

Child Care Protects Socioeconomic Rights

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ISSUE

Alberta’s lack of affordable child care restricts the full and free participation of women in the labour force, denying many of them of their right to meet their own basic needs.

POLICIES

The “affordability” of child care in Alberta is identified as a priority area of investment for both the provincial and federal government, as set forth in the Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement—renewed by the province this year (2021). Founded upon the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework, this bilateral agreement outlines how federal funds allocated to support early learning and child care in Alberta are to be spent. This year, the amended Early Learning and Child Care Act (formally the Child Care Licensing Act) and its accompanying regulations came into force in Alberta. While the Act “provides the Alberta government the authority to support, license, inspect, and monitor child care programs,” the Act and associated regulations significantly make no reference to the critical aspect of “affordability.”

PRACTICES

Alberta’s current approach to tackling the unaffordability of child care in the province is through the use of subsidies. The main eligibility requirement to apply for a child care subsidy is a combined household income less than the current income threshold set by the province. For applications that are approved, the amount of subsidy a family receives is determined by a formula, and is paid directly to the licensed child care program on behalf of the family. While competition between market actors in some sectors of the economy can drive down prices, this does not happen in the child care sector. In Alberta, the cost of a child care space is entirely set by the market. Alberta differs in this regard from the provinces of Quebec, Manitoba, and P.E.I., which have set-fee spaces alongside market-fee spaces.

1

The province sets a threshold for determining subsidy allocation

2

A family can apply if their household income is less than that threshold

3

Approved subsidies are paid directly to the child care program

The process of determining eligibility for child care subsidies

RESOURCE FLOWS

Early learning and child care in Alberta is funded by the provincial government, with support from the Government of Canada. In addition to the bilateral agreement for early learning and child care, the federal government also transfers payments to Alberta through the Canada Social Transfer (CST). Alberta parents may also apply for the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), a federal program which provides monthly payments to eligible families to help offset the costs of child care. Child care centre owners and directors, early childhood educators, parents and caregivers, and child care licensing staff are vital resources and stakeholders in the child care ecosystem. The physical infrastructure required for licensed facility-based (daycares, preschools, and out-of-school care programs) and home-based (overseen by a licensed family day home agency) child care programs to operate is another critical asset.

“Rooted in the beliefs and assumptions held by Premier Kenney and many members of his caucus, **child care and its associated costs** is viewed by the Alberta government as a **family issue** as opposed to a **collective or social issue.**”

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and Children’s Minister, Rebecca Schulz have yet to sign onto the federal government’s Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, which aims to make child care more affordable across Canada by cutting the cost of child care in half by 2022 and reducing child care fees to \$10-a-day by 2026. Tensions between the two levels of government intensified after Kenney accused Ottawa of treating Alberta “like a second-class province” after it accepted the “exact agreement” from Quebec which it had rejected when proposed by Alberta. Alberta’s UCP government is under growing pressure from members of Alberta’s Official Opposition, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, businesses and municipalities, and child care reform advocates, who are pushing hard for a national child care deal for Alberta.

POWER DYNAMICS

In the 2021 federal Budget, the Government of Canada laid out its Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan. The Plan outlines the government’s goal of working with individual provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to build and support a Canada-wide, community-based system of affordable, high-quality child care. At this time, Alberta still has an opportunity to join the nation-wide Early Learning and Child Care plan. However, with no guarantee or requirement that Alberta reach an agreement with Ottawa, whether or not Alberta will join other jurisdictions who have signed on is unknown. The approach Alberta takes to tackling the unaffordability of child care in the province moving forward, and the consequences of those actions or inactions, fall squarely on Premier Kenney and select members of his cabinet.





MENTAL MODELS

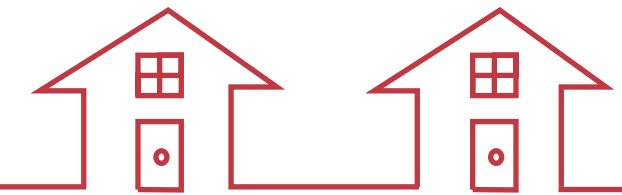
The mental models underpinning Jason Kenney's UCP government are traditional conservatism, smaller government (market ideology), and maximizing individual freedom. Taken together these held ideologies uniquely allow for government intervention for the purposes of protecting the "traditional" family through supporting parental rights and religious institutions. With regard to child care policies, a consistent theme from Premier Kenney and members of his cabinet is a commitment to "respect and reflect the choices" of parents. Rooted in the beliefs and assumptions held by Premier Kenney and many members of his caucus, child care and its associated costs is viewed by the Alberta government as a family issue as opposed to a collective or social issue. In this way, the approach taken thus far by Kenney's government to address the unaffordability of child care has centred on providing assistance on a targeted family-by-family basis and not through the use of a universal social program.

VIGNETTE

Norway is an example of an international jurisdiction, and one of only a few countries in the world which has successfully addressed the issue of child care unaffordability within its borders. Norway is a social democracy and "has a history of decentralization and local autonomy." Building off Norway's mental models which emphasize "the intrinsic value of childhood and the rights of children in society," child care is viewed as both a public good and public responsibility, which all children have a right to access. Driven by these beliefs, and with the support of most political parties who maintained the lack of equitable access to child care was a problem, Norway established new practices to address child care affordability beginning in the early 2000s. These practices included introducing a monthly maximum child care fee (equivalent to CAD \$445 in 2019), and discounts for every additional child. Norway also mandates that parents pay no more than 6 percent of their income toward childcare (up to that maximum ceiling), and low-income families are entitled to a number of free child care hours per week. Child care centres in Norway today are mainly supported through public funds (86%), with parent fees accounting for the remaining costs.



How Might We Remove the Socioeconomic Barriers to Rights?



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Issue Statement:

A lack of housing, resources, and social supports for vulnerable populations produce the conditions for homelessness and housing scarcity which impede an individual's socioeconomic rights.

Policies:

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) is a multi-lateral human rights treaty that came into force on January 3rd, 1967. Canada formally acceded to join the treaty on May 19, 1976, and officially went into force in Canada on August 19, 1976. Through accepting and signing onto this treaty, Canada accepted the obligation to take suitable measures to respect, protect and fulfill their obligations under the ICESCR. In Article 11 of the ICESCR, it states that states “... recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions”. Today, the right to housing is not enshrined in Canada's Constitution Act, 1867 or the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

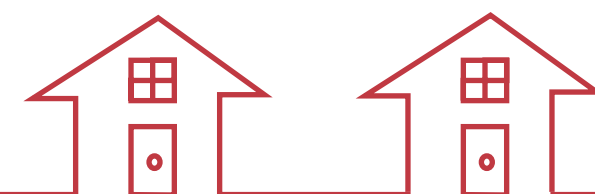
While the right to housing is not enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Government of Canada employed a National Housing Strategy in 2017. Through this strategy, the Liberal government aims to reduce chronic homelessness by 50%, bring up to 530,000 families out of housing need, and create up to 100,000 new housing units and 300,000 renovated units.

Resource Flows:

Funding for housing initiatives typically flows from governments to smaller organizations or business to fulfill their mandate or goals. For example, the province of Alberta offers funding to housing providers so they can build, renew, or maintain housing for seniors, families with low income, and groups with special needs. Further, In May 2021, Edmonton City Council approved \$10.4 million to support the construction of and up to 25% of the capital costs for 124 affordable housing units in four different locations across the city. This money was provided through the Affordable Housing Investment Plan which aims to add 2500 new or renovated affordable housing units across the city of Edmonton.

Practices:

There are numerous non-profit organizations across Alberta that are focussed on housing initiatives. Alpha House Calgary provides numerous housing programs that includes Community Housing and Permanent-Supportive Housing (PSH), transitional housing for individuals currently experiencing homelessness and transitioning them into Community or Long-Term Housing, assistance in finding living opportunities for community housing clients, and they operate six place-based buildings through the PSH program.



Power Dynamics:

Municipal governments can have a huge impact on what homelessness and housing scarcity looks like in their municipality. In May 2021, Wetaskiwin, AB city council passed a motion that would terminate the agreement that authorized the Open Door Association to lease the towns Civic Building as a shelter. This 24/7 shelter space opened in November 2020, and it provided reprieve for up to 60 individuals each night. Without this space, the municipality has been left without adequate space or services to serve a population in need.

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Mental Models:

Stigma and misunderstanding can lead to misinformation and a lack of empathy for vulnerable populations. According to the Homeless Hub, historically on average, individuals that experienced homelessness or housing insecurity in Canada were older, single men. Meanwhile, what we see today is that the population is more diverse and includes more women, families, and youth that are experiencing homelessness than in the past.

Relationships & Connections:

Research, data, and networks are essential to understanding a broader perspective into an issue. Non-profit organizations often have their finger on the pulse of the frontline work that is occurring or needs to occur in communities regarding homelessness. The Calgary Homeless Foundation sets out to fight homelessness in partnership with all levels of government, homeless-serving agencies, faith-based communities, and the general population. Further, they collect data and research to co-create a system-wide and evidence-based approach to serve and find solutions for individuals facing homelessness and housing insecurity.

Vignette:

In 2009, the City of Medicine Hat became one of the first cities in Canada to commit to ending homelessness using the housing first approach. The Medicine Hat Community Housing Society (MHCHS) has led the cities commitment to end homelessness and have housed 1323 individuals since the inception of the strategy. The MHCHS has persevered to implement a systems approach to social issues, which challenges the status quo and positively disrupts the system. This approach requires innovative approaches to improve efficiencies and optimize service delivery, while making important changes to the way the organization impacts the community. The MHCHS recognizes that system change is difficult, but it is at the top of their strategic directions.

The Need for Accessible Child Care in Alberta

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In Alberta (2019), 22% of children aged 0 – 5 years had access to a regulated full or part-time centre based child care space.

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