

Executive Summary: A comparison of experiences with poverty between service providers and those with lived experience.

Central Alberta Poverty Reduction Alliance

May 2018

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**Executive Summary**

Currently, 1 in 7 people in Canada live in poverty (Canada Without Poverty). Furthermore, within Alberta, there are 400,000 Albertans living in poverty, 143,000 of those individuals are children (CAPRA, 2005). Some risk factors that may increase the odds that an individual will fall into poverty include; loss of a job, lone parent families, recent immigrants, aboriginal descent, lack of education, disabilities and separation or divorce (CAPRA, 2005). Poverty is complex and multifaceted - there is no one cause or explanation for poverty. Almost everyone at some point in their lives may be at risk for experiencing poverty.

**Current Study**

The current research builds upon the poverty awareness survey completed last year. Questions were designed to probe into the perspectives of service providers and those with lived experience. CAPRA would like to understand these perspectives in order to be better equipped to bridge any gaps between the needs of those living in poverty and the services provided in our community. This will help guide CAPRA in supporting the needs of community members living in poverty.

**Methods**

Participants included individuals with lived experience with poverty (*N* = 40), as well as those who work for relevant service provider organizations (*N*= 25). Participants for the lived experience sample were recruited by contacting individuals who volunteered upon completion of the survey last year. Participants were also recruited through the Mustard Seed. The interviews and focus groups for the lived experience group took place at the Mustard Seed on two scheduled dates. Research assistants helped conduct interviews and focus groups.

The lived experience sample composed 61.5% of the total amount of participants, (*n*=40). This sample consisted mainly of males, which made up 80% of the sample (*n*= 32), the females then making up 20% of the sample (*n*= 8). About half of the participants (52.5%) participated in an interview (*n*= 21), and the other half (47.5%) participated in a focus group (*n*= 19).Although demographic data was not specifically documented, it was observed that the participants consisted mainly of Caucasians, however there were several Aboriginal participants within the lived experience sample.

Service provider participants were invited by CAPRA to an Alliance meeting in January. Additionally, interviews were scheduled with those who were invited to the CAPRA meeting but could not attend. The service providers composed 38.5% of the total amount of participants (*n*= 25). Within this sample, 24% of which were male (*n*= 6), and 76% were female (*n*= 19).Furthermore, 80% of these participants engaged in a focus group (*n*= 20), the remaining 20% participated in an interview (*n*= 5). This sample consisted mainly of Caucasians. Participant age also varied from young adults (18 – 35) to older adults (65 – 85) for both sample groups.

**Key Findings**

Table 1. Lived Experience Common Themes for Question 1

**What Stops You From Getting Enough (Food, Clothing, etc.) for You and Your Family?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Themes** | **Participant Quotes** |
| **Unaware of available resources 13%**Unaware of how to access services, unaware of what type of resources are available, lack in accessibility | “Not knowing what resources are available to me, like food, or clothes or whatever I needed.”“I think there are enough resources in Red Deer it’s just knowing when and how to get them.” |
| **Not enough money 63%** ***Health Issues 44%***Can’t work because of disability, AISH isn’t enough ***Lack of sufficient employment 56%***Too old, can’t afford education, not getting hired | “Right now, I have bad knees so I can’t work.”“I am on AISH, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped. $1,588 is what we get, and when you’re paying rent, and then groceries and bills, there’s not enough money.”“Not enough income, after paying all of the bills I don’t have enough left.”“I am almost 64, I am a pipe fitter and it is hard to find a job. Since I have been in this trade for so long it is hard to find another job.” |
| **Poor budgeting 5%**Spend paycheck too fast | “I spend too much money at once and it runs out.”“Just not good at budgeting. Usually spend my money right away. Don’t have enough money by the end of the month.” |
| **Life circumstances 10%**Addictions, taking care of family, separation from partner, possessions stolen | “People like to take advantage. I’ve had some rough roommates, who’ve taken me for everything. Try to help people out and it backfires.”“Looking after other members of the family.”“Drugs, plain and simple.” |
| **Adequate livelihood 5%**Feel they live well, not lacking in resources | “Nothing stops me...I’ve been fine. Had a place, everything. Nothing stops me. I always get what I need.”“Nothing. [stops me from getting enough] You accept how it is.” |
| **Lacking effort 5%**Do not put enough effort into acquiring resources | “Cause I’m lazy… my homeless holiday doesn’t end until December 24th. Then I gotta go to school for four years. So I’m still homeless.” |

Figure 1. Lived Experience Visual Depiction for Question 1

Table 2. Lived Experience Common Themes for Question 2

**What Does Your Typical Day Look Like?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Themes** | **Participant Quotes** |
| **Maintain Responsibilities 15%**Go to work/ school | “Wake up at 5:30, have breakfast and go to work.”“I go to class… and then just homework and then I don’t do a lot outside of that because everything in this city costs money.”“If I’m working, it’s 14-16 hr days. On my days off leisure time at home, watch movies, go out.” |
| **No routine 62%**Live day to day, look for work, stay at home | “I get up, I go out every day, then I go home… I go out for coffee once in a while… watch television.”“I don’t have much of a routine going anymore. I had to stop working when I got hit by a car.”“Staying home. Sometimes I’ll bake, color, watch tv.” |
| **Coordinate with services 23%**Move from service to service as they become available | “Usually waking up about around 5:30 when they wake you up downstairs [of mustard seed] then find something to do till 9am when the warmup shelter opens up. After 4:30 [pm] you can go to the dinner [mustard seed] and this shelter downstairs opens at 7pm.”“Get up at 5:30 in the morning and walking to Potter’s Hand. Then I go to the warming center until 4:30. After supper I head down to People’s Place.” |

Table 3. Lived Experience Common Themes for Question 3

**How do the Organizations/Services/Programs in Red Deer Help You or Make Things Difficult for You?**

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| --- | --- |
| **Themes** | **Participant Quotes** |
| **Frustration with seeking services 21%**Services too far apart, back and forth between services, time gaps of unavailable services | “It’s just a runaround game. One organization will help you but if they can’t help you they’ll just send you to another one…you’re just running around the city and wasting time.”“You do one thing for one place that conflicts with the other. There is a lot of hoop jumping that you have to do. And if you don’t do it you don’t get this, and if you do this you don’t get that. It’s a real hustle.” |
| **Supports needs 51%**Helps to acquire food, shelter, clothes, financial support | “The services here are great like the food and everything- the shelters and everything like that. Right now I only have enough for my rent… as soon as one of these agencies pick me up they’ll help me with my damage and furniture. Just to get me on my feet and that’s what I need right now.”“You ask, you will receive. You ask for help, people will bend over backwards to help you in finding lodging, food, clothes, medical.”“They help me a lot. If I need stuff, bread. There aren’t any organization that don’t help me that I know of.” |
| **Feel labelled 19%**Do no help, disability misinterpreted for addiction, won’t help unless intoxicated | “I can’t walk a straight line and the minute they see me they say ‘oh you’re drunk’ so now I get kicked out.”“They make it difficult. They label you and I don’t like that. I don’t want to be put in that group you know… It can’t be changed, because that is just how the system works…You get labeled…You’re either a drug seeker or whatever or something like that.”“Your expected to be a certain way because there is an idea of what it should be, but because you do not look like they expect you to, you get kind of treated a little differently.” |
| **Need government support 9%**Need more funding for shelters, social activities, transportation | “As far as the government, they do nothing.”“The government helped me a lot but doesn’t do enough to help some of the elderly ones. Nobody’s gonna hire them anymore.”“[We need] Things that don’t really cost much or like make it easier to get somewhere where it doesn’t cost money… even like have more libraries or something and just go and work on a puzzle book or something and socialize with people.” |

Table 4. Lived Experience Common Themes for Question 4

**Why do You Think You Don’t Have Enough to Live Well? When did You Start Having Problems?**

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| **Themes** | **Participant Quotes** |
| **Bad habits 16%**Have addictions, smoke | “I had an addiction; I was addicted to drugs and alcohol. I didn’t care what I had or what I needed. Started having problems during the addiction.”“If I didn’t drink beer or smoke cigarettes, I would live like a king.”“It started when I was 12 that I got addicted to the street drugs and the alcohol and to support my own habit I began to sell drugs on the street.” |
| **Not enough money 19%**Cost of living too high | “We’re in recession, the cost of living is high. If you look at apartments right now, $1300-1400. There’s no way I can do that.”“Rent, price of groceries, utilities are not very affordable. Children are very costly; everything is getting so expensive nowadays it is not even funny. You have to crunch and crunch as best as you can.”“Not enough income. Work’s scarce.” |
| **Life altering event 37%**Job loss, gained disability, separation/ divorce | “Being laid off, and trying to find work, then finding work again and getting laid off, it’s just a vicious cycle.”“Four years ago, when I broke my back.”“Ten years ago when I divorced. And after that everything fell apart.”“Recession hit, everybody got laid off and there was no work.” |
| **Started from childhood 11%**Unsupported family, disability, addiction | “I have had problems all of my life because I have chronic pain…because of my chronic pain, I need days to rest before working.”“I started having problems when I was ten years old.”“I probably started having problems because of addictions, I think I was 12 when I started.” |
| **Adequate livelihood 7%**Meet basic needs, live well | “I think I just try to live average. Where you know you get by with a little bit of extra so that you enjoy somethings, stuff, and every once in a while you do something for yourself.”“I do have enough. I always took care of myself. I do have enough.” |
| **Too many responsibilities 11%**In school, taking care of family | “There is too much month at the end of the money… I have six grandchildren, so I try to help take care of them, then I get behind on my bills.”“My parents got to the age where they needed to be taken care of and I was the only one doing it. You see your life slipping away from your own to the point where you’re the caregiver.”“Not looking right now [for work] cause I just wanna finish college because I have a hard time. I struggle with my work load as it is so adding work would just stress me out more and make me more anxious.” |

Figure 2. Lived Experience Visual Depiction for Question Four

Table 5. Lived Experience Common Themes for Question 5

**What do You Want People to Know About Individuals Who Live on Low-Income or No Income?**

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| **Themes** | **Participant Quotes** |
| **Misunderstood 32%**They are good/ kind people, not all addicted and/or lazy, same as everyone else | “We are not all addicted. I know people from my street ministry, some of them are wearing 3-piece suits and they are homeless. It is circumstances more than anything.”“These people bust their butts. I have met more people who have nothing to be more helpful than anyone who has everything, it is discouraging.”“We are people too…there is a lot of people here that are good decent people that are just doing our best…you get that stigma. Your referred to as you people… the degrading thing you know, if you only knew my story.” |
| **Shortage in assistance 8%**Do not get as much as you think | “The government is not doing enough.”“I know a lot of people think we get a lot of help but it’s bare minimum.” |
| **Everyone’s at risk 17%**It’s not their fault, complex reasons  | “It’s not their fault. We’re not here by choice, I never wanted this life, I never asked for this. One bad thing after another and here I am now I’m fighting to get out.”“There are a lot of people who are one paycheck away from being homeless.”“We don’t choose this. This is not what we want. We would like to be where everybody else is too.” |
| **Difficult to leave 19%**Hard to live comfortably, difficult to get out of poverty | “I want people to know that it’s really hard to budget your money and it’s really hard to live off.”“There is no formula to getting out of homelessness and addictions.”“I guess how difficult it is to do your daily things living in a world with no income… then be able to provide for yourself afterwards.” |
| **Regret mistakes 4%**Acknowledge past mistakes, regret past choices | “I wish I would have tried harder when I was younger cause I’m too old to change anything. And a lot of life time of regrets that I can’t go back in change.” |
| **Be respectful 21%**Give them respect, be kind, don’t judge | “The biggest thing I would say is that at one time I was better off myself, is just to show some respect. Don’t be so hard on these people.”“Don’t treat them different. These guys will help you out more than you will. These guys look different but that’s about it.” |

Table 6. Service Provider Common Themes Across all 5 Questions

**Service Provider Overarching Themes in Perspectives**

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| --- | --- |
| **Themes** | **Participant Quotes** |
| **Mental Health and Addictions Resources 6%**Need more resources for mental health and addictions, mental health and addictions center | “It seems a shame to me that we as a society can't do better for people with severe mental illness.”“Having more resources for those with mental health, whether it be counsellors or psychologists, and then just medication and stuff for them.”“There are certain things that need to be in place because it’s not just for people living in poverty, but for people that are wealthy also have issues and that would be an addictions center.” |
| **Collaboration between services 17%**More communication between services, unaware of services available, sharing of information, one stop shop | “It’s just the disconnection between services. People seem to be bounced from service to service, with no linking sort of agency in the middle or say a hub.”“I mean were trying to provide a piece, but I don’t have a full understanding of all that’s available to people.”“I think at the systems level there is a lot of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what other agencies or other supports roles are in what they can do.” |
| **Funding 39%**Need more funding, less restrictions on funds, more community support | “In order to open our doors, we need more money, bottom line. We do not receive any support from the government.”“Funding but specifically unrestricted funding so that funders are not trying our hands about what you can use funding for.”“Support from the community to, to care for its most vulnerable.” |
| **Affordable housing 11%**Affordable, quality housing, transitional and permanent housing | “It’s a huge problem in the city, we do not have enough low-income housing at an affordable rate.”“Affordable housing [needs to be addressed], that is quality, that is well maintained, that is a healthy place to live, that people feel safe and secure in but also having that kind of affordable housing”“There is very little choice for those struggling in poverty to find accommodation in their price range.” |
| **Stigma 15%**Community education, increase helping behaviors, reduce stigma | “The causes of homelessness are complex; we believe that Red Deer would like to learn more about the complexity of homelessness and poverty”“There’s often a stigma and dehumanization that comes with people living in poverty- that they are there for a reason or they’re lazy- that kind of thing. Referring people to services- often they are kind of met with a negative outlook, so they are less likely to go based on other people’s reactions.”“[We need to] Change the perception of what poverty is to reduce the stigma and discrimination that goes with people that don’t have an income and/ or a lifestyle that society in general thinks they ought to have.” |
| **Affordable Resources 12%**Make resources more affordable; food, clothing, day care, transportation | “Basic needs so I mean that would include things like food and clothing, transportation, identification, the basics for what you would need to be an active contributing member in our community.”“Food is usually, the first thing to be adjusted based on people’s income, income supports to help people with food indirectly.”“I think transportation is an issue for a lot of clients, and childcare is an issue, that keeps new-comer moms from accessing programs.” |

Figure 3. Service Provider Visual Depiction of Overarching Themes

**Alignment in Themes Between the Lived Experience and Service Provider Perspectives**

* Poverty is Complex
* Need to Reduce Stigma
* Need Affordable Housing
* Need Affordable and Accessible Resources (Food, Clothing, Transportation etc.)
* Need Better Collaboration and Communication Between Services

**Future Directions**

Based on the findings of this research, CAPRA may want to focus on further educational campaigns and/or programs to raise awareness in the community around the complexity of poverty and to reduce stigma. Efficiency may be improved in helping those who are living in low income if there was an increase in communication between service providers. To better support those accessing services and supports closer collaboration between service providers in Red Deer could be considered. This may be addressed by developing a better system of communication between services as well as enhancing awareness and resources about what each service provider can do to support those in need. This could reduce frustration for those accessing such services, as well as alleviate some stress for the service providers themselves.

**Conclusion**

The results from this study will be considered along with the *Poverty in Red Deer: A Needs and Opportunities* report in creating prevention and reduction strategies for poverty in Red Deer. This research will assist in providing local context for strategic planning at local action, advocacy, system change and policy development levels. Understanding in more depth one’s experience in living in poverty is an important step in addressing this complex issue. The hope is that this research will contribute to reducing and preventing poverty in Red Deer.

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