rule, and in people’s experience with the requirements and enforcement of their employment plans (EPs). These plans vary depending on the client, and may become more demanding over time. Minimally, an EP (for someone without PWD or PPMB status¹²) will require a client to engage in “supervised independent work search” and accept “suitable employment.” An EP may require that a client take one or more courses (such as night school), or participate in a drug or alcohol rehabilitation program. And it may require that a client participate in a job placement program. If a third party (such as a job placement/employment program service provider) reports to the ministry that a client has failed to attend a meeting/program required under their EP, the client may be found to be in non-compliance.

Non-compliance with an EP may lead to a client being deemed ineligible for assistance. This sanction can last a few months, or until compliance with the EP is demonstrated. As is discussed later, a few of the people in this study were cut off assistance for allegedly failing to abide by their employment obligations (see profile for *Frank* on page 24).

Fiscal year	Ineligible for benefits	Subject to benefit rate reduction	Total
2004–2005	24	7	31
2005–2006	9	7	16
Total	33	14	47

Source: Obtained through email request to Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, February 2007.

Study Methodology

In the summer of 2004, 62 people were recruited to participate in this study: 30 from the Lower Mainland, 17 from Kelowna, and 15 from Victoria.¹³

The criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants had to be:¹⁴

- Longer-term recipients of income assistance (specifically, they had to have been on assistance for 15 or more months since April 2002), as the study was particularly interested in following people at risk of hitting their two-year time limit;
- In the expected to work category (i.e., did not have PWD or PPMB status, or dependent children under the age of three, at the time of recruitment), as the study was focused on welfare rules that only apply to people in the ETW category;¹⁵ and
- Between the ages of 19 and 65, not pregnant at the intake stage, not a refugee claimant awaiting permanent residency status (for whom the rules differ), and not caring for a disabled dependent.

In addition, the study was particularly interested in recruiting people difficult to reach through conventional survey recruitment methods (because they may not have phones, are homeless or living on the streets, or otherwise living in less stable housing situations).¹⁶ Typically, the more difficult-to-reach, longer-term ETW welfare recipients are not represented in most BC government sponsored welfare follow-up studies (telephone-based surveys) or surveys based on government tax file data. These individuals are systematically missed out because they do not have phones or because they do not file tax returns. Yet these individuals are among those whom the government is specifically targeting with its more stringent rules. In order to reach these individuals for our study, participants were recruited with the assistance of numerous front-line advocates and agencies (such as drop-in centres, soup kitchens, food banks, neighbourhood houses, churches, women's centres, and other service agencies); participants were also recruited by placing posters (advertising the research and seeking recruits) in public spaces. The Lower Mainland recruitment deliberately drew on agencies both within and outside the Downtown Eastside. This recruitment method enabled the study to meet an important research objective and include difficult-to-reach, longer-term welfare recipients (approximately one half of the sample falls into this group).¹⁷ On average, the study participants had been on assistance for eight years (although most had cycled on and off). At the same time, because the study relied on community agencies for posterage and front-line advocates for referrals, a portion of the sample tends to be more connected to community services.

Finally, in addition to the above criteria, recruitment at the intake stage was designed to ensure that the sample was broadly reflective of the demographic make-up of the MEIA temporary assistance caseload in terms of family type (sex, marital status and presence of dependent children), and that the sample included participants who were recent immigrants and Aboriginal people (with over-sampling for this latter and smallest demographic group).

"I'd make every one of their [ministry] workers and administrators go on welfare for a month, and make them go to a food bank, to get a taste of what it's like."

— Joanne

Frank

Frank was cut off assistance at the time of our third interview, and again at the time of the final round of interviews.

In many respects, much of the public would find Frank the most sympathetic of the study's forced welfare leavers. He very much wants to work. He spends many hours a week volunteering with a local charity, helping other low-income people. He goes to church. While he had a history of addiction, he'd been clean for years. At the intake stage, he'd lived in a stable SRO room for years, and always made sure the rent was paid. But he's also had bad luck. He has hepatitis C. He never finished high school. And while he had worked steadily in the past, by the time we met Frank, he'd been out of the labour market for some time, and felt that, with his resume reflecting this, employers weren't prepared to take a chance on him. He was skipping a meal a day.

At the time of the third interview, Frank was in the midst of a temporary suspension from welfare. He was being sanctioned for quitting a job. But as Frank explains, he was misled. He'd quit the first job for what seemed like a better one, only to find that the second job was "a fly-by-night company." He felt the suspension was unfair: "I quit for a better opportunity, not because I didn't want to work. I was lied to at the second opportunity, but didn't know that."

Prior to the suspension, Frank says his experience with frontline caseworkers had always been positive, and that he'd always been treated with respect. But then, "they just cut me off. When I quit my job for valid reasons...they didn't even want to speak to me. Prior to that they were helping me. It was like a wall went up."

While suspended, he made ends meet by borrowing from family and friends, and turning to the food bank.

When we first met Frank, he reported that, while infected with hepatitis C, he was symptom-free. But during his suspension, he reported his hepatitis was acting up: "I'm tired all the time." His anxiety level was much higher. "Being stressed out about where my next rent cheque is coming from and having no money for food doesn't help my health any... Fruits and veggies are hard to get your hands on when you're poor." And this was the first time we found Frank worried about meeting rent.

Frank also reported that, while cut off, looking for work was harder. He couldn't access the employment agency the ministry had assigned him to, or get help with bus tickets. Given his health status at the time, he didn't feel he was employable. He did day labour occasionally, but it would leave him exhausted and bedridden.

At the time of the fourth interview, Frank was back on assistance, his health was much improved, and he was working (at a job he'd found himself), declaring the income, and having his entire welfare cheque clawed back (his average income was \$720 per month). He'd been required to take a 10-week training course, which he found very useful.

When we last interviewed Frank, however, things had taken a turn for the worse. He had been cut off assistance two months previously for being fired from his job.

Profile for Frank, continued

Frank was weathering this second cut-off less well. He'd been evicted for non-payment from the stable SRO room he'd had for years, and now "a buddy is letting me crash at his place" for free. He had no income, was getting food from soup kitchens, was skipping a meal a day and losing weight, and reported being "bummed out" and doing nothing. While his past addiction has been in abeyance, Frank now says, "over the past little while the monster's really been eating at me," and he's been drinking again for the first time in years.

He said looking for work was harder, as he had no address, no resume or letters of reference, and limited transportation help from a charity. And he reports his anxiety level is "through the roof." The lack of privacy was particularly difficult to manage. Life is now "much worse... The hotel room I had was small, but at least it was mine."

Frank laments not having a consistent caseworker and adequate support. "They switch them [caseworkers] on me all the time. It would be kind of neat if you could develop a relationship with one person... I'm really ticked off at the lies we've been told by our government about the support they were going to give us. Sure, I got training. But I need to finish high school."

"It would really be to their benefit to keep me on \$500 a month and send me to school for a couple years. They'd get their money back tenfold."

— Frank, who was cut off assistance

The very fact that participants for the study had to be on assistance for 15 or more months led the researchers to expect that most participants likely faced some barriers to employment, despite the fact that none, at the intake stage, were so designated. We were particularly interested in how a group of people with real (but to that point officially unrecognized) barriers to employment would navigate the new and more stringent work-related requirements, or conversely, whether the system itself would be forced to come to terms with the reality of the lives and capabilities of these people. We expected that some participants would leave assistance (either voluntarily or not), some would leave assistance but then return, while others would remain on assistance throughout the study, and of these, some would likely be re-categorized as PPMB or PWD.

The 62 participants were recruited and subsequently interviewed by a team of four research assistants.¹⁸ The research assistants conducted full, in-person interviews (of about one hour's duration) every six months between the summer of 2004 and the summer of 2006, using a structured questionnaire (thus, in total, full interviews were conducted five times). Additionally, in order to maximize the retention of study participants, the research assistants sought to re-establish contact with each of their participants every month throughout the study period.¹⁹

This study not only provides descriptive survey data, it also provides a more rounded qualitative sense of participants' experiences of living on welfare. The latter is made possible by the opportunity for participants to provide more open-ended responses to some survey questions. In addition, the longitudinal design, in which research assistants made personal monthly check-ins with the participants, generated supplementary qualitative interview notes.

The work of the research assistants in providing interview notes and in minimizing the study's attrition rate cannot be overstated. As is shown, many of the study participants did not have phones or homes, and many of those with homes moved frequently. At the intake stage, participants were asked to share contact information, not only for themselves, but also for family members and friends, and to list regular "hang-outs," so the research assistants had a number of alternate ways to stay in contact over the two-year period of the study. For many participants, a trusting relationship was established with the research assistant during the course of the study period, and the research assistant became one of the more stable and routine fixtures in their lives.

The end result of these and other efforts was a study retention rate of 73 per cent (by the end of the two years, the study had lost contact with 17 of the original 62 participants) – a very high retention rate for a study of this nature.

"Employment plans are a joke. All the jobs were in Richmond and require equipment (shoes, hardhats, etc.), transportation money, etc. ... Getting my GED [high school completion], forklift training, or other tickets to help me find steady work – these would have been useful wherever I work."
— Paul

This project fills a gap in the research. While other research that follows people on welfare and welfare leavers in BC exists, our study complements and supplements this work in important ways:

- Between 2002 and 2003, the BC government conducted seven quarterly exit surveys with people who had left income assistance six months previously. However, these surveys were one-time phone interviews that managed to connect with only about one third of those the surveyors sought to reach (nearly half were found not to have a phone line in service). Thus, these surveys missed many of the most vulnerable people. The surveys did not ask hardship questions, and they have since been discontinued.
- More recently, the BC government released a short paper on "Outcomes of Those Leaving Assistance," this time using the social insurance numbers of former clients and matching these against income tax returns.²⁰ The paper examined what has happened to clients who left between 2002 and 2003, and found that just over 80 per cent have some employment income, with no significant difference between those who left before and after 2002. While this approach achieved a better coverage rate than the earlier exit surveys, fully one quarter of the former welfare clients did not file tax returns and so are excluded from the tax file data. In addition, the study found that they could not determine what happened to welfare leavers in 7.7 per cent of cases in the sample because the tax returns were incomplete or lacked sufficient information. The latest government analysis, therefore, systematically misses out on approximately one third of welfare cases. And, as with the earlier telephone surveys, the study based on tax file data did not report income levels, it did not include hardship indicators, and those it failed to capture (the missing 25 per cent) are likely among the most vulnerable (those who have been on basic income assistance for a longer period of time, the homeless, those with mental health and addiction problems, etc.).
- Other academic studies have tended to focus on single parents with young children (whereas only about one quarter of the participants in this study live with dependent children), and the interviews have been more qualitative.

Profile of the Study Participants

At the intake stage, participants were asked a series of personal and demographic questions. As Table 2 illustrates, the study succeeded in recruiting a group of participants who broadly reflect the demographic make-up (family type) of income assistance recipients in the expected to work category.²¹ The small, non-random sample does not permit the study to make generalized statements or to report in detail about specific demographic groups, such as Aboriginal participants, Kelowna participants, older participants, women, immigrants, etc.

Sex (n=62)	Male	Female			
	40% (25)	60% (37)			
Living with dependent children (n=62)	Yes	No			
	27% (16)	73% (46)			
Marital status (n=62)	Single	Common law	Separated/divorced/widowed		
	61% (38)	10% (6)	29% (18)		
Age (n=62)	19–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64
	7% (4)	31% (19)	37% (23)	19% (12)	7% (4)
Current living situation (n=62)	Live alone	Live with partner or partner and children	Live with children	Live with extended family and/or friends/roommates	Other
	42% (26)	10% (6)	19% (12)	18% (11)	11% (7)
Family type (n=60) ^a	Single men	Single women	Single parent with children	Couple with no dependent children	Couple with dependent children
	38% (23)	30% (18)	24% (14)	5% (3)	3% (2)
Highest level of formal education completed (n=62)	Some high school or less	High school	Some college/technical	College/technical diploma	Some university or higher
	42% (26)	19% (12)	14% (9)	13% (8)	11% (7)
Place of birth (n=62)	BC	Prairie provinces	Ontario	Other Canadian provinces and territories	Outside Canada
	45% (28)	19% (12)	10% (6)	11% (7)	14% (9)
Current city of residence ^b (n=62)	GVRD	Victoria	Kelowna		
	48% (30)	24% (15)	27% (17)		
Ethnic or racial background (n=62)	Caucasian	Aboriginal	Other “visible minority”		
	60% (37)	34% (21)	6% (4)		
First language (n=62)	English	Language other than English			
	90% (56)	10% (6)			
Aboriginal (n=20)	Status	Non-status			
	90% (18)	10% (2)			
<p>^a Categories used by BC Ministry of Human Resources, British Columbia Employment and Assistance Cases; the category “single” includes those who are divorced/separated or widowed.</p> <p>^b Total percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Survey responses do not break down between DTES and elsewhere, but specify Vancouver or elsewhere in Vancouver. Only three participants identified a location in the GVRD other than Vancouver.</p>					

Circumstances of the Study Participants at the Intake Stage

“Having a roof over your head takes care of health problems, don’t you think? People need adequate shelter to improve their health before they can work.”
— Paul

At the intake stage, the study asked a series of questions aimed at establishing the economic, housing and social circumstances of the participant group. We sought baseline information about hardships (housing security, food security, access to phones and transportation, etc.), the health status of the participants, and their history within the labour market and the welfare system.

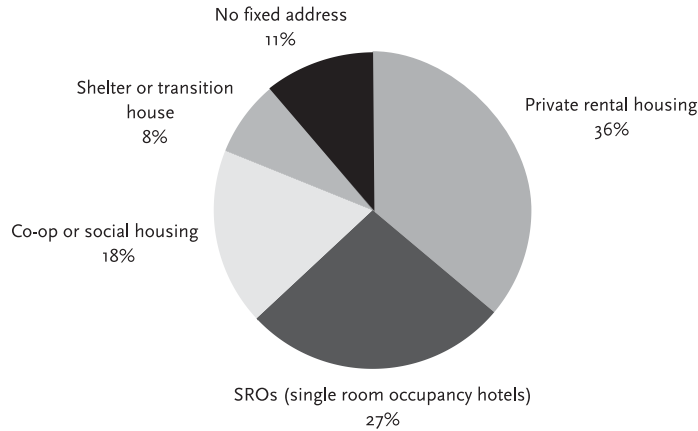
The following summarizes the circumstances of the study participants at the intake stage in the summer of 2004.

Housing

- 36 per cent lived in private rental housing, 27 per cent were living in SROs (single room occupancy hotels), 18 per cent were living in co-op or social housing, 8 per cent were in shelters or transition houses, and 11 per cent were at no fixed address. If we combine the last two of these figures, we find 19 per cent could be considered homeless (see Figure 1).
- 39 per cent reported being without a fixed address at some time during the previous six months.
- 53 per cent reported difficulty paying their rent (with 84 per cent of these saying they had difficulty most or all of the time, and 54 per cent of these reported being late with the rent some or all of the time).

- 43 per cent reported they had been threatened with eviction in the previous six months, and 19 per cent said they had been evicted during that time.
- 45 per cent reported moving one or more times in the previous six months, with 31 per cent moving more than once, and almost one quarter moving three or more times.

Figure 1: Housing Reported by Participants – Intake Stage



Thirty-nine per cent of participants reported being without a fixed address at some time during the previous six months.

PROFILE

Margaret

Margaret is a young single parent, and grew up in foster care. She hates being on welfare. She lost custody of her daughter twice during the study. The first time she was told her apartment complex was not up to standards. She had her landlord do the necessary repairs, and she regained custody.

After the second apprehension, Margaret could not be reached by the LOW research assistant for several months. When contact was finally re-established, Margaret had lost a great deal of weight. She answered questions with little of the passion seen previously. She reported losing her child because she picked a really bad guy to date. He is now out of her life, but she does not feel hopeful of regaining custody.

When we first met Margaret, she was a feisty individual: driven, taking care of her mental and physical health, and goal-oriented. By the final interview, she appeared to be on a frightening spiral of depression and weight loss.

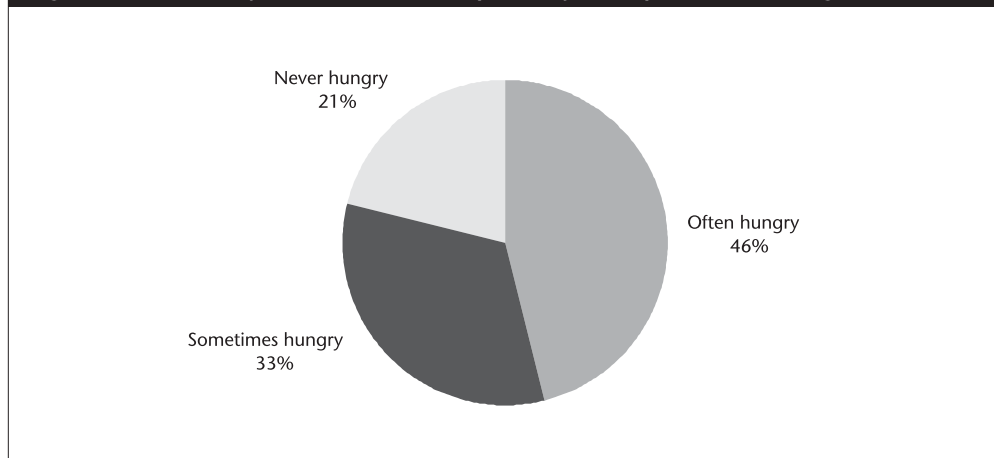
She will now have to face a decrease in welfare benefits (without custody of her child), and realizes she most likely will have to move and thereby not be able to qualify to regain custody of her child. Her mental state had gone from being quite positive to desperately low; she does not see her way out of the present situation.

Food Security

- 46 per cent reported they had often been hungry during the past month, 33 per cent said they were sometimes hungry, and 21 per cent said they were never hungry (see Figure 2).
- 82 per cent reported sometimes skipping a meal due to a lack of money, and on average, these participants reported skipping 20 meals per month, ranging anywhere from two to 60 meals. Almost a quarter (four people) of those with children reported that their children sometimes skipped a meal due to lack of money.
- 77 per cent reported receiving food from a food bank, soup kitchen or drop-in centre during the previous month, with 50 per cent saying they did so more than three times in the month, and 43 per cent reporting they did so 10 or more times. Indeed, the mean number of times food had been sought in this manner during the previous month was 11 times, and the median was eight times.

Seventy-seven per cent of the study participants reported receiving food from a food bank, soup kitchen or drop-in centre during the previous month, with 43 per cent reporting they did so 10 or more times.

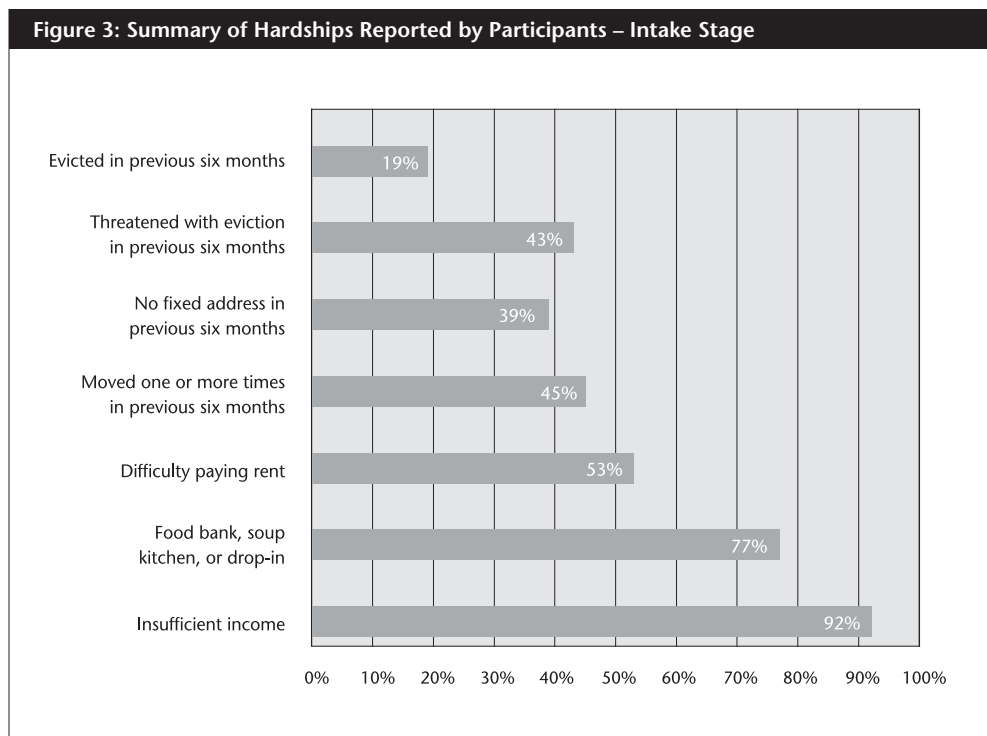
Figure 2: Food Security in the Last Month Reported by Participants – Intake Stage



Other Basic Needs

- Only 49 per cent had a phone number in service, and one quarter of participants reported having a phone line disconnected during the previous six months.
- 84 per cent said they had difficulty paying for transportation. 52 per cent reported traveling mainly by foot, 32 per cent by bus, 10 per cent by bike, while 9 per cent used “other” means (e.g., rides from others or their own car).
- 92 per cent said their income was not enough to cover their basic expenses through each month.
- In response to questions about how they make ends meet, participants indicated a wide range of strategies, but the most frequently occurring strategies included obtaining their food from drop-in centres (40 per cent), obtaining food from food banks (23 per cent), binning (collecting returnable cans and bottles) and/or panhandling (18 per cent), working “under the table” or illegal activity (18 per cent), and borrowing money from/relying on gifts of money, food and clothing from family/friends (11 per cent).
- 94 per cent indicated they had used municipal or community services in the previous six months, primarily community centres, drop-in centres, service agencies, women’s centres, churches and libraries.

Only 49 per cent of participants had a phone number in service.



Health Status

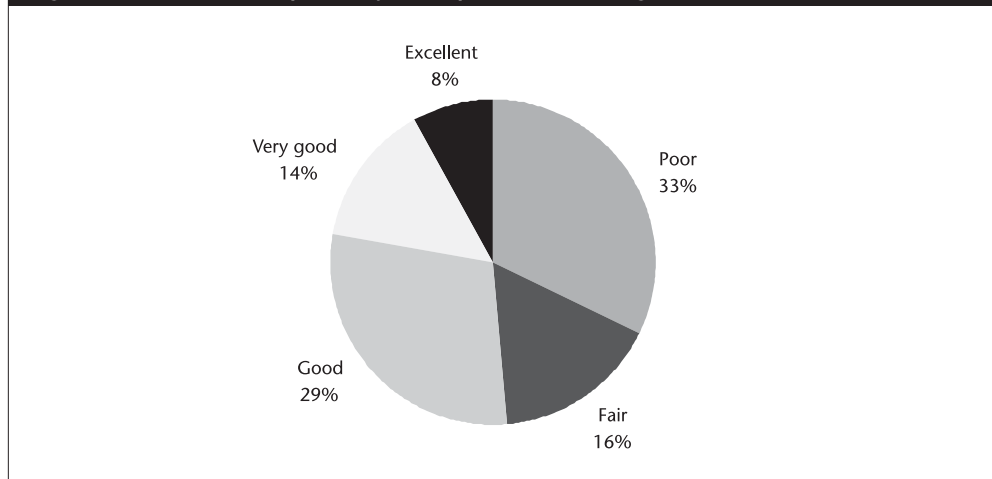
Many participants clearly had long-standing and serious health conditions that limited their day-to-day activities, with one third of participants having applied for disability status (PWD) or “multiple barriered” status (PPMB) in the preceding two years. Most were unsuccessful (70 per cent) or were still waiting to hear the outcome of their application. All remained in the ETW category at the time of the first interview.

Fifty-five per cent of participants reported having a long-term physical or mental health condition. Significantly, 20 per cent reported having hepatitis C.

The incidence of self-reported health problems (see Figure 4), including general health status, chronic health conditions and activity limitations and restrictions, is much higher than that reported by the general population, but similar with the incidence reported for people on income assistance in large-scale health surveys (e.g., the 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey, or CCHS). According to the CCHS, approximately 10 per cent of all British Columbians self-report that they have fair/poor health status, compared to 37.4 per cent of income assistance recipients.²² Almost half (48 per cent) of the Living on Welfare sample reported their health status as poor or fair.²³

- 73 per cent reported some health problems.
- 50 per cent reported going to an emergency room in the last six months (a much higher rate than the general population) – a finding with obvious implications for costs to the public health care system.
- 55 per cent reported having a long-term physical or mental health condition or health problem that limited their activity, and 26 per cent reported having a long-term disability or handicap that limited their activity, although more often than not, participants said they had received no special assistance from the ministry to help with their condition.
- Significantly, 20 per cent reported having hepatitis C (see profile for *John* on page 13). On top of their regular support, 18 per cent reported receiving an additional diet allowance for medical reasons (mostly for this medical condition).

Figure 4: Health Status Reported by Participants – Intake Stage



- 83 per cent indicated they did not receive adequate financial aid to cover their dental care needs, 67 per cent of whom identified that they needed more extensive dental work for problems ranging from multiple cavities and abscessed teeth, to broken and missing teeth.

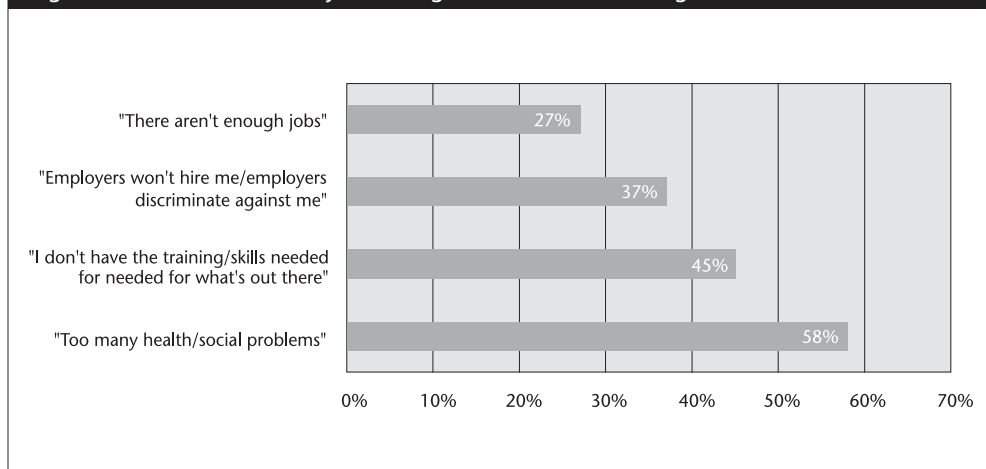
Employment History

- Participants reported a wide variety of past employment experiences, with a preponderance of low-paid, service-sector work such as serving tables, dish-washing, food preparation and cashier work, but also some more highly-paid, service-sector office and managerial work. There was also a preponderance of “blue collar” factory and construction work, and work in the lumber, fishing and shipping industries.
- The most common reason participants gave for their inability to find work at the time of the first interview was “too many health/social problems” (reported by 58 per cent of participants), followed by “I don’t have the training/skills needed for what’s out there” (45 per cent), and “Employers won’t hire me/employers discriminate against me” (37 per cent) (see Figure 5). Interestingly, only 27 per cent of respondents identified a lack of jobs in the economy as the cause of their own lack of employment, although this would likely change when the economy experiences a downturn.
- Three quarters of participants reported they had looked for work in the previous two years, but only one quarter was successful to a limited extent.

“I wanted education. I had accessed the YMCA’s program for training, but the ministry wouldn’t approve. I was sent to Destinations instead, attended ‘Mickey Mouse’ workshops. I have some university education and the ministry sent me to workshops for Superhost training and job interview skills.”

— Joanne

Figure 5: Reasons for Difficulty in Finding Paid Work – Intake Stage



Welfare History

Notwithstanding the government touting its multi-million dollar contracts with for-profit employment agencies, our study participants seemed to have been largely ignored. Our findings support those of others who suggest these agencies spent much of the first half of the decade “cream-skimming” those welfare clients with the fewest barriers to employment.

- Most of the participants had not been on welfare continuously; 82 per cent reported cycling on and off welfare since their first claim.
- On average, the participants reported being on assistance for a total (cumulative median) of eight years as of the study’s intake stage.
- 52 per cent reported combining welfare and earnings income prior to 2002, something they were no longer allowed to do after the government’s 2002 decision to eliminate earnings exemptions for people in the expected to work category.
- 18 per cent reported combining welfare and post-secondary studies at some time in the past, again something no longer allowed after 2002 for those in the expected to work category.
- 74 per cent reported being threatened with welfare sanctions at some time in the previous two years (most of whom were threatened with being permanently cut off) for an alleged failure to abide by the ministry rules, 39 per cent of whom also reported they had actually come under sanctions at some time, with 85 per cent of these saying they had had their benefits temporarily cut off. The most common rule people were accused of not following was job search requirements (in particular, providing paperwork to demonstrate an active job search).
- Given the importance of employment plans (EPs) in the administration of the time-limit rule, the research team had assumed that all participants would have one and know the content of these “agreements.” However, at the intake stage, 27 per cent of participants reported not having an EP (or if they had one, they were not aware of this).
- Equally surprising to the research team, given the government’s frequent touting of its job training and job placement programs, 54 per cent reported never having been offered training or education by the ministry, and only 15 per cent reported ever having been offered a job placement (either voluntary or mandatory).

PROFILE

Mary

Mary never thought she would end up on welfare, but a divorce changed all that. She was a professional woman, but at a low point in her life and found herself in need of income assistance. As a professional this hardship startled her. The income assistance helped financially, but she felt she was personally responsible for getting herself back to work and off assistance, which she did. She was appalled at the way income assistance recipients were treated; just to get a little assistance, in her words, you were treated “like a criminal.” She is steadfast that she will not return to welfare. But she is older, and worried about how she will make ends meet in retirement.

Initial Observations

Some important insights emerged from the information gathered at the intake stage. First and foremost, it became clear that, despite the fact that, at the time, all the study participants were in the “temporary assistance, expected to work” category of income assistance, and thus considered “employable” – and had been in this category for at least 15 months and often much longer – the reality was quite different. Like *Alan*, many of the participants were not imminently employable, and neither was their assistance “temporary” (see profile for *Alan* on page 18).

Many had long-standing and serious health conditions that limited their day-to-day activities, with nearly half of participants having sought “upgrading” into the PWD or PPMB category prior to the first interview. Many had severe addiction and health problems, notably hepatitis C (an illness that causes considerable fatigue, and which makes work in industries such as the food service sector virtually impossible). Without phone numbers in service, half of participants were at a distinct disadvantage in finding employment, and for the sizable share without a fixed address or stable housing, looking for work would represent a huge challenge. In short, many of the study participants were deeply engaged in meeting basic survival needs, making the task of seeking employment very challenging and/or inappropriate.

Second, the findings cast doubt on how serious the government’s stated commitment to offering employment support for people on income assistance really was during its first mandate. Minimally, the findings suggest that supports were lacking for people who were longer-term welfare recipients, and who consequently faced more barriers to employment (notwithstanding their categorization as “expected to work”).

The fact that, as late as the summer of 2004, about a quarter of our study participants reported not having an employment plan, and many reported not having a consistent caseworker (who would know about their individual circumstances and needs) nor being offered training or job placements, suggests the system was not focused on offering

Despite the fact that, at the time, all the study participants were in the expected to work category of income assistance – and had been in this category for at least 15 months – the reality was quite different. Many were not imminently employable.

PROFILE

Virginia

When we met Virginia, she was a young single mother with one child. She was required to take training programs that did not meet her areas of interest, and is bitter about an employment trainer telling her that she would never be able to work in a bank (which was her goal). Virginia proved him wrong by getting hired by a bank on her own. She is now off welfare and still working at the bank. Her child is in child care, with the help of a subsidy. As of the last interview she had moved into a good neighbourhood with her partner, and was about to get a promotion. She can’t understand how people who are vulnerable, as she was, and need assistance or a little help must endure such treatment from welfare: “They seemed to try and punish you for having hopes and dreams for yourself.”

meaningful employment supports to longer-term clients, even though the government had significantly boosted the employment expectations of those on assistance.

Many of the study participants were deeply engaged in meeting basic survival needs, making the task of seeking employment very challenging and/or inappropriate.

Similarly, notwithstanding the government frequently touting how many welfare recipients had found employment placements through its multi-million dollar contracts with Job Wave and other for-profit employment agencies, our study participants seemed to have been largely ignored by this program. Our findings support those of others who suggest that these agencies spent much of the first half of the decade “cream-skimming” those welfare clients with the fewest barriers to employment (most of whom need little or no help getting off assistance), rather than concentrating their efforts on longer-term welfare recipients with greater barriers to employment (clients whose needs make them more “expensive” from the perspective of for-profit service providers or agencies whose performance-based funding was linked to the number – or “volume” – of clients who do not return to income assistance).²⁴ The nature of the government’s job training and placement contracts seems to have created a perverse incentive, discouraging service providers from concentrating their programs on those who could most benefit from meaningful employment supports.

Third, the findings offer something of a challenge to both conventional left and right-wing proponents with respect to moving people from welfare to work. Traditionally, those with a more conservative bent have been inclined to say people on income assistance should “get a job,” while left-wing activists have said people cannot move from welfare to work because “the jobs aren’t there.” The majority of our study participants, however, say something quite different: that they want to work, and they know jobs are out there (only 27 per cent said their inability to find work was due to a lack of jobs), but they cannot access these jobs, either because of their health and/or social problems, because they lack the needed training and skills, or because employers won’t hire them. This finding suggests that policy solutions must focus on addressing these problems, and recognizing the precariousness of people’s physical and mental health, as well as discrimination in the labour market.

Finally, the findings drive home the inadequacy of welfare benefit levels. For this sample of longer-term welfare recipients, what emerges is a public welfare system that is structurally dependent on food banks and other charities in order for people to meet basic needs. Many people on welfare cannot find housing, cannot afford a phone, and cannot meet core food and nutritional needs. Much of the public would be surprised to learn that the social welfare system we collectively fund through our taxes – a system many assume is there for people in need – is so woefully inadequate and leaves people living so deeply below the poverty line. The combination of inadequate benefit rates with the elimination of earnings exemptions in 2002 means many simply cannot make ends meet on income assistance income alone. The findings shed light on why some on income assistance feel compelled to resort to panhandling, survival sex, or various other illegal activities. And the findings point to the various ways in which society at large pays for an inadequate welfare system – through higher health costs, higher policing and justice system costs, and increased demand on innumerable community and charitable agencies.

Two Years Later: What Changed?

As mentioned previously, despite the best efforts of researchers to check in with participants each month, the study was unable to retain all 62 of the original participants for the full two years. When final interviews were conducted in the summer of 2006, researchers were able to interview 45 people (an attrition rate of 27 per cent). As noted, a retention rate of 73 per cent for a study of this kind (working with a highly mobile and vulnerable population) is very high. (See the Appendix on page 64 for a breakdown of the status of all participants during each round of interviews.)

Where Are They Now?

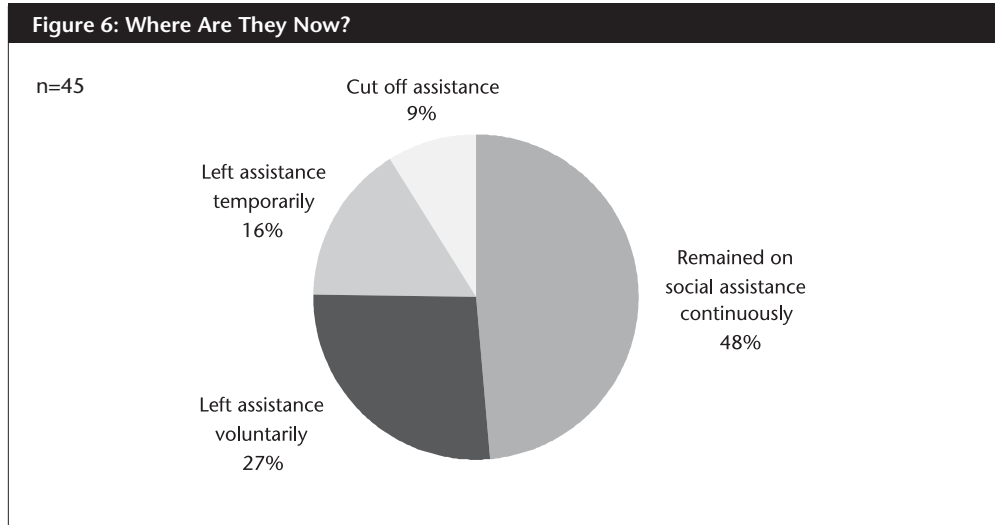
Of the 45 people who remained with the study to its completion in the summer of 2006, their status with respect to income assistance was as follows (see Figure 6 on page 38):

- 48 per cent (22 people) remained on income assistance throughout the study period (one of whom experienced a cut in benefits), and most of these participants were eventually re-categorized to PWD or PPMB status (a point to which we return below);
- 27 per cent (12 people) left assistance voluntarily;
- 16 per cent (seven people) left assistance temporarily at some point during the two years, but by the end of the study were back on assistance; and
- 9 per cent (4 people) came under sanction and were cut off assistance.

What emerges is a public welfare system that is structurally dependent on food banks and other charities in order for people to meet basic needs. The findings shed light on why some on income assistance feel compelled to resort to panhandling, survival sex, or various other illegal activities.

Thus, almost two thirds (64 per cent, or 29 people) of those who completed the final interview were still in receipt of income assistance at the end of the study period.

We also know a fair amount about the 17 people who did not complete the study (see *What Became of the Lost Participants?* on page 39).



“It would have helped to have PWD or PPMB status, because I wouldn’t have been under a lot of pressure to look for work. That would have given me time and energy to complete my Grade 12 and other training... They continued to pressure me to work even when I had trauma issues [resulting from a rape]... I had trouble concentrating, let alone looking for work.”
 — Diane

Employability: Why Can’t People Get Off Assistance?

As the study progressed, the initial findings that led the researchers to question the immediate, regular and/or full-time employability of many of the study participants only deepened, with the ministry itself apparently ultimately coming to much the same conclusion.

As of the second round of interviews, the study asked participants explicitly about addiction issues, knowing that this represents a key employment barrier for many. Almost half (47 per cent) of participants reported an “addiction problem” at the second round of interviews. Of these, the majority (just over half) identified the problem as a (street) “drug addiction” (primarily cocaine), followed by alcohol (one third) and tobacco addictions (12 per cent). Just over half considered their addiction to be “very” or “fairly” serious. Many of the participants who reported having an addiction problem identified a range of difficulties that ensue, including: going without food (54 per cent), loss of housing (54 per cent), the addiction consuming the majority of their time (50 per cent), difficulty holding steady work (46 per cent), losing custody of a child or children (38 per cent), engaging in illegal activities/theft (29 per cent), panhandling or binning (21 per cent) and prostitution (17 per cent).

Despite the fact that by the end of the study period the ministry had come to the conclusion that many of the study participants were not currently employable, it nevertheless cut off assistance to seven people (21 per cent of those who participated in the final interview and had not left assistance voluntarily) at some point during the study. Four of

What Became of the Lost Participants?

Of the 17 people who did not remain with the study until its end, we know this:²⁵

- Just over one third of participants who dropped out of the study had no fixed address at the start of the study, compared to 11 per cent of the original sample.
- Two participants are known to have become homeless during the course of the study and subsequently could not be located.
- Three participants withdrew from the study at different stages:
 - One found work as a security guard by early 2006 and subsequently declined to be interviewed;
 - One declined to participate in the study after the second round of interviews; and
 - One participant reportedly chose to become homeless in the hopes of moving up the BC Housing waitlist soon after the first interview, spent much of the next year homeless, and eventually secured subsidized housing but declined a final interview.
- Four participants moved out of town and/or province:
 - One man moved from Kelowna to Vancouver after the third interview, and subsequently died in the winter of 2006 in an SRO room in Gastown. He had remained on regular income assistance, had experienced numerous spells of homelessness, and had a long-time drug addiction. He lived on the fifth floor of a chaotic and run-down rooming house with no elevator. His small room had a broken window facing a brick wall. He had lost his cell phone coverage a few months before his death due to non-payment. The building caretaker said that the building manager had found him in his room alive with a broken hip, where he had been in that state for several days. He was taken to St. Paul's Hospital, and died shortly after;
 - Two moved to Alberta and reportedly found work there; and
 - One moved cities and could not be re-located.
- One participant began school a few months before the final interview and dropped out of touch.
- One participant with addiction issues had her children apprehended after the second interview, and researchers were unable to make subsequent contact.

Thus, of the 17 people who did not complete the study, four arguably found themselves in improved life circumstances by virtue of finding work or going to school. The circumstances of a number at the end of the study period are simply unknown, but many are clearly no better off, or are indeed worse off.

One man moved from Kelowna to Vancouver after the third interview, and subsequently died in the winter of 2006 in an SRO room in Gastown.

PROFILE

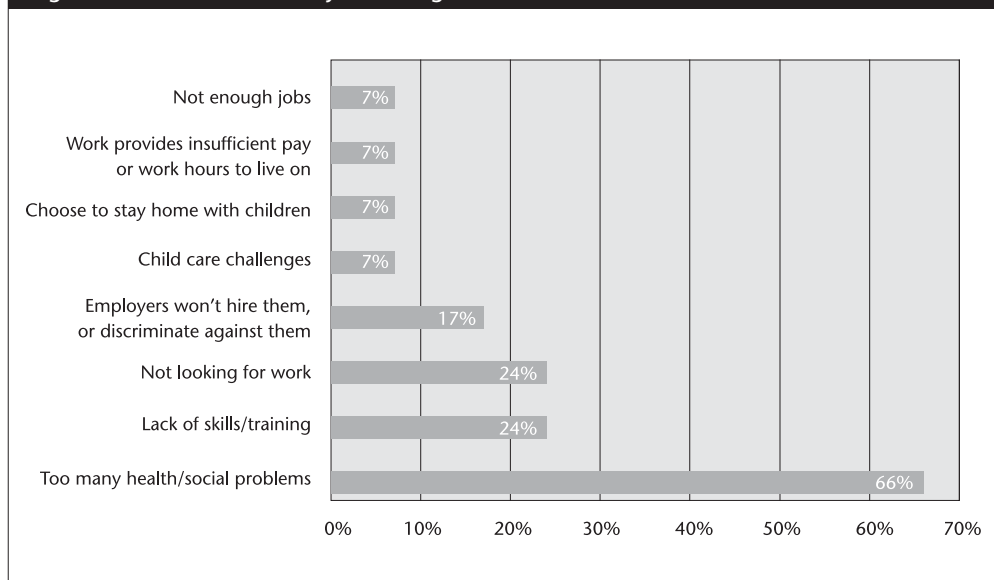
Fred

Fred has a drug addiction and has been diagnosed with numerous mental health conditions, including bipolar disorder. He has very low self-esteem. He was re-categorized as PWD. This has been good for him, as he was unable to get and keep a job. This new status seems to be less stigmatizing for him, and he is able to get and take all his medication. By the last interview he had gained weight, his illegal drug use was down, and he had joined a gym to work out and feel better. By the time of the last interview, he looked quite a bit better.

these seven people remained cut off as of the final interview, while three experienced a temporary cut-off of at least one month but were back on assistance by the final interview. Even though it seems highly questionable for these participants to have been considered imminently employable, they nonetheless were in the expected to work category and found themselves cut off for failing to abide by their employment obligations (more is reported on the experiences of these seven participants below).

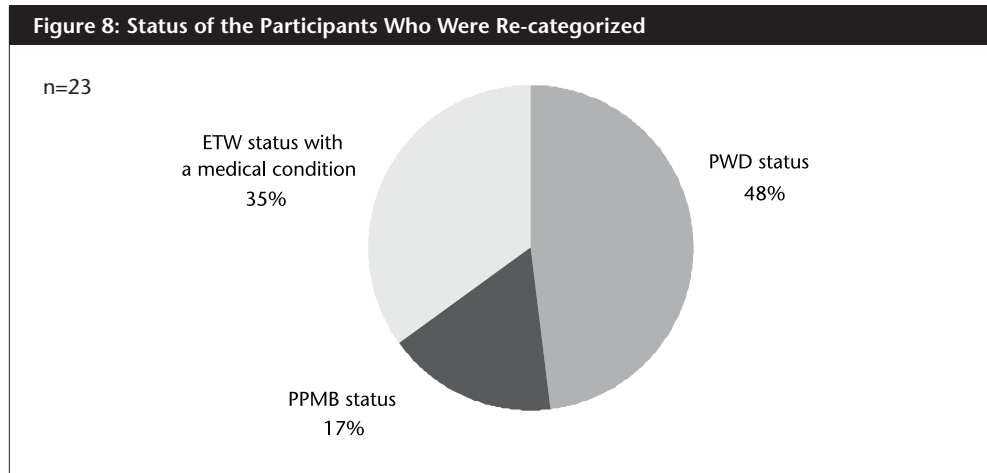
Of the 29 people who remained on assistance at the end of the study period, when asked why they could not find work, two thirds reported too many health/social problems, a quarter reported that employers won't hire them or discriminate against them, a quarter said they were not looking (presumably because they had been re-categorized as PWD or PPMB and were thus exempt from work search requirements), and interestingly, only two people pointed to a lack of jobs (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Reasons for Difficulty in Finding Paid Work – Final Interview



Re-categorizations

Of the 29 people who were in receipt of income assistance at the end of the study, only nine remained in the basic expected to work category. Significantly, many participants, like those profiled on page 42 and *Jane* (see profile on page 60), were “upgraded” at some point during the study period (20 of 23 people who were re-categorized remained on assistance at the study’s end, and three subsequently left assistance). Figure 8 breaks these re-categorizations down by type.



Thus, at various times in the two-year study period, more than one third of the original participant group were re-categorized. This finding appears to reflect broader welfare caseload trends in BC. Since 1995, the decline in the welfare caseload has been entirely in the expected to work category, dropping 56 percentage points from 79 per cent of the caseload in 1995 to 23 per cent in 2005. On the other hand, the number of people with a disability designation (and the proportion of the caseload) actually increased. This trend commenced under the NDP government, but continues apace under the Liberals. For example, the “temporary assistance, expected to work” caseload declined by 62 per cent between April 2002 and December 2006 (from ~2.5% of the population to .96%), while the disability caseload (PWD) increased by 26 per cent (from 1.1% of the population to 1.3%, excluding the PPMB and medical conditions caseload). (See Table 3.)

The incidence of re-categorization represents both a good and bad news story. On the positive side, once re-categorized, income assistance recipients realized an increase in their monthly benefit rates. The tragedy, however, is that for so many, this took a long time to come about and happened only after repeated unsuccessful applications.

Table 3: Recent Changes in Caseload Distribution Under Welfare Reforms

Caseload category	April 2002 (per capita incidence)	December 2006 (per capita incidence)	Change
Temporary assistance, ETW caseload	2.5%	0.96%	-62%
PWD ^a	1.1%	1.3%	+26%
Overall caseload	3.6%	2.4%	-35%

^a Excluding PPMB, those temporarily exempt from work expectations, and ETW – Medical Conditions.
Source: Pulkingham, 2007.

Sarah

Sarah was finally re-categorized as PWD in the final year of the study. She is a single parent, and lives with her child in a stable basement suite. Her child is her priority, and she is very protective. But trying to live a healthy lifestyle on assistance has been a struggle. Sometimes they run out of food, but she will not go to the food bank or drop-in centre because of the concern that people might harm or exploit them.

Sarah reported poor health from the intake stage, but her health deteriorated further in the course of the study. No drugs or alcohol were involved in this change of health status. She was able to attain PWD status with the help of an advocate. This helped a great deal, as the constant pressure to look for a job stopped. Now there is concern that Sarah may lose the ability to walk. Despite this, Sarah remains fiercely independent and private. She has strong opinions about the ministry (“they treat you like shit”) and what she sees as the hypocrisy of the system.

Audrey

Audrey’s story shows what benefits can result from an appropriate re-categorization.

At the beginning of the study, Audrey was homeless. She had hepatitis C and serious drug addictions to a number of substances, though primarily heroin. She had recently moved cities to get away from the drug scene she had been part of. She had been in jail briefly connected to drug use and distribution.

Audrey applied successfully for PWD status early in the study. Her application cited hepatitis C, depression and addiction issues. Having PWD made a world of difference. Audrey was interested in working, and soon found part-time work. She had some slip backs on addictions, but moved progressively towards being clean. Once on PWD she had adequate income to choose to work, and she did choose to do so.

At the end of the study, Audrey was happily pregnant. She’d been able to stay clean so far through the pregnancy. She was living with her boyfriend, and they are both happy about the coming baby. She expects to find work soon after her baby is old enough to be in child care, because she doesn’t want to be a “welfare mom.”

Mark

Mark is an immigrant from Latin America. He was on regular assistance and gained disability status in 2005. His health problems include advanced heart disease and high blood pressure and other health problems arising from past alcohol addiction. He has had several heart attacks over the past two years, but was unsuccessful in obtaining a diet allowance. His strategy to access healthier food was to volunteer as a cook. He was expected to search for work until 2005, when he was finally helped by community advocates and a translator and obtained disability status (thereby being excused from job searches). He has a moderate understanding of English and is semi-literate. The ministry had not referred him to an ESL program or health professionals. He continues to volunteer as a cook.

The re-categorization of the ministry caseload, including the rising disability caseload, along with the 25th exemption to the time-limit rule discussed earlier, appear to be ways the government averted what many predicted would otherwise have been a social catastrophe of unprecedented proportions had the time-limits rule been enforced in full. Less than one year after implementing the new legislation (in February 2003), the government created the new PPMB category, followed one year later (in April 2004), with the addition of a yet another medicalized category, “expected to work – medical conditions.”²⁶

The incidence of re-categorization represents both a good and bad news story – and a significant finding.

On the positive side, once re-categorized, income assistance recipients realized an increase in their monthly benefit rates (currently, while a single person in the expected to work category receives \$610 per month, a person with PPMB status receives \$658, and a person with PWD status receives \$906); hence our description of the re-categorization as an “upgrade” for these participants (although, it must be noted, the higher benefit levels still leave people living well below the poverty line, and generally people are forced to live on this meagre income for many years). Clients with PPMB or PWD status may also avail themselves of the earnings exemption rules; if they are able, they are entitled to engage in paid employment and keep up to \$500 per month in extra income (although in practice, fewer than 20 per cent of people designated PWD claim earnings exemptions).²⁷ Moreover, with re-categorization comes the welcome relief that a barrier to employment has finally been recognized, and people are excused from many of the onerous, time-consuming and costly employment search and job-training obligations required of those in the basic expected to work category.

The tragedy, however, is that for so many, this re-categorization took a long time to come about and happened only after repeated unsuccessful applications. People were forced to wait two or more years for their medical condition, disability, or other barriers to employment to be officially recognized, during which time they were forced to live on less income and were made to jump through numerous employment and work-search hoops that, ultimately, were fundamentally inappropriate to their condition. As noted above, at the intake stage of this study, participants had already been on assistance in the expected to work category for at least 15 months (and many for much longer), 45 per cent had previously applied for PWD or PPMB status, and our first round of interviews led us to question how imminently employable many were from the outset.

Subsequently, this research found that the re-categorized individuals had to make an average of 2.4 claims for a change in welfare status over the course of the study before they were successful. Tellingly, like *Mark* and *Sarah* (see profiles on page 42), the vast majority of those who were re-categorized reported having had help from either an outside advocate (12 people) or their caseworker (11 people), while only seven people indicated they had no help in securing their re-categorization. This speaks to the complexity and bureaucratic hurdles facing those seeking PWD or PPMB status, and the important role played by outside advocates in helping people attain the benefits they need.

According to our findings, the mis-categorization of many income assistance recipients should have been clear to the ministry much earlier, and indeed, we suspect that, for years, it was known but conveniently and systematically ignored. Governments had been

“They should be more supportive of people going back to school, financially and emotionally.”
— Virginia, who eventually left voluntarily

content to let people simply subsist in the basic category, receiving the minimum benefit rate. But with the harsher new rules, more onerous employment requirements, and most especially, the two-year time limit rule, the government was forced to come to terms with the realities of longer-term recipients (such as their health conditions). The re-categorization may also reflect the “push-back” of clients and welfare advocates, who demanded that people be excused from obligations that were fundamentally inappropriate, and may even reflect the efforts of front-line ministry workers themselves, who sought to exempt their clients from further undue stress. The result was to create new categories for people to be temporarily excused, and to reclassify people, in order to avoid a total loss of welfare entitlement for many recipients who have serious health problems. Ultimately, the government did not have the appetite to truly enforce the more draconian legislation they implemented in 2002, and there ensued a process of diversionary re-categorizations.

An irony emerges, namely that because the government brought in such demanding new rules for those in the expected to work category, it was forced to confront the reality of many of those who for so long were made to languish in this category, but who were not, in fact, imminently employable.

While the new welfare regime is more stringent with respect to employment obligations, the study found little indication of a system that offers meaningful or individualized employment supports. Of those who remained on assistance, about 45 per cent reported not having a consistent caseworker.

In spite of the fact that, over the course of time, the ministry eventually re-categorized a large proportion of those with extensive health problems, those participants, like *Henry*, who remained in the ETW category at the end of the study also reported considerable health problems (see profile for *Henry* below). For example, seven of the nine who were not re-categorized reported that they are unable to find steady work because of an addiction problem. At the commencement of the study, these participants had been on income assistance, on average, for 10 years (cumulative median number of years). The BC Coalition of People with Disabilities continues to note that the process of gaining disability status takes too long.²⁸ It is thus likely that, notwithstanding all the re-categorization of recent years, the task is not complete.

PROFILE

Henry

Henry is an Aboriginal man who remained on regular income assistance throughout the study. According to Henry, he is an ex-alcoholic who has worked occasionally “under the table” doing roofing work. But he hasn’t worked much recently because of problems with chronic arthritis in his knees. He had stalled knee replacement surgery (originally scheduled for 2005) because he said he was worried about the loss of income and after-hospital care. He has been unsuccessful in his applications for disability status and has lost his regular caseworker (who had initially promised to pay for putting his belongings in storage so that he could have surgery and then temporarily return to his family up north to convalesce). He feels he can be employable in the future, but needs help dealing with his health problems first. Henry accesses many community services for food, clothing, and health care. He is still expected to search for work. He said he has stopped asking his caseworkers for help with planning how he can support himself after surgery, or asking them for clothing allowances or health supports.

Employment Requirements: Job Training, Job Placements, and the Enforcement of Employment Plans

While the new welfare regime is more stringent with respect to employment obligations, the study found little indication of a system that offers meaningful or individualized employment supports.

As noted earlier, at the intake stage, the job training and job placement firms with whom the government has contracted seemed decidedly uninterested in this study's participants (being longer-term welfare clients with more challenging barriers to employment). This seems to have changed very little in the course of the study.

- By the final round of interviews, of those who remained on assistance (n=29), only 21 per cent had been offered or required to take a training program (in four of these six cases the training was mandatory and all four took the training, while in two cases it was voluntary and neither took the training). Of the four participants who took the training, two said the program was helpful, and two said it was not.
- By the final round of interviews, of those who had left assistance voluntarily (n=12), five participants had been offered training/education over the course of the two years and four participated in the training/education; three of the four who participated in training found the training to be at least partially helpful.
- By the final round of interviews, only five participants had been offered job placements over the course of the two years. Only one of the five participants felt that their job placement provided valuable experience.

At one level, these results may not seem surprising. As people have been re-categorized and excused from work requirements, it is perhaps to be expected that few would be offered or required to engage in these employment programs. Nevertheless, even many of those in our study who are excused from work obligations still desire paid employment and could benefit from it, especially if the welfare system could accommodate intermittent and/or temporary employment (as many of their health conditions require).²⁹ Many would welcome meaningful training that offered the prospect of truly escaping poverty. But this kind of training – with active supports and focused on people's individual needs – appears not to have been on offer.

Also noteworthy is the lack of consistent welfare caseworkers. Throughout the study, of those who remained on assistance, about 45 per cent reported not having a consistent caseworker. The ministry has been moving away from a model in which clients have consistent caseworkers who know them, their history and their unique needs, replacing this with a “pod” model in which teams of workers are assigned to cover large groups of clients. The ministry claims this provides better service, as clients can always contact a worker. Critics contend the model was necessitated by the staff lay-offs and office closures that marked the 2002–2004 period, and fails to meet client needs. Welfare advocates

“It’s hard to follow through with the [employment] plan. I keep forgetting what I am supposed to do. Many times juggling kids’ schedules and required things for me to keep welfare happy just did not work out.... Computer training would have made a difference.”

— Alison

are clearly of the view that the lack of consistent caseworkers represents a hardship for clients, who must frequently re-tell their stories in order to have their needs met (such as unique health or disability requirements). Overall, the new model seems at odds with the government's goal of helping people move from welfare to work, as clients do not have the benefit of a worker who is familiar with their personal employment challenges and who could help design a meaningful employment plan.

Of the four people who were cut off assistance by the end of the study, all reported having a consistent caseworker initially, but not as the study progressed, and only one had ever been offered a job placement. At the intake stage, three reported having been offered voluntary training in the past. As the study progressed, however, only one was offered further (mandatory) training. This participant reported the training to be useful, but nevertheless frustrating because what he claimed he most needed was to be able to finish high school (which was not, evidently, the kind of support on offer).

Hardship Questions Revisited

Having established baseline information at the intake stage concerning core hardship issues such as housing and food security, the subsequent surveys continued to ask these questions, so that changes in these conditions could be tracked.

By the final round of interviews, we found the following results.

Housing

As Table 4 reveals, a small shift to more stable housing occurred in the course of the study. The results show a slight improvement, but the overall picture – particularly those continuing to experience periods of living at no fixed address – remains grim.

What we see is a pattern of movement away from SRO housing to private rental housing, and to a lesser degree from social/co-op rental to home ownership, while the incidence of more transient housing situations (shelter/transition housing, no fixed address and residential treatment centres) remain roughly unchanged in aggregate, although there is movement within the categories of these transient housing situations.³⁰ The improvements are either because people left income assistance and got a job that afforded them the opportunity to improve their housing situation³¹ or they were re-categorized into PWD/PPMB, which afforded them greater stability of income as well as access to higher benefits, and they were able to translate this into securing more stable housing.

Notably, however, there was no improvement in the housing circumstances of those who were still on income assistance at the end of the study but who were not re-categorized. This finding reinforces the importance of the modest increase in benefit levels and access to earnings exemptions to which those who are classified as PWD or PPMB are entitled.

Table 4: Housing Reported by Participants

	At the first interview: Entire sample (n=62)	At the first interview: Sub-sample of those who participated in the first and final interview (n=45)	At the final interview (n=45)
Single residence occupancy (SRO) hotel room	27%	29%	20%
Private rental unit	36%	38%	44%
Co-op or social housing	18%	20%	16%
Transition house or shelter	8%	7%	4%
No fixed address	11%	7%	9%
Home owned by participant	0	0	4%
Residential treatment facility	0	0	2%
No fixed address at some time in previous six months	39%	53%	29%
Moved two or more times in previous six months	42%	29%	15%

A small shift to more stable housing occurred in the course of the study, but the overall picture – particularly those continuing to experience periods of living at no fixed address – remains grim.

Importantly, from the outset, there are stark differences in the housing circumstances of those who ended up leaving income assistance voluntarily compared to those who were still on assistance at the end of the study: voluntary leavers were the most likely to be better housed to begin with, with about 90 per cent of these participants living in private rental, co-op or social housing at the first interview, compared to only half³² of those who remained on income assistance at the end of the study.

Food Security

As with housing circumstances, experiences of food security differed dramatically between the three main groups of participants (voluntary leavers, the re-categorized, and those who remain on income assistance without re-categorization). And while differences in housing circumstances showed a modest change over time (as described above), differences in reported food security were much more marked.

The study looked at food security issues in a number of ways, including how much participants worried about running out of food because of a lack of money, how often they went hungry because of a lack of food, and how often they used food banks and soup kitchens. At the first interview, the vast majority (roughly three quarters) of participants who were eventually re-categorized³³ or who remained on income assistance without re-categorization³⁴ worried they would run out of food before the month's end, while just under half of those who left assistance voluntarily during the study³⁵ were preoccupied with this worry at the intake stage. By the final interviews, none of the voluntary leavers worried about running out of food during the previous month, while only one quarter of those who were re-categorized worried about running out of food; meanwhile a majority³⁶ of those who remained on income assistance and were not re-categorized during the study were worried about running out of food because of a lack of money.

The overall reliance on food banks and soup kitchens remains very high for those on assistance; disturbingly, even those who are re-categorized continue to rely on food banks or soup kitchens an average of four times per month.

Similarly, there are stark differences in participants’ experiences of hunger and food bank usage over time. As Table 5 indicates, at the first interview participants who ultimately remained on assistance without having been re-categorized as PWD or PPMB were the most likely to report that they often went hungry (56 per cent) and used food banks (a median of 11.5 times per month); even so, one third reported never experiencing going hungry. By the final interview, the same proportion of these participants continued to report that they often went hungry, but they also reported even higher usage of food banks (a median of 30 times per month). Not surprisingly, the people who left assistance voluntarily (all but one of whom had paid employment) were faring much better with respect to experiences of hunger and food bank usage by the final interview. While just over one third of these participants reported never going hungry at the time of the first interview, 92 per cent reported never going hungry at the final interview. Unlike participants who remained on assistance at the final interview, voluntary leavers rarely used food banks at the beginning of the study (a median of one time per month) and reported never using food banks at the last interview.

More telling still is the experience of participants who were re-categorized during the course of the study. At the first interview, these participants reported an overall experience of going hungry at a rate higher than any of the others: 50 per cent often experienced going hungry and only 5 per cent reported they never went hungry. But by the final interview, more than half of this group reported never going hungry, and reports of experiencing hunger often or sometimes had dropped by one half, as did food bank usage.

The results show that the intensity of food insecurity had lessened considerably for those participants who saw their incomes rise between the first and final interview. Nevertheless, the overall reliance on food banks and soup kitchens remains very high for those on assistance; disturbingly, even those who are re-categorized continue to rely on food banks or soup kitchens an average of four times per month. And one half (PWD/PPMB) to two thirds (ETW) of those on assistance continued to report at the final interview going hungry (often or sometimes) because of a lack of food.

Table 5: Changes in Food Security Reported by Participants

	On assistance at final interview, not re-categorized (n=9)		On assistance at final interview, re-categorized (n=20)		Left assistance voluntarily and still off at final interview (n=12)	
	First interview	Final interview	First interview	Final interview	First interview	Final interview
Often go hungry due to lack of food	56%	56%	50%	26%	27%	None
Sometimes go hungry	11%	11%	45%	21%	36%	8%
Never go hungry	33%	33%	5%	53%	36%	92%
Median number of times food banks or soup kitchens used in last month	11.5 times	30 times	7.5 times	4 times	1 time	None

The Voluntary Welfare Leavers

As we have seen, the 12 people who left assistance voluntarily during our study and who continued to participate through to the final interviews fared much better than those who remained on assistance. As the survey also finds, the fact is that voluntary welfare leavers were in better housing and had better food security at the first interview than those who remained on income assistance at the end of the study. Voluntary leavers were in better health and none reported having to resort to criminalized activities to make ends meet. These participants, like *Mary* (see profile on page 34), represent most of those who could, from the outset, be considered more employable. In addition to what has already been noted, this cohort reported the following:

- When asked why they left assistance, three quarters reported that they found or returned to work, two people could not take the rules anymore, and one person previously had a job but gained more pay (enough to leave assistance).
- Eleven reported that employment income is now their main source of income and that they have one job; these participants had been employed for a median of 11 months, almost two thirds were employed full-time, with an average hourly wage rate of \$13, and a median gross monthly employment income of \$1,311 (ranging from a low of \$800 to a high of \$2,856).
- One of the voluntary leavers was not employed at the end of the study.

“No one wants to be on welfare. [The system should] recognize that not everyone can take just any job. If you’ve got kids you need to earn a little more.”
— Heidi, who eventually left voluntarily

PROFILE

Diane

Diane is an Aboriginal woman who has one young child in her care. She remained on regular income assistance throughout 2004 and 2005, and left assistance in 2006 when she began working as a cashier. She moved to the city in 2003, shortly after she was a victim of a violent sexual assault. She lives in non-profit housing. Her employment plan with the ministry mandated her to attend job search programs involving resume building and life skills. For most of the duration of the study, she was expected to look for work and to attend job search/life skills training.

At the same time, Diane indicated to her caseworker that she had health problems, severe depression, and trauma symptoms related to her assault. Her application for disability status was stalled by a medical doctor who insisted that she pay \$50 for the doctor’s signature on the application. Although her caseworker put a call in to her doctor informing them that this information must be provided free of charge, it was a Native outreach worker who helped her overall in completing the application for disability – but in the end, it was not successful. After a year of requests for help to her caseworker she finally accessed trauma counselling, attended that for three months, until she could no longer get funding. She was excused briefly from finding work during the time of counselling, and was then mandated to attend a job search program for First Nations women. She said that trauma counselling, rather than the last employment training course, helped her to find work. It is part-time employment.

Of those who left voluntarily, some might argue that the threat of time limits encouraged them to leave. Indeed, many reported being threatened with cut-off before leaving. On the other hand, these participants also seemed to have received a level of employment support that others did not. For example, they were more likely to have met their welfare caseworkers in person (nine out of 10 who responded to this question). While seven of these participants reported that their experience with welfare was very negative (e.g., “it seems like a bad dream”), six of the voluntary leavers found their experiences with training/employment programs to be helpful, with several noting the benefits of access to computer courses at college and help with financing this, as well as their participation in a job club. However, as the experiences of *Lynn* and *Liz* show (see profiles on pages 57 and 14), many of the voluntarily leavers, notwithstanding their employment, are still living in poverty.

Just over one fifth of those who participated in the last interview and who had not left assistance voluntarily reported being cut off assistance during the study. It seems highly questionable for these participants to have been considered imminently employable, yet they were nonetheless in the expected to work category and found themselves cut off for failing to abide by their employment obligations.

The Forced Leavers: The Experiences of Those Cut Off Assistance

As mentioned earlier, just over one fifth³⁷ of those who participated in the last interview and who had not left assistance voluntarily reported being cut off assistance during the course of the study. The experiences of these seven forced leavers (four women and three men) deserve special attention, as they speak directly to the appropriateness of the new tougher employment requirements and sanctions. As we will see, it seems highly questionable for these participants to have been considered imminently employable, yet they were nonetheless in the expected to work category and found themselves cut off for failing to abide by their employment obligations.

Four participants (one woman and three men) were still off assistance as of the end of the study period. Of the four, one (the woman) was cut off after the second round of interviews (and remained off for the rest of the study period), one man was cut off twice (at the time of both the third and final interviews), and the other two were cut off after the fourth round of interviews. All were Caucasians between the ages of 34 and 44.

All were required to leave assistance because they were found to be in non-compliance with their employment plans or some other employment obligation: two were cut off for not looking for work (with one person being cut off for missing an appointment with a job counsellor), one person refused a volunteer placement, and the other was fired for cause.

Was the decision to cut off these four people justified? Consider the following:

- Three of the four feel the decision to cut them off was unfair, while the fourth said he did not know if it was unfair, but said he was not looking for work because, “Who would have me?” One person was trying to get disability status. One feels the ministry simply refused to consider the circumstances of their job loss. And one cites not getting the health and housing supports needed, and their serious drug issues.

- All four have hepatitis C, which, as noted, presents serious employment challenges. Yet hepatitis C does not qualify for gaining PPMB status (which would result in exemption from many of the employment obligations).
- At the intake stage, three reported having poor health, while one said their health was good (they had hepatitis C, but were symptom-free at the time). Two also reported depression/bipolar disorder. One person had sought PPMB status and one had applied for PWD status, but both were unsuccessful.
- All four have a history of addiction and drug use, with three continuing to have serious addiction problems. The one female in this group reported that her drug addiction was a barrier to employment, consumed a majority of her income, caused her to engage in illegal activities and prostitution, contributed to her loss of housing and to going without food, and led to her losing custody of her child (the child lives with the participant's mother). The two men with ongoing addiction problems reported that their addictions prevented them from holding steady work, led to their loss of housing, consumed a majority of their income, and caused them to engage in illegal activities. One man was in and out of jail.
- At the intake stage, two had been homeless for two to three years, living in shelters, with friends and on the street; one had been living in an SRO for a few years; and one shared a private apartment with a partner.
- At the intake stage, all reported significant food insecurity. The main sources of food were food banks and drop-in facilities, with one person saying they stole food regularly (and had been to jail numerous times for doing so). All reported skipping meals 30 to 60 times per month due to lack of money.
- Two had not completed high school, one was a high school graduate, and one had completed some apprentice training.
- Interestingly, all four resided in the same city. This raises the possibility that a dominant factor in their being cut off was the misfortune of living in an area where the prevailing culture of the ministry is more austere and unsympathetic to clients, and less open to a flexible interpretation of the rules in view of people's real circumstances. At the intake stage, all reported having helpful and courteous caseworkers for whom they had very positive feelings, but when they lost these caseworkers, they were cut off.

All four of the participants who continued to be cut off welfare have a history of addiction and drug use, with three continuing to have serious addiction problems.

The interview results suggest that at least three of the four were not imminently employable, while the fourth was trying his best to secure employment but needed support. It seems dubious at best that they belonged in the expected to work category.

Unlike the voluntary leavers or those re-categorized discussed above, these four participants were, at the time of the final interview, undeniably worse off (although they were clearly in very rough shape before being cut off).

- At the intake stage, these participants reported using food banks or drop-in facilities to meet food needs a mean 19 times per month. By the final interviews, this had risen to 36 times.
- As of the final interviews, all four were effectively homeless: two were living mainly on the street (with one staying at friends' places intermittently), and two were staying with a friend for free. The one person who previously had stable SRO housing was evicted upon being cut off assistance.
- All four report a higher level of anxiety/stress since being cut off.
- At the time of the final interviews, none of the four were employed.
- One man reported that, prior to being cut off, he had gone on methadone and had been clean for six days. When he was cut off, he lost the methadone (welfare had been paying \$70/month for the treatment), and was now back to using heroin. "All I wanted was the health and medical benefits. They gave me \$200 a month [he is homeless, and therefore not receiving the shelter allowance]. They weren't even housing me. It's a real big set-back."
- When asked how they made ends meet after being cut off:
 - The one female in this group reported staying with family/friends, going to food banks, and engaging in sex trade work. She reported prostitution as her main activity, although at the time of the second post-cut-off interview, she also reported taking a life-skills training course offered through a prostitutes' support group.
 - Two men were living rough on the streets (one staying intermittently with friends), using food banks, skipping meals, and stealing. Indeed, both reported theft as their primary source of income and main activity (for which one has been in and out of jail and the other charged). Their health had deteriorated.
 - One man, *Frank*, had been evicted from his SRO and was living for free with a friend. He reported no income, using soup kitchens, being demoralized, and doing nothing (see profile for *Frank* on page 24).
- Thus, of the four people forced off assistance, three reported engaging in illegal activities (prostitution/theft) as their main activity (primarily in support of their addictions).

Of the four people forced off assistance, three report engaging in illegal activities (prostitution/theft) as their main activity (primarily in support of their addictions). As of the final interviews, all four were effectively homeless and none of the four were employed.

In addition to these four, three other participants were temporarily cut off at some point during the study, but had returned to assistance as of the final interviews. Of these:

- All three were Aboriginal women dealing with severe addiction issues, and all had previously lost custody of their children.

- At the intake stage, one had a stable SRO room; one had been evicted a month previously and was at no fixed address and house-sitting for friends; and one lived with her partner in a private apartment.
- None had completed high school.
- At the intake stage, all reported significant food insecurity, including going to food banks or drop-in centres for meals 15 to 30 times per month.
- One woman reported having just fought cancer. One said she has arthritis and a knee injury that affects walking and prevented her working. And one said drug and alcohol addiction kept her from working. Thus, all three reported health/social problems as their main reason for not being able to find paid employment.
- One woman, *Lorraine*, was cut off assistance for almost a year for failure to abide by her employment plan (see profile for *Lorraine* on page 11); one was cut off for about three months for failure to pick up her cheque when instructed and not submitting a document (she said she was busy helping a sick friend); and one was cut off for over six months, again precipitated by her failure to show up at a welfare office.
- When asked how they made ends meet while cut off: one was living on the street and with friends, barely eating, panhandling, and reported returning to prostitution as her main source of income (see profile for *Lorraine*); one was relying on her partner and living with his friends, but had no income of her own, and reported getting food from a food bank or drop-in centre 60 times per month; and one reported her landlord forgiving the rent for a month, but then getting an eviction notice and living with friends, volunteering for a stipend, and getting food from a food bank or drop-in centre 10 to 15 times per month.
- None had paid employment while they were cut off.
- All three were back on assistance at the time of the final interviews. One was back in a stable private apartment, now had a medical condition recognized, and reported improved health; one was back in an SRO, getting treatment and reported improved health; and one was living in an SRO, using the food bank less, and now had a medical condition recognized, and reported a worsening of her health.

Being cut off helped neither these people nor society generally. When reviewing their cases, it is clear that the first priority of assistance identified by these participants is their desire to have support in tackling their addictions, help managing their hepatitis C and other health problems, and stable housing. They have experienced the policy stick without the needed supports.

Desperate Measures: The Intersection of Welfare Policy and People's Personal Lives

Forced to live in poverty, many people on income assistance face impossible choices. Too often, people find themselves in catch-22s, in which all options appear only to make matters worse.

Losing Custody of Children

For example, parents on income assistance, struggling to make ends meet, often end up having their children apprehended. Once they lose their children, their welfare benefits are reduced (as their household size has shrunk), they are forced to downsize to cheaper housing, at which point their ability to regain custody of their children is made that much more challenging. While the removal of children is sometimes necessary, what emerges is a system that, in the face of these issues, offers less support/resources, not more. Of course, people's circumstances can also change for the better; with time, people can land on their feet, they may find employment or leave income assistance, and may regain their children. In the course of our study, participants experienced all of these highs and lows.

"[The system] needs to be realistic. The small amount of money puts people at risk. People end up doing things like getting roommates that are undesirable just to pay the rent, or relationships with an abusive spouse to cover rent and food."
— Olivia

- During the course of the study, 31 per cent of the sample reported that they had dependent-aged children, although at the intake stage only 26 per cent of the sample reported that they had children living with them.
- During the course of the study, 42 per cent (eight of 19) of participants with dependent-aged children reported a change in custody status (losing and gaining custody in almost equal measure).

Overall, the findings suggest that almost half of those with dependent-aged children experience some custodial change, with all the associated disruption and anguish for both children and parents (see profile box for *Margaret* on page 29).

Forced into Abusive Relationships

Similarly, women on income assistance too often feel they have no choice but to stay in or return to abusive relationships or homes. Beginning with the second round of interviews, the study asked those participants who reported living with a spouse or partner the following question: "Sometimes people stay in relationships because the relationship may provide more financial security. In the past six months, would you say that you have stayed in or returned to a relationship for financial reasons?" Those who answered yes (all of whom were women) were invited to elaborate. The results were as follows:

- Overall, during the course of the study, one third of women (four of 12) who reported being in an intimate relationship at some point during the course of the two-year study reported staying in or returning to an intimate relationship for financial reasons.
- Overall, during the course of the study, one third (four of 12) who reported being in an intimate relationship at some point during the course of the study reported that they experienced abuse at the hands of their partners during the course of the study. Three of these four women stayed in or returned to an abusive relationship for financial reasons.

Thus, it is clear that for women in the study who were in a relationship, a sizable minority reported staying in or returning to a relationship for financial reasons, and among those who remained in an intimate relationship for financial reasons, all but one did so even though they experienced abuse at the hands of their intimate partner.

Survival Sex

A sizable minority of women also report engaging in survival sex in order to make ends meet. One fifth of all women who participated in the study reported engaging in prostitution at some point during the course of the study. For four of these women, survival sex is tied directly to three of the new welfare changes: two women reported engaging in survival sex when they were cut off assistance (one was cut off assistance temporarily and subsequently returned to assistance); another reported engaging in survival sex when she came under sanction and her welfare cheque was reduced by \$100 per month; another woman reported engaging in survival sex when she had tried to get back on welfare and had to wait out the three-week waiting period. For the other four women, survival sex was linked to their drug addictions and the need to have the cash to “feed their habit.” All but one of the women who engage in survival sex have hepatitis C, and three of the women are also HIV-positive. Notably, almost two thirds of the women who reported engaging in survival sex and who have hepatitis C were re-categorized as PWD or PPMB during the course of the study.

Overall, half of those who reported engaging in criminalized activities to make ends meet link these activities to one of the three welfare changes (the waiting period, a cut in benefits, or being cut off assistance altogether).

Illegal Activity to Make Ends Meet

One quarter of all participants in the study reported engaging in other criminalized activity to make ends meet. Six of these participants directly linked their criminalized activity (e.g., selling drugs and/or stealing) to new welfare provisions (the three-week waiting period and sanctions, including being cut off welfare). Overall, half (eight of 17) of those who reported engaging in criminalized activities to make ends meet link these activities to one of the three welfare changes (the waiting period, a cut in benefits, or being cut off assistance altogether). Men and women were equally likely to report engaging in criminalized activities to make ends meet.

Are People Better Off?

After two years, were the 62 people who participated in our study better off in the summer of 2006 than they were in the summer of 2004? The short answer is, it depends.

- As noted earlier, of the 17 people who failed to remain with the study for the full two years, it would seem that only a minority are better off (but we can't know for sure).
- Of the 29 people who remained on assistance at the completion of the study, a majority seem to be slightly better off, primarily because most (20) have been re-categorized as PWD, PPMB, or having a medical condition.
- All of the 12 who left voluntarily are clearly doing better.
- The four who were forced off are clearly worse off.

Overall, it would appear that only a small fraction of the participants in the study have found their way out of poverty. Those who shifted from income assistance to the labour market are better off, but most are now counted among the working poor.

Looking at this question from the narrow perspective of income, we find the results shown in Table 6.

As expected, those who remained on assistance saw a slight increase in their income (the increase was higher for those who were re-categorized during the course of the study than for those who were not; reported benefit levels for those who remained on income assistance without being re-categorized were slightly higher by the end of the study because some participants regained custody of children, received diet allowances or received a higher housing allowance), the exception being the one participant under sanctions.

Those who left voluntarily saw a sizable increase in their incomes, although their average gross monthly income remained low. Indeed, the vast majority (almost two thirds of these participants) were still left with an annualized income below the poverty line.³⁹

And those who were cut off assistance reported a staggering drop in income.

Overall, it would appear that only a small fraction of the participants in the study have found their way out of poverty. Those who shifted from income assistance to the labour market are better off, but most are now counted among the working poor. And only a handful of participants in this study reported being provided with training or job place-

Table 6: Changes in Participant Gross Monthly Income (from all sources)

	On assistance at final interview, re-categorized during study (n=20)		On assistance at final interview, not re-categorized during study (n=9)		Left assistance voluntarily during study and remained off assistance at final interview (n=12)		Cut off assistance during study and remained off assistance at final interview (n=4)	
	First interview	Final interview	First interview	Final interview	First interview	Final interview	First interview	Final interview
Median income	\$521	\$801	\$516	\$554	\$903	\$1,396	\$369	\$75
Mean income	\$623	\$826	\$582	\$627	\$931	\$1,480 ³⁸	\$378	\$288

ments that were helpful or somewhat helpful to them in securing a better future for themselves.

Even the one somewhat ‘good news’ story to emerge from the findings – the re-categorization of people into PWD or PPMB – is greatly tempered by these realities:

- It took much too long for people to be appropriately categorized. In some cases, what should have been obvious from the start was not officially recognized for years.
- While those with PPMB, and more so PWD, now have modestly higher incomes and are no longer required to jump through inappropriate employment obligation hoops, they still experience a high level of deprivation; they live thousands of dollars per year below the poverty line, and still must regularly resort to food banks and other charities to meet basic food needs. This reality is all the more harsh with the understanding that people will likely be living on welfare in these categories for many more years. A very disturbing truth emerges: without fundamental policy change – a sizable increase in welfare benefit rates, and much more active employment supports – this will be as good as it gets for these people.

While those with PPMB, and more so PWD, now have modestly higher incomes and are no longer required to jump through inappropriate employment obligation hoops, they still experience a high level of deprivation; they live thousands of dollars per year below the poverty line, and still must regularly resort to food banks and other charities to meet basic food needs.

PROFILE

Lynn

Lynn has two children and is separated from the children’s father. They live in a small basement suite with a vegetable garden in the yard. While on assistance, Lynn attended job training courses, but struggled with child care (as the employment agency did not fully cover child care costs). Lynn would love an outdoor job like gardening, but suffers from severe allergies (particularly in the summer); because the medication is over-the-counter there is no medical coverage for it.

Through her non-profit employment agency, Lynn eventually found a part-time placement at a seniors’ centre (she was not interested in full time work until her children were both in school). Initially, the transition to work was a challenge: her earnings were being clawed back by the ministry, even though she had costs related to work, and transportation costs to and from work in the first few months were a significant problem.

But as her son grew old enough to enter school, Lynn accepted more hours at work. Her wages increased gradually, and her employer paid for some professional licensing. After some time she left income assistance. Lynn is now doing better than she was at the beginning of the study, though her income is barely higher than it was while on assistance. She still regularly relies on food banks or other community services to meet her food needs. Overall, she says her life is about the same since leaving assistance.

Conclusion

Cutting People Off: The Tougher Employment Rules in Perspective

What does this study allow us to conclude about the government's tougher approach to employment obligations, and the sanctions that result? And what has been learned about the controversial 2002 introduction of the two-year time limit rule?

The time limit rule remains in the legislation, and a few dozen people have experienced its full impact. Hundreds more, while not explicitly cut off for three years under the time limit rule, are cut off assistance for failure to comply with their employment plans.

First, the full force of the time limit rule was never realized, and thankfully, the worst fears about the social fallout that could result did not materialize. As 2004 drew near, thousands of British Columbians were at imminent risk of being cut off assistance. That did not transpire, due to two factors: the introduction of numerous exceptions, most notably Exemption 25 in February 2004, which excused those recipients who were abiding by their employment plans; and the creation of new categories such as the "expected to work – medical condition," PPMB, and the re-categorization of clients into PWD, thereby exempting thousands of additional people. Mounting pressure from anti-poverty activists, faith groups, welfare advocates, civic governments and others likely played a pivotal role in bringing about this change in policy.

A second, related finding: ironically, the harsh two-year rule and the more stringent employment obligations forced the government to better address the reality of those who, for years, languished inappropriately in the expected to work category. The rule forced the ministry to accept that many of those in the ETW category were not, in fact, imminently employable, and led to their re-categorization. It is deeply regrettable, however, that it took these rules to bring about what should have been the norm all along.

Third, the time limit rule remains in the legislation, and a few dozen people have experienced its full impact. Some have been formally cut off, or if they have children, their monthly benefits have been cut. According to the government's data, hundreds more, while not explicitly cut off for three years under the time limit rule, are cut off assistance for failure to comply with their employment plans (perhaps for one or two months, but frequently for much longer). While none of the participants in this study were explicitly

cut off due to the two-year rule, just over one fifth of participants (seven) who did not leave assistance voluntarily, and who participated in the final interview, were cut off (for various durations), and their experiences raise grave concerns about the consequences of the rule. For these people, being cut off has resulted in great harm – it has left people homeless, with virtually no income, and resorting to survival sex and theft.

Are there some who left welfare voluntarily for whom the two-year rule and other more onerous employment obligations were “just the push they needed”? There are surely some. But therein lies the fundamental flaw in the policy – it is so arbitrary. It may be just the push some need into the workforce, while for others it pushes them even deeper into poverty and deprivation. Surely, people on assistance, and the province as a whole, would be better served by a more nuanced and individualized policy that deals with people’s specific realities, and could work with them constructively, sometimes over many years, to overcome whatever challenges they face.

Final Policy Observations

Reflecting on the study participants as a whole, one emerges with a sense of how remarkably resilient people are. Living on welfare, particularly in recent years, is very hard. Meeting basic needs is itself, often, a full-time occupation. It is easy to find oneself caught in a downward spiral, in which limited options force bad circumstances to become worse still. Some feel compelled to turn to desperate measures: survival sex or prostitution, returning to or remaining in an abusive relationship, theft or other criminalized activity. Some lose their children. And virtually all must turn frequently to food banks, other charities, community services, and the emergency/acute health care system to survive. And yet, despite woefully inadequate incomes, poor health, addictions, abuse, disabilities, and more, people survive for years.

Other key insights to emerge from the study:

- Many welfare clients are inappropriately left in the expected to work category, often for years, when they are not, in fact, imminently employable. There is a clear need to rethink what we require of welfare recipients, and what we mean by “employable” or ETW.
- Some of those in the ETW category, and some in the PWD and PPMB categories, could be employable in the mid to longer term, but for this to be so, they require a quality of training, education, assistance with addictions and other health conditions, and employment supports that are not currently on offer. Alternatively, they may be employable, but not full-time or full-year, given their health conditions or disabilities, but the welfare system is not currently flexible enough to facilitate sporadic or intermittent employment.⁴⁰
- Lack of stable housing and phones represents a key barrier to employment. In this study, those who had stable housing to begin with were much more likely to leave welfare for employment, while those without housing were much more likely to remain on assistance.

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- The findings cast doubt on how serious the government is in its stated commitment to offering employment support for people on income assistance. Minimally, the findings suggest that supports were lacking for people who were longer-term welfare recipients, and who consequently faced more barriers to employment. For the most part, these clients were not offered training or other employment opportunities. Notwithstanding the government's multi-million dollar contracts with Job Wave and other for-profit employment agencies, our study participants were largely ignored by these programs (at least up until mid-2006). And the lack of consistent caseworkers has served as a further barrier to receiving individualized and appropriate support.
- The findings drive home the inadequacy of welfare benefit levels. In order for the longer-term recipients in our study to meet basic needs, what emerges is a public welfare system that is structurally dependent on food banks and other charities.
- The findings urge us to move the debate about welfare beyond the traditional Left (need more jobs) versus Right (get a job) dichotomy: the most common reason participants gave for their inability to find work was "too many health/social problems," followed by "I don't have the training/skills needed for what's out there." This suggests that it is not enough to assume that economic growth and job creation will solve the income security and employment needs of longer-term income assistance recipients. Rather, policy innovation needs to focus on creating a range of employment and income generating opportunities for those who are unable to find sustainable employment under existing labour market conditions.

PROFILE

Jane

In the course of the study, Jane managed to be re-categorized to PWD status, and from there, voluntarily left income assistance.

Health problems were what originally forced Jane to turn to income assistance. Despite being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, at the intake stage Jane was nevertheless in the expected to work category. She sees herself as a valuable member of society, and actively sought help from an advocate to establish her disability claim. Jane subsequently found employment, is now working full-time, and has an income substantially higher than it was on welfare. At the same time, she reports that full-time work is hard on her health, and that she had been to an emergency room three times in the final six months of the study. Throughout the study, she always volunteered. In spite of her own ability to successfully claim PWD status and to get back into full time work, Jane sees the welfare system as a whole as resistant to helping people and placing bureaucratic "hoops" in people's way.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study lead to the following policy recommendations:

- Welfare benefit rates must be increased *and* indexed.

In its 2007 budget, after many years of benefit rates being either frozen or cut, the provincial government announced a modest increase to income assistance rates.⁴¹ In real dollars, however, these increases have effectively brought after-inflation benefit rates to where they were in the mid-to-late 1990s.

These increases are not enough.

Given that most of those who remain on assistance will be there for an extended period of time, people have the right to live with dignity. People need to be able to live without resorting to charities, or to desperate measures such as survival sex or petty crime, or remaining in abusive relationships. Rates must be raised substantially, and then indexed to inflation so as to keep up with the rising cost of living. The Economic Security Project proposed an alternative approach to setting welfare rates in Steve Kerstetter's 2006 paper *A Better Way to Set Welfare Rates*, whereby rates would be tied to a transparent calculation of the actual cost of meeting basic needs (such as SPARC-BC's Cost of Living calculation, or the Market Basket Measure of Poverty). And even the premier's own BC Progress Board has recommended that welfare rates be indexed.⁴² The CCPA has called for a 50 per cent increase immediately, as part of a staged schedule for reaching either the SPARC or MBM level. And earnings exemptions should be reinstated for all income assistance recipients (not just those with PWD or PPMB).

- The ministry must end the punitive use of arbitrary barriers and inappropriate rules. Income assistance recipients should not be forced to endure continuing threats of sanction to their benefits, the imposition of inappropriate employment plans, the three-week wait, the two-year independence test, complicated and bureaucratized applications forms, and repeated rejection of applications for PWD or PPMB status that are eventually successfully obtained. The province must recognize that welfare when in need is a human right. As this study illustrates, increasing benefits and allowing individuals to keep some of the earned income they receive can translate directly into improved housing and food security.
- The government must make a commitment to categorize welfare clients appropriately, and in a timely manner, so that people are not held in the ETW category for years, with less income and forced to jump through employment hoops that are fundamentally inappropriate. Those who face barriers to employment must have this recognized quickly.
- People are being unjustly cut off assistance, rather than receiving the support they actually need. People who are not imminently employable are being cut off for not complying with employment plans – a circumstance that is unreasonable and unjust. The regulations and administrative practices that permit

“They need to raise the rates quite substantially, provide transportation, clothing, and better support from the [case] workers.”

— Marjorie

people being cut off, even temporarily, must be revisited. And notwithstanding its numerous exemptions, the two-year time limit rule should be eliminated. It is too arbitrary and risks unacceptable harm.

*"I need higher education (both high school and college)... I'd like to see that education is provided, that training in many fields is available, and supports that build confidence."
— Fiona*

- Decisions about cutting people off welfare, even temporarily, must be much less arbitrary, and should never be made by a single financial aid caseworker. Cut-off determinations should require an internal consultation with the ministry's regional manager (who should be accountable for every cut-off decision). These consultations must carefully consider an individual's unique circumstances. If a determination is made to close a file, the client should be clearly informed of their appeal rights, and given the contact information for a local community welfare advocate who can represent them (or if no local advocate exists, a local lawyer should be made available). It is also incumbent on the ministry to provide core funding for local welfare advocates who can fulfil this role.
- If more people are to be able to move from income assistance to the labour market, they must be provided with a level of education and employment supports that make this possible, and that truly represent a path out of poverty. Shauna Butterwick has provided a model for what this might look like in another Economic Security Project report – *A Path Out of Poverty*.⁴³ The training and supports provided must be individualized, aimed at securing decent and stable employment, and will often need to be long-term. If high school completion is needed and desired, this should be prioritized. If a post-secondary degree or apprenticeship appears a reasonable prospect, this too should be facilitated to the greatest degree possible. Once again, we would concur with the premier's

PROFILE

Debbie

Debbie temporarily left welfare during the study, but by the final interview was back on assistance. She has one young child in her care and lives in a small basement suite. She reports being late with the rent often, being threatened with eviction, and says that both she and her child frequently skip meals. At the intake stage, she reported numerous health problems that limit her daily activity.

Initially, her employment plan mandated her to attend a life skills program and to search for work. Then, in 2005, she left assistance to return to school, underwent one unsuccessful year at college doing upgrading programs, and subsequently returned to regular income assistance. She took custody of a teenage step-child in 2006 and now finds it difficult to provide for them both. Her youngest has been diagnosed with ADHD and she has struggled to find adequate child care. Her employment plan states that she must continue searching for work. Although she is considering going back to school to try to improve her grades, she is worried about adding to her student loan debts. She complains of being tired of begging her caseworker for more money and said her attempts to go back to school were in part a strategy to improve her self-confidence after feeling demoralized by welfare rules.

BC Progress Board, which notes, “As governments shift people from income support to the labour force, they acquire an even greater responsibility to help low income individuals gain the education and skills needed to participate effectively in the economic mainstream.”⁴⁴

- At the same time, the province must adopt a broader definition of “work” to mean more than merely “paid employment.” The ministry should recognize that work includes caring for children and family, and community and volunteer work. And when individuals are dealing with health and addiction issues, they should be adequately supported.
- Stable housing is vital to escaping poverty and gaining access to employment. Repeatedly during our final interviews, participants indicated that they were on the waiting list for social housing, and that securing such housing would be a huge help to them. Progress on reducing poverty and helping people move from welfare to work hinges on the implementation of a large-scale, low-income housing strategy.
- Beyond education and housing, other specific supports needed (and identified by the study participants) include: help with addiction/health problems, better access to affordable quality childcare, more supportive workplaces, more supportive caseworkers and employment counsellors, and help dealing with abusive relationships or other traumatic situations.
- To help people meet personal needs (including accessing health and other services), and to assist the process of securing employment, welfare clients should be provided with monthly bus passes.
- Welfare clients should have consistent caseworkers who know and understand their unique circumstances and can work with them collaboratively in developing a path out of poverty.

As with previous Economic Security Project reports, we reiterate the need to see more accountability at the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance. This is a ministry charged with helping poor, needy and often vulnerable people. Its ability to fulfil this role – or its failure to do so, as documented in this study – demands the same level of public accountability, transparency, scrutiny and debate as the Ministry of Children and Families, or any other ministry or agency mandated to help vulnerable and marginalized people in need of assistance. That level of accountability has been lacking, for which the government, the official opposition, and the mainstream media must all accept some responsibility.

We urge that the ministry (and government overall) change its overarching goals. The policy target or performance objective of government must shift from a narrow focus on welfare caseload reduction and “moving people from welfare to work,” and move instead to the broader goal of poverty reduction and elimination, and health promotion.

Living on welfare, and leaving it, must be made easier and more humane. And a true path out of poverty should guide the legislative, regulatory and administrative approach to income assistance in BC.

The policy target or performance objective of government must shift from a narrow focus on welfare caseload reduction and “moving people from welfare to work,” and move instead to the broader goal of poverty reduction and elimination, and health promotion.

Appendix

Living on Welfare – Interview Breakdowns					
Study groupings	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
Remained on income assistance since beginning of study	62	40	31	26	21
Left income assistance voluntarily and is still off		5	11	10	12
Cut off income assistance and is still off		2	4	1	4
Came under sanctions but still on income assistance with cut to benefits		2	1	1	1
Left assistance temporarily (voluntary or cut off) since beginning of study, but is back on income assistance		2	3	6	7
<i>Not interviewed during this round</i>		11	12	18	17
Total number of participants	62	62	62	62	62

Notes

- 1 Pulkingham and Fuller, unpublished paper.
- 2 In the end, looking at the ministry's operating budgets over a longer time frame (2001/02 to 2006/07), the government reduced the ministry's budget from \$1.9 billion to just under \$1.4 billion, a reduction of 25 per cent over a five-year period.
- 3 In its 2007 budget, after many years of benefit rates being either frozen or cut, the provincial government announced it would raise income assistance rates. Support allowances for those without children and without disability status increased by \$50 per month, and shelter allowances for all recipients increased by \$50 per month. Details on the rate increases were accessed at www.eia.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/2007/increase.htm. In real dollars, these increases have effectively brought after-inflation benefit rates to where they were in the mid-to-late 1990s (after the NDP cuts). The Living on Welfare study reported here concluded its interviews prior to this latest increase in rates.
- 4 See Wallace et al., 2006. While the Living on Welfare study reported here focuses on those who are already in receipt of income assistance, an earlier study produced by the Economic Security Project – Wallace et al.'s *Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC* – found that the rule changes and administrative practices governing access to and eligibility for welfare were much more significant to the drop in caseloads than the rule changes affecting those already on assistance. The latter study found that, since 2001, about half the drop in the welfare caseload can be explained by an improved labour market, while the other half was due to policy changes. The study also found that, notwithstanding government claims that “more people are leaving welfare for work,” data from the ministry reveals no increase in the number of people leaving welfare (even as a share of the caseload), but rather that the caseload decline is entirely due to a drop in the number of “entries” or “starts” and to a significant increase in the share of applicants who are both formally denied or simply discouraged from accessing assistance. The introduction of the “two-year independence test” was found to be particularly significant, as were the new three-week-wait rule and various administrative barriers, including the required completion of an on-line orientation and the obligatory provision of extensive documentation.
- 5 For more on the 2002 policy and administrative changes, see Klein and Long, 2003.
- 6 For employable welfare recipients with dependent children, the rule does not cut off benefits altogether, but sanctions recipients through a reduction in the support allowance portion of welfare benefits by up to \$200 per month.
- 7 See Klein and Long, 2003; Reitsma-Street and Michael, 2002; McLeod 2003 and 2004.
- 8 Pulkingham and Fuller, unpublished paper.
- 9 As the two-year time limit rule was implemented in April 2002, the first people at risk of being cut off assistance were those who would have maxed-out their eligible time on welfare as of April 2004.
- 10 Reitsma-Street and Wallace, 2004.
- 11 Freedom of Information response to Jean Swanson (#07-00450), July 16, 2007, Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.
- 12 Clients with PWD or PPMB status may also be required to have an EP. However, they are exempt from the time limit rule, and the EPs they are required to sign are supposed to be more suited to their individual circumstances. Thus, our study chose to focus on longer-term clients who, at the time the study commenced, did not have these designations, and thus, were at risk of being cut off.

- 13 The initial intention was to recruit 15 from Kelowna, making the overall sample an even 60, but the researchers felt at the recruitment stage that two of the Kelowna participants posed a high likelihood of “disappearing,” and thus, two additional participants were recruited.
- 14 The study used a non-random, purposive sampling method.
- 15 According to ministry figures (accessed at www.eia.gov.bc.ca), in 2004, a monthly average of 49,331 clients were in the expected to work category, out of a total of 156,951 clients. Thus, those in the ETW category represented approximately 31 per cent of all welfare recipients.
- 16 These individuals are under-represented in existing ministry welfare exit surveys and Statistics Canada data sets, e.g., the Longitudinal Administrative Database (LAD) used in research reports tracking the employment outcomes of tax-filers who have been on welfare.
- 17 The sample for this study also includes welfare recipients who are well represented in existing government surveys because they have more stable housing and telephone access, and they are not highly transient (approximately one half of the sample falls into this group).
- 18 In the course of the study, five research assistants were involved, with the Kelowna position held by two assistants. The original Kelowna assistant, Robin Morgan, moved away to attend graduate school, and Kathryn Plancke was hired to replace her.
- 19 The project, approved by the Director, Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University, protects the confidentiality of the participants by ensuring that this research does not reveal personal identifying information about study participants.
- 20 Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance (Research, Evaluation and Statistics Branch). “Outcomes of Those Leaving Assistance,” February 2007.
- 21 In July 2004, the demographic breakdown (by family type) of the temporary assistance caseload for cases in the expected to work and expected to work – medical condition categories was: single men (40%); single women (23%); single parents (27%); couples (6%); couples with children (6%) (see BC Ministry of Human Resources, 2004). This profile excludes temporary cases categorized as PPMB or temporarily excused because these cases were excluded from our sample. Thus the profile of our sample is very similar to the family type (sex, marital status and presence of dependent children) breakdown of the relevant temporary assistance caseload, although we have a slightly higher proportion of lone parents and fewer couples with children. In this study, 18 of the 19 participants with dependent children are women, whether they are a lone parent or part of a couple.
- 22 Vancouver Island Health Authority, 2006, pp. 13-14.
- 23 The difference in health status, specifically the even poorer self-reported health status of participants in this study, likely reflects the fact that roughly half of the sample in the study reported here consists of individuals who typically are not well-represented in large-scale surveys such as the CCHS.
- 24 See, for example, Adams and Tait, 2004; and MacLeod 2004b and 2005b.
- 25 The attrition rate is higher for men than women (while 40 per cent of the initial sample were men, 60 per cent of those who dropped out of the study were men) and for those who lived in Kelowna (27 per cent of the initial sample, but 41 per cent of those who had dropped out by the final interview).
- 26 Pulkingham, 2007.
- 27 Cohen et al., 2008.
- 28 BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, 2007.
- 29 Such training and employment programs for people with disabilities are the subject of another Economic Security Project study. See Cohen et al., 2008.

- 30 As the figures in Table 4, column 3 indicate, at the time of the first interview, participants who participated in the first and final interview were more polarized than the sample as a whole in terms of housing circumstances: they were either more transient than the initial sample (and by inference, much more transient than those who dropped out by the final interview) or they had more stable housing circumstances reflected in the fact that they were much less likely to have moved frequently within the six months prior to the first interview.
- 31 The most notable improvement in housing occurred for participants who left income assistance voluntarily, two of whom became home owners by the final interview, and one of whom moved from an SRO into social housing.
- 32 15 of 29 participants.
- 33 15 of 20 participants.
- 34 Seven of nine participants.
- 35 Five of 12 participants.
- 36 Five of nine participants.
- 37 21 per cent, or seven of 33 participants.
- 38 The mean income of voluntary leavers in this study of \$1,480 is about \$300 less than the average monthly income found by the government in its seventh (and final) exit survey of welfare leavers (average monthly income of \$1,778 in the Fall of 2003), which is not surprising given that the government's survey only reached those with phones.
- 39 The poverty line used in this instance is Statistics Canada's 2005 Before Tax LICO (1992 Base) for a family size of one and for cities of 500,000+ (\$20,778/year).
- 40 For more on what kinds of welfare reforms and other supports would facilitate great employment for those on PWD who can only work sporadically or intermittently, see Cohen et al., 2008.
- 41 Details on rate increases were accessed at www.eia.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/2007/increase.htm.
- 42 Banting, 2006, p. ii.
- 43 Butterwick, 2006.
- 44 Banting, 2006, p. ii.

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About Raise the Rates

www.raisetherates.org

Raise the Rates is a province-wide coalition of community groups and organizations concerned with the levels of poverty and homelessness in British Columbia. Located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Raise the Rates focuses on promoting public awareness in order to increase pressure on the government to raise welfare rates, improve the welfare system, increase the minimum wage and build more social housing.

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About the CCPA

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About the Economic Security Project

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The Economic Security Project is a major research initiative of the CCPA's BC Office and Simon Fraser University, in partnership with 24 community organizations and four BC universities.

The project examines how recent provincial policy changes affect the economic well-being of vulnerable people in BC, such as those who rely on social assistance, low-wage earners, recent immigrants, youth and others. It also develops and promotes policy solutions that improve economic security.

The project is funded primarily by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through its Community-University Research Alliance Program.