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Case for Basic Income for Child Welfare

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**THE CASE
FOR BASIC
INCOME
SERIES**

Basic Income and Child Welfare

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SUMMARY

This brief explores the relationship between poverty and child welfare in Canada, and considers the transformative potential of a guaranteed basic income in supporting families and youth affected by Canada's child welfare system. Acknowledging and meaningfully addressing poverty as one of the root causes of child welfare involvement by providing adequate income supports means that families in Canada will be able to meaningfully and autonomously make dignified choices about their own needs. By ensuring that all families in Canada have an adequate income, a basic income would reduce the number of children in care, support better outcomes for those transitioning out of the care system, and help sever the complex relationship between intergenerational trauma, poverty, and Canada's child welfare system.

ABOUT BASIC INCOME

Basic income means different things to different people. The Case for Basic Income series defines basic income as an income-tested and targeted unconditional cash transfer from governments to individuals to enable everyone in Canada to meet their basic needs, participate in society, and live in dignity, regardless of work status.

Some Case project teams make more detailed recommendations about the principles to guide the design of a basic income program in Canada.

ABOUT THE CASE FOR BI SERIES

The Case for Basic Income series explores the impacts of a basic income program for various communities and policy areas across Canada. Each Case has been developed collaboratively by subject matter experts and basic income advocates to consider the distinct issues and concerns between the Case topic and income insecurity - and the difference that basic income might make.

Every Case is unique in both function and form and is guided by its authors and contributors.

Basic Income and Child Welfare

The Case for a Basic income

This brief explores the relationship between poverty and child welfare in Canada, and considers the transformative potential of a guaranteed basic income in supporting families and youth affected by Canada's child welfare system. By ensuring that all families in Canada have an adequate income, a basic income would reduce the number of children in care, support better outcomes for those transitioning out of the care system, and help sever the complex relationship between intergenerational trauma, poverty, and Canada's child welfare system.

Canada's child welfare system

In addition to protecting children who are at risk of harm or in need of care, child welfare services are intended to support families to ensure the safety and well-being of their children and themselves. Typically, families come into contact with child welfare services when reported by a professional (e.g., doctor, teacher, social worker) or a member of the public (e.g., neighbour, friend, family member). When a report is made, child welfare services conduct an assessment or investigation to determine if a child is at risk of harm or in need of care (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022).

Following assessment, child welfare services may take a range of actions to intervene with the family or the children. Whenever possible, child welfare services will seek to provide support and services to the family and/or place the child with a relative or other natural support (i.e., kinship care; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2022).

Other routes of intervention centre around apprehension (i.e., removing the child and placing them with a foster family or in group care). The latter is much more common for Indigenous and racialized youth (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Although there are instances in which intervention via apprehension may be important or necessary, this reflects the narrow range of "supports" that are within the purview of child protection agencies. The separation of children from their families is a band-aid solution to neglect and maltreatment: this type of intervention leaves unaddressed the root causes of why many families may struggle to care for their own children. Indeed, all parents and guardians require support to care for their children, and providing all families access to the resources necessary to sustain life and well-being is crucial to actually promoting the welfare of children.

Child welfare and poverty

The link between poverty and involvement in the child welfare system is well established (Blackstock, 2017; Bath & Haapala, 1993; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Pelton, 2015). Families living in poverty are reported to and come in contact with child protective services at higher rates than those with relative socioeconomic privilege. Of all children in care, almost 40% have parents who work part-time, have multiple jobs, or who rely on provincial income assistance programs as their primary source of income (Fallon et al., 2020).

Many families struggling with poverty may be, or appear to be, unable to adequately provide for their child's basic needs. Low-income families in Canada are more likely to be food-insecure and precariously housed. Many work multiple jobs in an effort to secure an adequate income, including part-time, temporary, or low-paid work. Further, these families are hit especially hard by the affordability and cost of living crises, and struggle to afford basic needs such as essential medication, dental care, transportation, or clothing (Blumenthal, 2015; Canadian Poverty Institute, 2017; UNICEF, 2020).

Cycles of trauma and poverty

Because it involves the forced separation of children from their most important relationships, apprehension by child protective services is a form of trauma (American Bar Association, 2019). Individuals with previous child welfare involvement are more likely to experience homelessness (Alberton, Angell, Gorey, & Grenier, 2020), have children who are also apprehended (Wall-Wieler, Brownell, Singal, Nickel, & Roos, 2018), and be sex trafficked (United States Department of State, 2022). They are also less likely to succeed academically (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003) and have greater rates of substance use (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In other words, these individuals grow up to live in greater precarity, and have children who grow up to do the same. Therefore, apprehension initiates and maintains intergenerational cycles of trauma and poverty.

The legacy of colonization, and the 'modern residential school'

These cycles are especially evident when we look at the history of residential schools. The systematic removal of Indigenous children

and youth from their families and communities is a defining part of Canada's history and identity. It is also the foundation on which the child welfare system was built. The primary objective of the residential school system was to remove and isolate Indigenous children from their families and assimilate them into dominant culture (National centre for Truth and Reconciliation, n.d.). This, alongside other colonial practices, has forced Indigenous families and communities into states of poverty (Canadian Poverty Institute, 2017). Today, Indigenous families are investigated by child protective services at rates 4 times higher than non-Indigenous families, and 53.8% of children (aged 0-14) in care in Canada are Indigenous (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). In cases where parents are investigated for neglect and the children subsequently removed from their homes, it is because the parents are viewed as intentionally failing to provide for their children (Swift & Callahan, 2009; Russell, Harris, & Glockel, 2008). In other words, parents are blamed for their situations. This tends to be especially the case for Indigenous families (Sinha, Ellenbogen, & Trocme, 2013), with colonial assessment tools and racial biases are pointed to as possible explanations for this trend (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017; 2018). Rather than working toward reconciliation and improving the conditions of Indigenous people, child welfare services labels their living situations as "neglectful" (Blackstock, 2017), apprehends the children, and places them into foster care (of which too many of these placements are non-Indigenous, unequipped to meet cultural needs, and contribute to further loss of identity and culture; Bennet & Blackstock, 2002). This is one of the many ways in which child welfare services are viewed as the modern-day residential school (Blackstock, 2017).

Funding families

Rather than fund the separation of children from their families, Canada must prioritize ensuring families have adequate resources to thrive so that generations can begin healing. In order to address the real challenges that poor families face, a more robust and comprehensive system of support to promote autonomy and dignity is necessary. Although symptoms of poverty like food insecurity and housing precarity may be viewed by child protection agencies as evidence of neglect, the tools that child protection typically wields (i.e., investigations, apprehensions, and foster care) will never be able to solve a major source of the problem, which is poverty. The child welfare system, as it stands, is not the 'safety net' for children that it is commonly purported to be. Instead of looking at 'child protection', Canada needs to look more holistically at 'family protection'; providing a safety net that keeps both children and families free from poverty and trauma. This safety net could take the form of a guaranteed livable income.

There exist interventions to improve family situations which support this argument. For example, the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) has reduced poverty for 782,000 children since 2015, in addition to improving incomes, food security, and living conditions of families (Government of Canada, 2019; Baker, Messacar, & Stabile, 2023). Provincially, an evaluation of Manitoba's Healthy Babies program found that the monthly benefit provided to expectant mothers was not only associated with better health outcomes for infants, but also a reduced likelihood of that child being taken into care (Brownell, Chartier, Au, & Schultz, 2010). Although these benefits

provide evidence that income supports are necessary to promote family dignity, agency, and overall well-being, they are not as robust nor sufficient as a guaranteed livable income would be.

Conclusions and calls to action

Implementing a guaranteed livable income is an important policy step to ensure that no child in Canada is unnecessarily removed from their homes due to poverty. In a country as wealthy as Canada, no parent should have to make the choice between food or rent, medication or the heating bill. The best thing we can do to make certain that Canada is a vibrant and healthy country is to invest in our children and their families so that no one has to make impossible choices just to survive, and so everyone has the right to grow up and live within the safety of their family, home, and communities.

Acknowledging and meaningfully addressing poverty as one of the root causes of child welfare involvement by providing adequate income supports means that families in Canada will be able to meaningfully and autonomously make dignified choices about their own needs. It is important to note that implementing a basic income will not single-handedly stop the cycle of poverty, child welfare involvement, and intergenerational trauma overnight; a robust network of resources such as adequate housing, affordable child care, universal healthcare and pharmacare, and affordable education must work in tandem with a basic income. However, implementing a guaranteed livable income is a crucial step to ensure that all children and families are safe and can make empowered choices for themselves for generations to come.

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