

Income Disparity and the Impact on Social Work

Subject expert: Rod Adachi, a Registered Social Worker and Executive Director of the Alberta College of Social Workers.

The following is a transcript of an Alberta College of Social Workers podcast recorded January 23, 2008. [Click here](#) to hear the audio version.

INTERVIEWER: How is social work affected by income disparity?

ROD: Well, Godfrey, social workers work with individual families and communities right across Alberta. All sectors and individuals are affected when there is income disparity. So social workers, as professionals, have to practice within that context and that raises a number of challenges.

For example, social workers bear witness to concerns faced by our vulnerable populations. Those on limited incomes, like seniors, who have fixed incomes; those on income support programs; those receiving AISH - who are disabled. They have a very limited capacity to deal with the rising costs and the costs have escalated tremendously in Alberta. In many ways it has increased the families and children facing poverty. Also, Alberta is attracting a lot of newcomers – immigrants, refugees - and they're having a hard time getting established because of the disparity gap.

INTERVIEWER: How does this pressure on seniors, the disabled and so on - how does this pressure affect other Albertans?

ROD: I think a lot of Albertans have faced in the last couple of years an issue about affordable housing. Everybody needs housing... seniors, newcomers, children ... and having a lack of affordable housing has a real negative impact on family life. Even those families who have been able to access housing, some of them are tied to very high mortgages. That limits their availability to participate in other activities such as recreational activities and cultural activities. That can have a negative impact on children, for example.

Many Albertans rely on programs and services that are provided by community agencies. A lot of human service agencies in our communities are having a major challenge recruiting and retaining workers because of a salary disparity. This has limited their ability to provide a lot of needed agencies for seniors and those who have mental health issues - a lot of Albertans who are our neighbours and families.

INTERVIEWER: So this impacts middle-income individuals, as well?

ROD: Yes. I think we all know of somebody who has to have certain services. As our population ages, we have parents, or aunts and uncles who need personal care to stay in their homes. Much of this is provided through community human service agencies. If they have difficulty

recruiting and retaining workers then that has a direct impact on how many services are available, and the quality of the services.

INTERVIEWER: So how does this situation affect social workers and their ability to help others?

ROD: A lot of social workers work in these agencies, so they are directly impacted because their salaries are very low comparatively speaking. Those who choose to stay and work in those agencies are now working with fewer colleagues. They're understaffed, so obviously their workloads have gone up which means higher stress, fewer weekends off and fewer holidays. So it's high stress directly on the social worker.

When these types of agencies are limited in their ability to do their work, they can't take any new referrals. Social workers who may be working in institutional agencies, like health authorities for example, or children's services - have fewer places they can refer their clients. A lot of children who need services aren't getting those services. This has an impact then on that case worker's caseload because it keeps increasing. If they can't find something for these clients to do, or appropriate services in a program, then their caseloads are going to increase and that creates a negative impact on those workers.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see the situation getting better or worse in the future?

ROD: Well, we hope that things will get better. I think there's a growing understanding of the disparity gap. There is certainly a lot of attention being paid to housing, or affordable housing and we are, as the Alberta College of Social Workers, involved in several initiatives to try to improve the situation. We're hoping that more Albertans will begin to understand this and the impact of the growing disparity within their communities and in families that they know.

INTERVIEWER: What can be done to stop the growing gap? Not just stop it but start to see it close?

ROD: The whole concept of disparity needs to be recognized and acknowledged by all levels of society. In particular, leadership is required to champion changes and commitment has to be made to develop some social policies that tie in together with our economic policies - to bring balance back into our communities and our province.

I think there's been too much focus on economic activities. They've been very successful and in fact have worked, I guess, too well because they have overheated the economy and created a worker shortage and some of the disparity that we're speaking of. I think an analogy is like one of those balloon dogs you see people making. If there is too much air in the head, it's out of balance. If there is too much air in the tail, it's out of balance. There is a finite capacity of how Albertans can function. I think there needs to be balance in the whole social sector, in addition to the economic sector.

INTERVIEWER: What social policies have to be introduced to create this balance that you're talking about?

ROD: I think we have to recognize that Albertans are here. They want to make this their home. They have to have a hope that the economy is not only sustainable but there is some stability. The sharp impact in housing was a real shock to the system. That kind of change is not sustainable and is unpredictable and very difficult for the average Albertan to deal with. It has an impact right across society.

If you did buy into a housing situation and are paying a high mortgage, it limits your capacity to do other things. So in many ways, other sectors will suffer. You are not going to go out for meals in restaurants; you're not going to buy things. It has an impact on the retail sector. I think you have to look at all these sectors together as a comprehensive whole.

By and large I think the most important aspect is the well-being and health of Albertans - from children to seniors. And we have a lot of new families coming in, which means a lot more children coming in and they have their specific needs. At the same time we're an aging population, so we have those specific needs to look at. Due to the worker shortage, we're bringing in a lot of newcomers from other jurisdictions; other countries and we have to look at how that impacts society and how we can bring this all together in a way that makes some sense.

INTERVIEWER: Social workers have advocated for something called a living wage; there should be an assurance in a society like ours that should guarantee a living wage. Can you explain what that is?

ROD: Yes. Well, particularly in Alberta the minimum wage is totally inadequate. The cost of living here has risen so much so quickly that one can't really survive on a minimum wage. A living wage reflects the realities of what's happening in our community. A living wage should enable an individual to earn enough money to afford adequate housing and proper nutrition and carry on and participate in society the best they can. They don't have to have a lot of goods or toys or buy a lot of services and things but they should be able to survive without feeling overly stressed and worried about their future.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of policy do you think the government should introduce to ensure that this living wage becomes a reality for people?

ROD: I think they have to look at the actual cost of living and the situation that real people face in their communities. Some years ago, there was some talk about Market Basket Measure, which meant the market basket looked at housing and the cost of food, etc. and they tried to determine just what a person needed to fill their basket.

The basket wasn't over-abundant. It meant your necessities. Somehow that concept disappeared. Things like that could be revived. At the same time, they could be asking a lot of stakeholders who have a vested interest. That would include students with student loans, seniors, families with children, newcomers and ask them what they are facing in terms of the challenges they are having difficulties with in Alberta today.

There is a growing deficit in our social infrastructure. I think many Albertans recognize that there's been a deficit in our physical infrastructure like roads and bridges, and there's been some attempt to deal with this. At the same time, many of our social programs were cut-back or eliminated some years ago. Enough attention hasn't been paid to those types of programs. There needs to be an initiative to look at those programs and ensure that our social infrastructure is also repaired and reinvigorated so we can deal with all the issues that Albertans face.