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# The Role of Social Welfare Policies and Programs in the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence



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## Author's Note

This policy and legislative review was conducted by the Collaborative Applied Research for Equity in Health Policy and Systems (CARE) Lab under the leadership of Dr. Stephanie Montesanti. The goal of this policy and legislative review is to inform the Alberta's Primary Prevention Framework (APPF) Policy Collaborative by identifying gaps and weaknesses in existing social policies focused on economic/financial supports, including income, employment, and childcare, in the primary prevention of domestic and family violence. The findings also provide a context and entry point for the Government of Alberta and the IMPACT collective to identify policies, strategies, and actions to advance prevention efforts.

## About the Collaborative Applied Research for Equity in Health Policy and Systems (CARE) Research Lab

CARE is an applied health policy and systems research program situated within the University of Alberta's School of Public Health that tackles complex public health priorities and health system challenges. CARE works across four main research areas: 1) healthy Indigenous communities and families; 2) domestic and family violence responses in healthcare settings; 3) upstream change to address mental health inequities; and 4) transforming primary healthcare to redress inequities in health. The CARE team works in collaboration with policy- and decision-makers, practitioners, and communities to support evidence-informed decisions and applied interventions that promote health and health equity.

## Acknowledgements

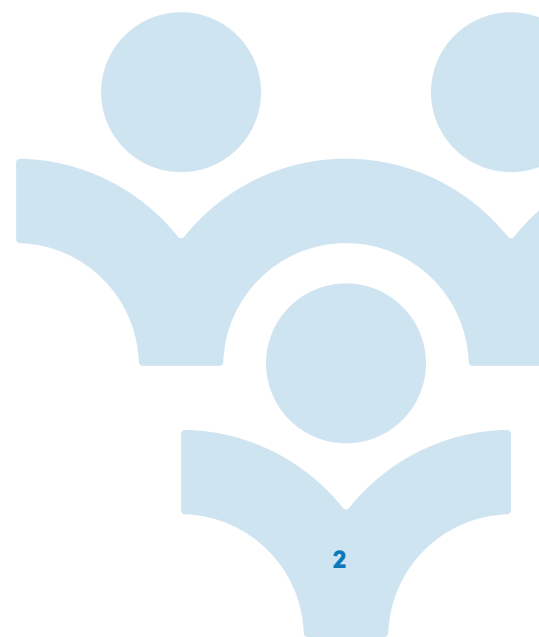
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# 1. Background

A policy and legislative review on federal and Alberta's social policies in the primary prevention of domestic and family violence was conducted by the CARE Research Lab. Specifically, this policy and legislative review examined the role of distributive social welfare policies concerned with bringing about basic social and economic changes that address human needs, including income, childcare, and employment.

Social policy in Canada is defined as public policies that address the social (including the socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-economic) conditions of a country's citizenry.<sup>1</sup> Alberta's Social Policy Framework (2012)<sup>1</sup> defines social policy beyond a narrow definition of social services and supports to stipulate that social policy is "about how we work, live, and spend our time, and it helps determine how we come together to meet human needs like housing, employment, education, recreation, leisure, health, safety, and the care of children."<sup>1</sup>

This report is part of a series of policy and research briefs designed to inform the Alberta Primary Prevention Framework (APPF) Policy Collaborative, whose goal is to support the Government of Alberta and the IMPACT Collective identify policies, strategies, and actions focused on advancing primary prevention efforts to stop domestic and sexual violence before they start. The aim of the APPF is to provide a roadmap for the government and the anti-violence sector on how they can focus their attention, resources, and time on upstream solutions and approaches that target the root causes and drivers of domestic and sexual violence.

Socio-economic factors such as unemployment, low income, and financial stress are positively associated with self-reports of physical intimate partner violence perpetration, among all genders.<sup>2-5</sup> Given the observed relationship between socio-economic conditions and self-reported domestic violence, a key question was addressed in this policy study:

## ***Are social programs that provide direct financial assistance and promote the social welfare of families an entry point for the prevention of domestic and family violence?***

Although domestic and family violence occurs across all socio-economic groups, findings indicate that violence and abuse disproportionately affect equity-deserving groups and Indigenous communities.<sup>6</sup> As part of this series of policy and research briefs, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence has formed collaborations with Indigenous researchers, advocates, and Knowledge Holders to produce a separate report that outlines recommendations for transformational reforms in current systems and institutions for promoting sovereignty, dignity, justice, and equity for Indigenous people.

This report supports the APPF by identifying gaps and weaknesses in existing social welfare policies and programs that aim to prevent the risk of violence from occurring in the first place. A secondary goal of this review was to examine which programs under social welfare policies in Alberta promote financial and social wellbeing of families through a social determinants of health and equity lens.

## **What is meant by Primary Prevention?\***

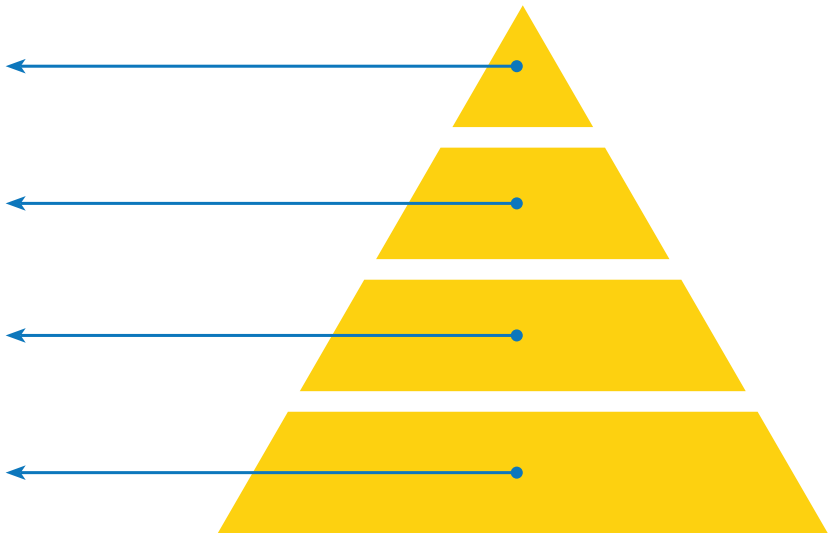
Primary prevention refers to a social change strategy and whole-of-society approach that aims to stop violence before it starts by shifting and addressing the underlying systems, structures, norms, attitudes, practices, and power imbalances that drive gender-based violence.<sup>7,8</sup> "Primary prevention is different from other kinds of interventions that address domestic and sexual violence. Interventions that occur when the risk of violence is already there are often called early interventions or secondary prevention. Doing something about domestic and sexual violence that is currently happening (when people are in crisis) is often called "response" or tertiary prevention. "Rebuilding lives is focused on providing long-term supports that enable people who have been harmed to heal and find safety, housing, health, and wellbeing while supporting those who have harmed them to be accountable, heal, repair, and prevent the transmission of violence across generations."<sup>9</sup>

**Rebuilding Lives**  
Long-term supports

**Crisis Intervention**  
Intervention after violence  
has occurred

**Early Intervention**  
Intervention targeted at  
the early signs of violence

**PRIMARY PREVENTION**  
Preventing violence  
before it occurs.



**Lee, Wells, and Litviniuc explain that primary prevention responses can also occur through three pathways:<sup>10</sup>**

**“Pathway 1**

**Improving our existing practices** to promote healing, accountability, repair, resilience, and skills in families and individuals.

**Pathway 2**

**Changing cultures and structures** to support and reinforce pro-social norms, equity, safety, dignity, justice, and belonging.

**Pathway 3**

**Re-imagining and building worldviews** that promote liberation, peace, belonging, and harmony.”<sup>10</sup>

The three pathways identified pursue distinct goals that are expected to contribute to the ultimate goal of the APPF: a life of safety, equity, dignity, justice, and belonging free from violence for all Albertans, including Indigenous people, women, and other equity-deserving groups.<sup>11</sup>

Below we summarize research literature on the root causes of domestic and family violence in the Canadian context. In reviewing the literature, we also describe theories and models that explain how socio-economic conditions, such as unemployment, impact the risk of violence perpetration.

\* This definition was adapted with permission from various research reports that were written to support the development of the Alberta Primary Prevention Playbook. Please follow this link for the most recent definition <https://preventdomesticviolence.ca/our-work/public-policy/alberta-primary-prevention-playbook/>

## 1.1 The Root Causes of Domestic and Family Violence

The following section was adapted from *Guiding Research for the Design of the Alberta Primary Prevention framework* with permission from Lianne Lee, Lana Wells, and Anya Litviniuc.<sup>10</sup>

The root causes of domestic and family violence are **systems of oppression**, specifically, heteronormative patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

- Heteronormative patriarchy is a social system in which, on average, heterosexual men have most power, privilege, and control in the political, economic, cultural, and social roles.<sup>12</sup> Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and sexual stigma are deeply rooted in traditional gender and sexuality norms, which are presumed to be additional risk factors for domestic violence.<sup>13</sup>
- White supremacy is a political, economic, and cultural system in which white people overwhelmingly control power and material resources based on conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement, which are embodied and reproduced as relations of white dominance across institutions and social settings.<sup>14</sup>
- Colonialism is the practice of maintaining political and economic control over a social group deemed inferior within one's nation or over other nations.<sup>15</sup>
- Capitalism is a form of economic and social organization focused on wealth accumulation and maximization of profit by normalizing inequalities, competition, valuing relationships for their usefulness and material benefit, and exploitation.<sup>12</sup>

These systems of oppression have collectively normalized problematic **worldviews**, which are a collection of attitudes, values, stories, and expectations about the world around us, which inform our thoughts and actions.<sup>16</sup> These worldviews include:<sup>11</sup>

- The normalizations of dominance, control, coercion, aggression, and violence in personal and professional interactions, institutions, systems, and culture.
- Inequality and hierarchy, with dominant groups, such as white upper-class men, at the top, and women, equity-deserving groups, and Indigenous people at the bottom.
- Wealth accumulation and exploitation of the environment and other individuals and groups, particularly, women, equity-deserving groups, and Indigenous people.
- Individualism and social fragmentation.

These worldviews have shaped our **culture**, including social norms, values, and beliefs; our **structures**, including laws, policies, and practices in our systems, institutions, and organizations; and have produced **internalized oppression or privilege and unhealed trauma**. Together, these systems of oppression and problematic worldviews create and reinforce conditions that normalize and drive domestic and family violence.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, these worldviews contribute to a climate of structural violence, which establishes and (re)produces hierarchical relations and systems<sup>17</sup> where interpersonal and intimate partner relationships are established, and at times domestic violence occurs. Structural violence theory conceptualizes the multiple levels (micro to macro), types (direct, indirect), and actors (individual, institutional) involved in producing violence against marginalized and oppressed communities.<sup>18</sup>

The goal of the APPF is to lay out recommendations for primary prevention efforts that will challenge the systems of oppression and problematic worldviews to enable all Albertans to live a life of safety, equity, dignity, justice, and belonging free from violence.<sup>19</sup>

## 1.2 Drivers of Financial Strain and their Connection to Domestic and Family Violence: Poverty, Employment and Workplace Safety, and Childcare

There is a complex set of relationships and interdependencies that underpin the observed association between poverty and domestic and family violence.<sup>20</sup> Financial strain resulting from unemployment or loss of wages may increase stress in relationships, with stress leading to the use of violence.<sup>20</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has increased levels of acute (financial crisis) and enduring (poverty) levels of financial stress for Canadians, with immediate and long-term adverse impacts on physical and mental health. Recent

### Gender equity (UNICEF, 2017, p.3):<sup>16</sup>

*“The process of being fair to men and women, boys and girls, and importantly the equality of outcomes and results.”*

statistics have shown that more than 75% of Canadians reported increased stress since the beginning of the pandemic due to financial strain.<sup>21</sup> Alberta is the top-ranking province in Canada in terms of poverty rate. The 2021 Poverty Snapshot in Calgary indicates that unemployment in Calgary remains higher than before the pandemic, averaging more than 10% for the first nine months of 2021.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the effects of poverty in Alberta, leading to higher rates of unemployment and lower family incomes. Restrictions have caused supportive programming to limit capacity or close, resulting in reduced service delivery and fewer services for low-income families. These effects of poverty disproportionately impact certain communities and individuals, such as Indigenous communities, families living in rural settings, and newcomers and refugee communities. Structural violence has created, and continues to create, conditions that contribute to a higher prevalence and greater depth of poverty among Indigenous and racialized communities in Alberta.<sup>24</sup>



A survey conducted quarterly by MNP Consumer Debt Index found that **one in three Albertans aged 18 years and older said they have no money left at the end of the month to cover their payments**, which is up six points from December 2021.<sup>22</sup>

#### 1.2.1 Gendered Experiences with Financial Strain and Domestic and Family Violence

Poverty may intersect with gender identity to shape violence perpetration or experience. Gender inequalities also drive intimate partner violence. For instance, gendered assumptions about the allocation of household resources and caring responsibilities are central in shaping gender inequalities and women's vulnerability to or risk of intimate partner violence and abuse. These gendered assumptions include:

- Beliefs about shared access to household incomes and resources.
  - Situations of financial dependency which can put women at risk of poverty if they leave.
  - Gendered expectations regarding women's caring responsibilities which limit employment prospects.
  - Gendered expectations that benefits received by women (e.g., childcare) are for the benefit of other family members.
  - Situations where male partners prevent women from working, claiming benefits, or leaving the house.
- It has been well-documented that the design and delivery of social programs can make it difficult for women in abusive relationships to leave, for example, because of lack of affordable childcare (increasing reliance on the partner's family), and partner abuse which limits women's ability to work and other opportunities.<sup>25</sup>

Research studies have shown that the risk for experiencing any partner abuse or violence by a current and/or ex-partner is lower among recent immigrant women in Canada and the United States compared with non-recent immigrant women.<sup>26,27</sup> Factors contributing to this may include postmigration stresses, such as poverty, underemployment, alienation from traditional support systems, perceived discrimination, and acculturative stress which affect power dynamics among couples and thus, increase a women's risk of partner abuse.<sup>28</sup>

#### 1.2.2 Employment and Workplace Safety

Safe well-paid jobs are essential for women and equity-deserving populations to become self-reliant, improve their status, and reduce their vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Some policy recommendations that have already been suggested in the literature include:

- Closing the wage gap for women and other equity-deserving populations.<sup>29,30</sup>
- Helping women and other equity-deserving populations reach decision-making, leadership, and executive positions where they can demonstrate their capacity, achieve self-actualization, and earn the salaries they deserve.<sup>31</sup>
- Providing vocational training, career placements, and counseling for people at risk of unemployment (e.g., people affected by homelessness and people with disabilities).<sup>32</sup> Vocational training involves training for a specific occupation in agriculture, trade, or industry through a combination of theoretical



teaching and practical experience provided by many high schools and by special institutions of collegiate standing (as a college of agriculture, a school of engineering, or a technical institute).<sup>33</sup> In Alberta, employers are responsible for maintaining a work environment free from sexual harassment for all employees. An employer who neglects to follow up on a complaint of sexual harassment may be liable under the *Alberta Human Rights Act*<sup>34</sup> for failing to take prompt and appropriate action.

### 1.2.3 Impact of Childcare on Domestic and Family Violence

The impacts of childcare on domestic and family violence are gendered. It is essential to explore the impacts of childcare on women's experiences of violence, and particularly the ways a lack of access to childcare can create barriers to their safety. Employment challenges are compounded for women who have intersecting identities pertaining to factors like gender, motherhood, marital status, socio-economic status, age, race, and immigrant status. Financial dependence in intimate relationships can create opportunities for an abusive partner to exercise control, creating an increased risk of exposure to violence. A Canadian study reported that half of the women interviewed who were fleeing abuse said that access to childcare would have assisted them in leaving a violent situation sooner.<sup>35</sup> By the time the women in this study entered a transition house or shelter, almost 60% were assessed as being at extreme risk of being killed by their partner.

The economic value of unpaid work in Canada was estimated to be between \$516 and \$860 billion (25 to 37 % of nominal GDP) in 2019.<sup>36</sup> It has been argued that women may be unable to enter the paid work force because they are unable to secure care for their children or, if they can secure employment, they may take part-time/temporary or precarious work to balance work with caregiving or to reduce the cost of childcare. The resulting economic insecurity can lead to enduring forms of financial stress, and can lead to forced financial dependence, which undermines women's equality. The financial dependence that results from the current state of childcare services puts women at an increased risk of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. However, since 2018, several provinces across Canada began implementing public policies directly targeting affordable childcare fees. Childcare fees remain lowest in all Quebec cities at under \$200 a month, followed by Winnipeg and Charlottetown.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Newfoundland and Labrador, Alberta, and British Columbia also implemented policies directly targeting high childcare fees in 2018.<sup>37</sup> In 2022, the Alberta Government negotiated an agreement with the federal government to increase accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare. The Alberta plan includes affordable grants for childcare operators to lower fees for all parents, and expanding childcare subsidy eligibility for families of children 0 to kindergarten age earning up to \$180,000.<sup>38,39</sup>

D'Inverno, Reidy, and Kearns (2018) propose three processes or mechanisms of change (i.e., reduction in financial stress, increase in egalitarian parenting practices, and promotion of child/parent bonding) through which paid parental leave may potentially prevent or decrease intimate partner violence specifically.<sup>40</sup> Their theory of change on how paid parental leave could impact intimate partner violence is illustrated in the figure below.

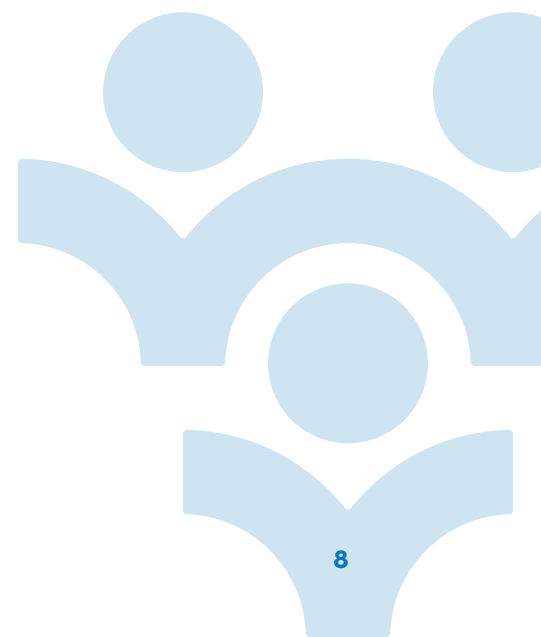
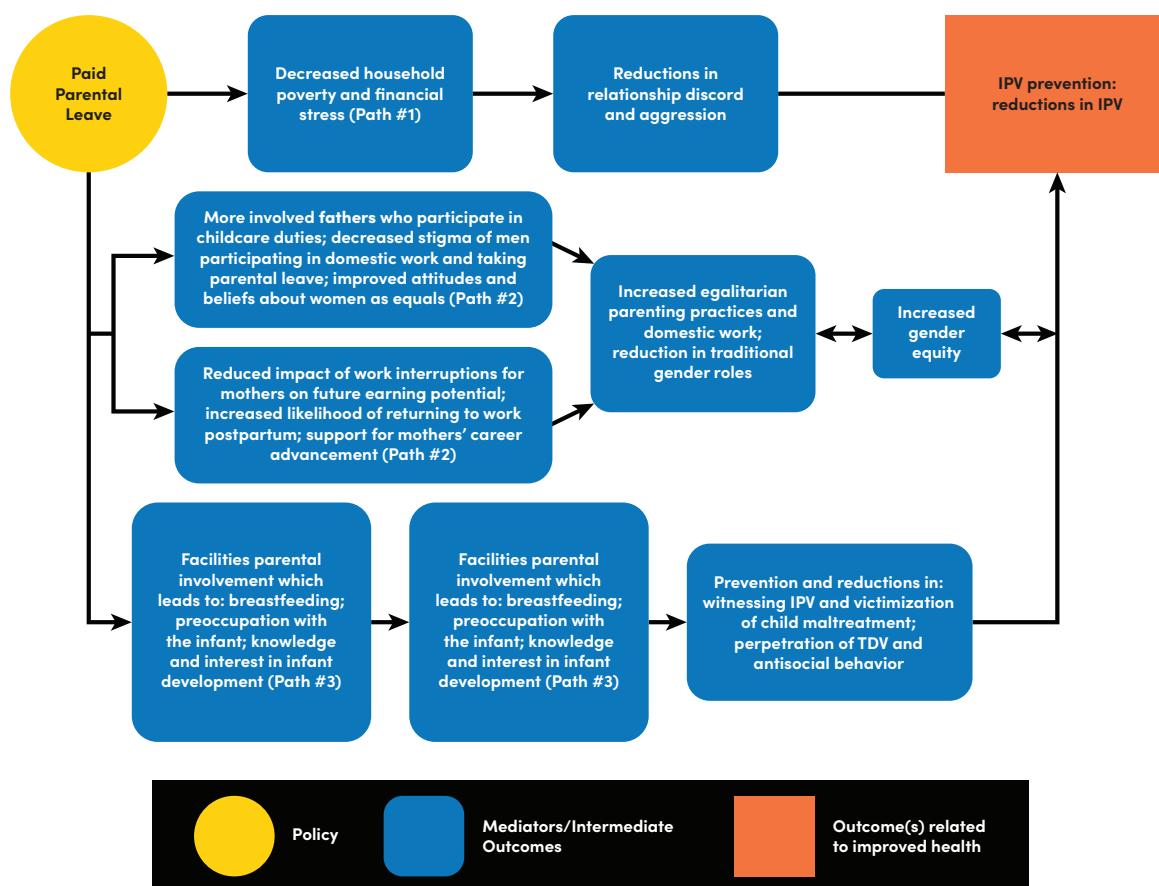




Figure 1: Theory of Change Model on How Paid Parental Leave Could Impact Intimate Partner Violence.<sup>40</sup>

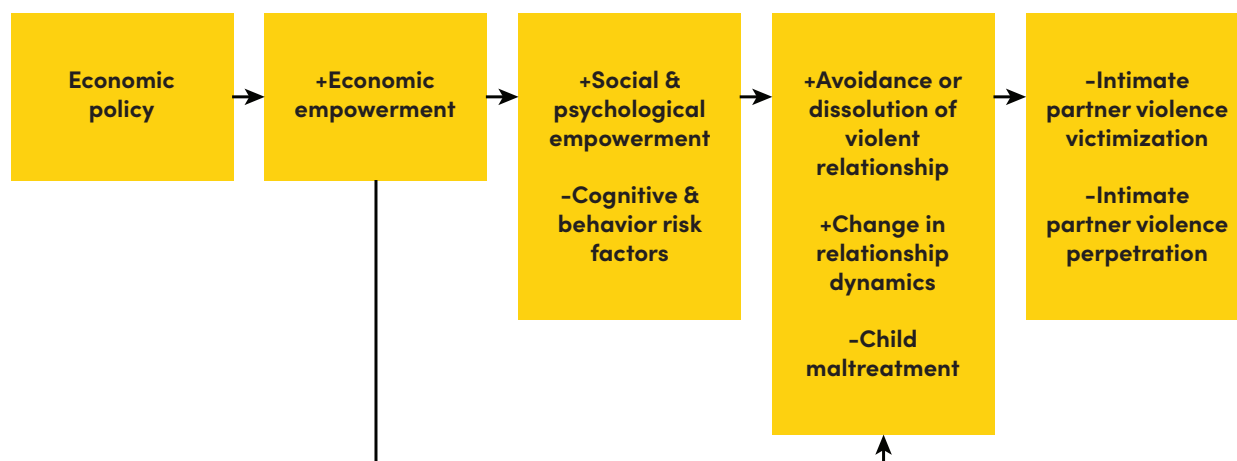


In the theoretical model, Path 2 focuses on increasing the participation of fathers in childcare duties. It suggests that fathers who are more involved in direct physical and emotional care of children hold more gender-equitable attitudes, thereby promoting less traditional gender norms which are risk factors for violence against women and girls.

### 1.3. The Impact of Economic Programs on Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence

Social programs that increase financial security (e.g., employment benefits, loans, savings programs, paid leaves, cash transfers) are already in place, making it valuable to understand whether they have incidental effects on domestic and family violence. These programs aim to improve a person's financial stability and wellbeing and are typically focused on populations of lower economic status who face greater rates of domestic and family violence.<sup>3</sup> Financial wellbeing refers to one's objective (actual) and/or subjective current and future financial situation.<sup>41-43</sup> There are two main types of programs that provide cash payments: programs that replace income (e.g., Employment Insurance (EI) regular and sickness benefits) and programs that supplement income (e.g., childcare benefits). Tankard and Iyengar (2018) explored two theoretical pathways through which social welfare policies and programs focused on financial assistance may reduce intimate partner violence, i.e., financial assistance programs may activate social and psychological empowerment as protective factors and reduce cognitive and behavioural factors that amplify intimate partner violence, such as stress and substance abuse.<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 2: Theoretical Model Linking Social Welfare Policies/Programs Focused on Financial Assistance and Supports to Reduced Intimate Partner Violence Developed by Tankard and Iyengar (2018).<sup>38</sup>**



This model suggests that financial assistance related programs and supports have the potential to reduce domestic and family violence in the context of both primary prevention (preventing violence from starting) and secondary prevention (preventing violence from continuing). While our focus was on social welfare policies that address primary prevention towards violence, it is important to understand the distinction between primary and secondary prevention in the context of economic approaches. Primary prevention is relevant when an individual is not currently experiencing or perpetrating violence or abuse, whether or not the individual is in a relationship. When an individual is not in a relationship, economic programs and supports that aim to reduce financial strain and improve financial wellbeing such as EI benefits or paid leave have the potential to help them avoid a high-risk relationship, as a form of primary prevention.<sup>44</sup> For instance, when an individual is in a relationship, but violence is not present, income support may make the individual more likely to leave the relationship at signs of risk of abuse or may prevent the current dynamics of the relationship from deteriorating. Prevention of domestic and family violence in a future generation is also a form of primary prevention. Secondary prevention is relevant when an individual is currently experiencing or perpetrating violence or abuse. In this case, income support could potentially make an individual more likely to leave an abusive relationship or, together with other supports, help the perpetrator stop the abuse by removing financial stress.

## 2. Search Strategy

A total of 47 sources were identified from a systematic search of Canadian (federal) and Albertan economic policies and legislations. After initial screening for relevance 22 sources were excluded. Our final search process resulted in 26 sources included for full text review and analysis. Publicly available, formal policy documents (e.g., strategies, plans, guides, evaluations, frameworks) written in English or French were included. In addition to policy databases (e.g., Can-Lii in Canada), we performed targeted web searches of government websites, using Google Advanced engines and manual searches. Search terms included domestic violence\* or sexual violence\* or family violence) AND equity AND workplace\* or employment\* or wage\* AND assist\* benefit\* guideline\* initiativ\* legislati\* mandate\* ordinance\* policy policies program\* recommendation\* regulation\* relief\* resource\* standard\* strateg\* support\*.

**Table 1: Search Strategy**

Source	Search terms
Canada	
Can-Lii	“(“domestic violence”* or DV* or equity*) AND (workplace* or employment* or wage*)” (Select legislation only.)
Google Advanced	<b>Federal domains:</b> Canada.ca; <b>Provincial domains:</b> Alberta.ca  “All of these words” search for “workplace* OR employ* OR wage* AND Domestic Violence* OR Sexual Violence* OR equity*” without the quotes. Under “Any of these words” search for “assist* benefit* guideline* initiativ* legislati* mandate* ordinance* policy policies program* recommendation* regulation* relief* resource* standard* strateg* support*” without the quotes.
Manual website search	<a href="https://www.canada.ca/">https://www.canada.ca/</a> <a href="https://www.parl.ca/legisinfo/Home.aspx?ParliamentSession=43-2">https://www.parl.ca/legisinfo/Home.aspx?ParliamentSession=43-2</a> <a href="https://www.canlii.org/en/">https://www.canlii.org/en/</a>

**Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Primary Screening Exclusion Criteria: Title & Abstract
<p><b>Policy:</b> Does the title or abstract indicate relevance to a government policy? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Language:</b> Is the source available in English? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Subject:</b> Does the title or abstract indicate a topic related to addressing the root causes of domestic, family, and/or sexual violence as it relates to economic and financial wellbeing, employment equity, and workplace safety? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Enactment Date:</b> Was the policy enacted or in the past 10 years? If no, exclude.</p>
Secondary Screening Exclusion Criteria: Check Full Text
<p><b>Policy:</b> Does the title or abstract indicate relevance to a formal government policy? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Language:</b> Is the source available in English or French? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Subject:</b> Does the source indicate a topic related to addressing the root causes of domestic, family, and/or sexual violence as it relates to economic and financial wellbeing, employment equity and workplace safety? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Enactment Date:</b> Was the policy enacted or in the past 10 years? If no, exclude.</p> <p><b>Location/Country:</b> Does the title/abstract indicate the policy was enacted by a Canadian federal government or Alberta provincial government? If no, exclude.</p>

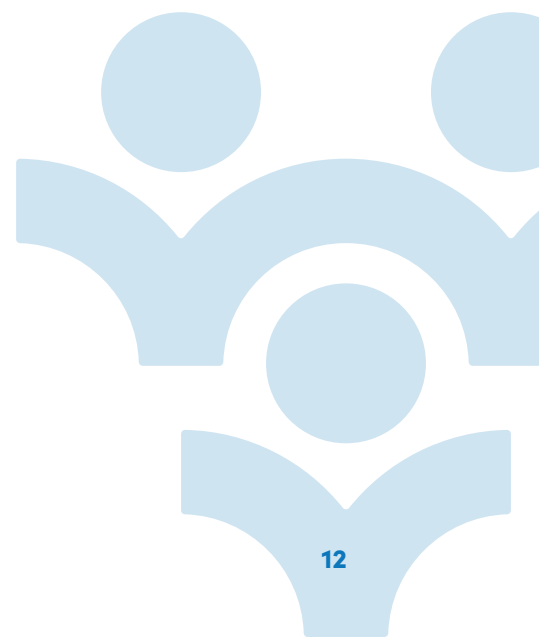
### 3. Results

After primary and secondary screening, descriptive data (e.g., type of data, jurisdiction, target population, outcomes related to primary prevention) and classification of policies according to type of intervention (universal, targeted, or proportionate) were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet as part of data extraction. The social welfare policies and legislations included in the analysis covered both provincial and federal jurisdiction. Ten federal and 15 provincial policy sources were included. Our main interest was to identify how social welfare policies responded to primary prevention by addressing the underlying, or “upstream,” risk and protective factors for domestic and family violence on reducing instances of violence by intervening to promote economic empowerment and independence of women, financial investment in youth education and training, safe, well-paid jobs for women and other equity-deserving groups, counselling for people at risk of unemployment, and linking individuals to back-to-work programs. We also extracted information on stated objectives of the policies and legislations to reduce financial strain and promote financial wellbeing by families.

We observed a gap in federal and provincial social welfare policies specific to preventing sexual violence, other than addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, some federal policies and legislations have limited relevance to the Government of Alberta because they are outside the jurisdiction of Alberta. Of the 25 policy sources included in our analysis,

- 14 policies and legislations sources were focused on **income supports**;
- 5 were focused on **employment supports**;
- 5 were focused on **childcare benefits/support**; and
- 1 pertained to **child protection**.

In the sections that follow, we provide a brief description of the different federal and provincial (Alberta) social welfare policies and legislations (e.g., income support, employment support, and childcare support) and the gaps and weakness of these policies and legislations.



**Table 3: Policy and Legislation Type**

Policy and Legislation Type	Federal Policies	Provincial Policies
Income Supports	Employment Insurance Act <sup>39</sup> Canada Disability Savings Act <sup>40</sup> Canada Student Loans Act <sup>41</sup> Canada Education Savings Act <sup>42</sup> Canada Student Financial Assistance Act <sup>43</sup> Old Age Security Act <sup>44</sup>	Income and Employment Supports Act <sup>45</sup> Employment Standards Code <sup>46</sup> Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) Act <sup>47</sup> Income Support, Training and Health Benefits Regulation <sup>48</sup> Integrated Training Program Regulation <sup>49</sup>
Employment Supports	Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector <sup>53</sup> Employment Equity Act <sup>54</sup> Canadian Human Rights Act <sup>55</sup>	Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act <sup>56</sup> Workers' Compensation Act <sup>57</sup> Occupation Health and Safety Act <sup>58</sup>
Childcare Benefits/Support; Child Safety	Canada Country Background Report – Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care <sup>59</sup> Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework <sup>60</sup>	Early Learning and Child Care Act <sup>61</sup> *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act <sup>62</sup> Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act <sup>63</sup> Family Support for Children with Disabilities Regulation <sup>64</sup>

### 3.1. Description of Income Support Policies and their Connection to Prevention

Income Support policies which support basic needs in Alberta include the ***Income and Employment Supports Act***<sup>51</sup> and ***Learner Policy and Procedures***.<sup>57</sup> These supports allow individuals to reduce stress associated with providing basic needs such as food and housing for themselves and their family while also ensuring that they are able to find employment to secure their basic needs in the future. The Income and Employment Supports Act was amended to introduce a new policy under the Act to provide income support for a full-time learner attending a Government of Alberta approved training program and who meets the financial eligibility criteria. This policy provides long-term employability and financial security through building skills and training.

In Alberta, social programs that provide minimum standards for employment wages and benefits aim to ensure that everyone who is employed in Alberta has an equitable standard of living. These parameters should enable employees to achieve a baseline of financial security in employment, including those on maternity or paternity leave and those with medical conditions. Two legislations in Alberta and one federal provide compensation for those who must work under extenuating conditions due to unforeseen life circumstances, namely the ***Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act***,<sup>53</sup> the ***Canada Disability Savings Act***,

<sup>46</sup> and the **Disability-Related Employment Supports and Services Regulation**.<sup>58</sup> These policies provide services and financial support to those who are unable to work to their full capacity due to physical conditions or disabilities. This support reduces barriers associated with cost of living for individuals with disabilities and their families/guardians, reducing stress and household tension related to financial strain, and improving the quality of services individuals receive. The **Employment Standards Code**<sup>52</sup> is the legislation that governs employment relationships in Alberta. It sets out minimum standards that most employers in the province must adhere to. The Employment Standards Code was amended in 2020-2021 to address COVID-19 leave and vaccination leave and the prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace. This amendment is useful as it ensures individuals are paid and protected from COVID-19, and appropriate policies and procedures to prevent violence and harassment in the workplace are implemented.

Additional policies aimed at income support include those that address training and education necessary for finding employment such as the **Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act**.<sup>62</sup> This includes both financial support for those undertaking training and schooling associated with future employment and training services for those who need skills in order to gain employment. These policies not only enhance employment status of those undertaking training, but also increase self-esteem and confidence, and provide life skills to the individuals participating in the programs, which are preventative factors against violence and abuse later in life. These services also increase social wellness by connecting individuals to others looking for employment and decrease the burden of costs associated with many school and training programs.

Moreover, the category of income support policies includes policies aimed at decreasing financial dependence, specifically for older adults (as in the **Old Age Security Act**<sup>60</sup>) and working adults.

### 3.2. Description of Childcare Policies and their Connection to Prevention

Childcare policies reviewed in Alberta underscored the importance of early childhood development, which support social and emotional wellbeing from a life course perspective and can prevent occurrences of violence both in the present and future. Thus, support for early childhood development promotes positive outcomes for a child.

The childcare policies related to childcare facilities and services, such as the **Early Learning and Child Care Act**,<sup>67</sup> ensure that violence is prevented within childcare facilities themselves, as well as ensuring that a child feels safe enough to disclose information related to their home environment to trained personnel within these facilities. This information can prevent violence or stop further violence through intervention in the case of current exposure. Furthermore, policies regarding childcare facilities ensure that families can work while their child is being cared for, increasing financial security in a household and reducing stress associated with employment or meeting basic needs. These policies are also associated with gender equality, as employment related to childcare is often female dominated, increasing financial security for those working in this field due to increasing job opportunities. However, occupations dominated by women pay less because they require performance of “female-typical” tasks which contribute to the gender wage gap.<sup>71</sup>

Highlighted in the listed childcare policies is financial assistance for children with disabilities and children who are adopted, reducing the financial strain these circumstances may have on adoptive and biological families. Additionally, these policies offer non-financial services such as counselling services to meet the physical and psychological needs of both children and their families. The reduction of stress associated with these aspects of childcare provide greater opportunities for families to gain employment and improved quality of life. In the **Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act**,<sup>69</sup> childcare supports are considered under Child-Focused Services, eligibility for which is based on assessed needs of families as outlined in legislation and policy.



### 3.3. Description of Employment Supports

The employment-related policies reviewed support focus on workplace culture, the promotion of equity within the workplace, and access to employment opportunities. Promotion of an inclusive and equitable workplace culture is present in policies and legislations which aim to increase respect and decrease discrimination in the workplace. These policy and legal decisions take the form of frameworks (e.g., **Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector**<sup>59</sup>) and Acts (e.g., the **Canadian Human Rights Act**<sup>61</sup>) and prevent violence through addressing biases associated with certain social identities such as race, sexual orientation, and religion. These frameworks and Acts also prescribe processes to respond to discriminatory actions within a work environment to prevent violence. The Value and Ethics Code for the Public Sector<sup>59</sup> provides guidance for provinces to follow when creating policies related to employment.

Employment supports also focus on decreasing hiring biases and increasing accessibility to jobs for vulnerable populations, thereby addressing underrepresentation. Increasing their representation reduces violence against vulnerable or equity-deserving populations through reducing stigma surrounding facets of identity and decreasing financial stress related to unemployment for these individuals.

The federal and Alberta employment support policies also address individuals who experience injury or harm at work and provide both financial compensation and support services to the individual and their dependents. These policies reduce the stress associated with not being able to work, including both financial strains and physical limitations. Moreover, the policies provide support for children of those injured, which may promote their subsequent educational pursuits and employment opportunities, leading to financial security.

Harassment and violence are defined as workplace hazards in Alberta's **Occupation Health and Safety Act**.<sup>64</sup> Under the Occupation Health and Safety Code, Section 390-390.3 and 390.4, requirements for violence and harassment prevention plans, policies, and procedures are included.

### 3.4. Description of Child Protection Supports

In Alberta, the Ministry of Human Services oversees the delivery of child intervention services provided by eight regional Child and Family Service Authorities (CFSAs), one of which is a Métis Authority, under the **Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act**.<sup>68</sup> A total of 17 Delegated First Nations Authorities (DFNAs) also provide services under this Act through agreements between the First Nations, the Government of Canada, and the Government of Alberta. Under this Act, a child may be removed from a violent situation if the child is exposed to domestic or family violence. By removing the child from the environment where the violence occurs, this may support the child's development and social wellbeing later in life.

Currently, there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black children in the Canadian child and family services system.<sup>72</sup> The issues that give rise to the overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black children in the child welfare system are complex and multi-faceted. Low income is strongly associated with caregiver and household risk factors for children.

## 4. Gaps and Weakness in the Social Welfare Policies and Legislations (Federal and Provincial)

The policies reviewed generally addressed financial needs associated with the economy, including financial support for children with disabilities, employment insurance, and supplementary income for those with extenuating needs. This type of support can reduce stress associated with financial strain and increase individual capacity to find a more stable source of income through employment. However, the policies have inconsistent eligibility criteria for social services and financial support. Not all policies mention eligibility criteria and most refer primarily to Canadian citizens and permanent residents, creating a *gap in accessibility* for those who do not belong to either of these groups. Policies relating to a specific group or population also have inconsistent definitions, for example the definition of a "child" or "minority."

The primary focus of most social welfare policies in Canada and Alberta which provide financial support or assistance due to extenuating circumstances is related to health or medical emergencies. These include, for instance, policies that target financial support or assistance related to unforeseen medical conditions, disability, or injury. The policies within the category of income support primarily focus



on financial assistance either because of leaves from work, those seeking employment, or unable to work because of a disability. There is a significant gap regarding other types of support available to prevent violence through income-related policies. Also, programs focusing on basic physical or mental needs of individuals are lacking.

The extent to which basic income — a mechanism to increase financial security— attends to structural barriers (e.g., gender inequality, institutional, and systemic discrimination) and increases access to employment and other basic services is unclear. Intersectional groups need access to high-quality public services and any policy approach that “trades off” services for income will have potentially devastating impacts—particularly for already vulnerable groups. An important reason why a basic income is viewed by intersectional groups as a problematic solution to enduring financial crisis is its contextualization of poverty as simply a question of a “lack of income,” which ignores the intersections of identity and systemic factors that contribute to financial insecurity. This underscores the importance of designing, implementing, and evaluating public programs such as income and employment support services with intersectionality in mind.

Alberta has some of the oldest workplace legislations in Canada, some of which have not been updated in decades, such as eligibility criteria for various workplace leaves. Over the years, the workplace, the nature of work, family life, and standards have changed significantly. Changes include a growth in part-time work, shift work, demand for remote work and more flexible schedules for those with children or elderly parents who need care. It is necessary to have policies and programs that reflect the current workplace and workforce.

### Income Supports

The **Canada Disability Savings Act**<sup>46</sup> comprises the Registered Disability Saving Plan (RDSP), the Canada Disability Savings Grant, and the Canada Disability Savings Bond. The Canada Disability Savings Program enables people with severe disabilities and their families to save for the future and provides some long-term financial security for people with disabilities. Under the Canada Disability Savings Program, it is estimated that between 60% and 66% of people who would be eligible to receive the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) on the basis of disability are in low-income and not paying income tax.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, people who do not have sufficient income tax payable often get no benefit from a non-refundable tax credit. Also, the DTC is a physical disability-focused tax credit and does not reflect complex mental health issues. Thus, people with mental health or neurodevelopmental issues would have more difficulties claiming the credit. At present, a person's disability must last for a continuous period of at least 12 months to access the DTC. It does not account for episodic experiences of disability which is especially common for people who experienced an injury from physical or sexual violence.

The **Old Age Security Act**<sup>50</sup> generally does not consider alternate living arrangements for families. Individuals may receive less if they have a partner, and this does not account for individuals who are separated from their partner or do not share financial responsibilities with their partner. This also excludes households where financial abuse is occurring. There are equity issues regarding the amount beneficiaries receive, which is also influenced by how long an individual has lived in Canada. Individuals or families affected by these eligibility criteria include immigrants and refugees who are 65 and older, individuals who recently gained status within Canada, and caregivers who are living with and supporting their family (elderly parents) who may not have status in Canada.

On the other hand, the **Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) Act**<sup>53</sup> offers financial security primarily for people with a permanent physical condition that prevents them from earning a living. The monthly financial benefits received through AISH are low considering the cost of living. The monthly living allowance is \$1685 and monthly child benefit is \$200 for the first child and \$100 for each additional child.

The income support programs administered by the federal and Alberta government are limited in their ability to solve intersectional financial stress or crisis by the extent to which they are *income-focused support*. Although financial strain is a highly gendered and intersectional issue, a focus on intersectionality in basic income support approaches is secondary. In other words, it only emerges based on a connection to key aspects of the problem of financial strain. These include overrepresentation in low-wage and precarious work and constraints on full participation in the workforce related to ability, geography, and biological functions (e.g., reproduction). Moreover, the narrow definition of “family” used in all policies and legislations reviewed under the category of income supports is problematic.

### Employment Supports

Generally, across the employment support policies and legislations reviewed, factors which are considered “identifiers” when addressing diversity and representation in employment are vague and inconsistent. Intersectionality is not taken into account within these policies, specifically regarding barriers to employment for those assuming multiple forms of vulnerability.

In the **Employment Standards Code**,<sup>52</sup> with respects to maternity leave, “duty to accommodate” should be taken into consideration if a pregnancy does interfere with a person’s job duties. There are also gaps in equity related to hiring and employment of men and women.

For the **Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) Act**,<sup>53</sup> a cohabiting partner’s income is considered when adjusting the claim amount. This can create issues for the individual accessing the claim if they are divorced from their partner, or if their partner is not supportive. This could be **amended** to only focus on the individual’s income or reviewed on a case-by-case basis. In the **Canada Education Savings Act**,<sup>48</sup> the number of children within a family is not taken into account when determining savings.

In the **Canadian Human Rights Act**,<sup>61</sup> “victim” refers to Canadian citizens and permanent residents. Often individuals outside these statuses are the most vulnerable in workplace environments. There is also no protection mentioned for the individual filing a complaint, specifically employment protection, which may deter individuals from filing complaints due to fear of losing their job. This legislation primarily focuses on financial support for an individual filing a complaint and does not account for other types of supports including for mental health.

### Childcare Policies

Childcare subsidies are available if a caregiver is employed, actively searching for employment, attending school or employment training, or if they have a medical condition that interferes with the ability to care for a child. Individuals who are rebuilding their lives after leaving a violent relationship are not eligible for subsidy unless they can fit into one of these categories. Subsidies are not available while they seek healthcare, legal services, attend other necessary appointments, or process the trauma they have experienced.

In the federal and Alberta childcare policies, there are inconsistencies in definitions on who is eligible to receive the programs and services enacted by the policies, which creates confusion for families looking to access childcare support.

Law enforcement authorities are the primary actors responsible for children in cases where the family is unable to provide or meet the needs of a child. This is demonstrated specifically in the **Early Learning and Child Care Act**<sup>67</sup> and the **Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act**<sup>68</sup> (classified under child protection legislation). Involving these authorities can be triggering for both children and families who have previously experienced systemic racism and violence within the legal and justice systems in Canada and may cause further emotional or psychological harm to individuals interacting with the legal system.

In the policies and legislations reviewed, cultural aspects related to childcare are generally not addressed or taken into account, and culturally relevant services are not provided for families or children accessing childcare services. Furthermore, social wellbeing is generally not considered in these policies and programs. As such, there is great opportunity for an increase in social networks for both children and families accessing these policies through the services they offer.

Early learning and childcare can be very expensive for many families. The pandemic has shifted the public understanding of how access to childcare supports children, their families, and our economy. As a result, a big shift towards affordable childcare was announced in the 2021 federal budget. By the end of 2022, the Government of Alberta achieved a 50% reduction in average fees for regulated early learning and childcare to make it more affordable for families.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the hours of childcare/daycare facilities do not accommodate families whose jobs involve shift work and may create barriers for women’s employment. Since women often have higher levels of family responsibilities, women involved in shift work may experience greater levels of work-family role conflict.

### Child Protection and Safety

Several gaps are noted in the **Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act**.<sup>68</sup> The services and programs offered under this Act are for parents who are minors. There are terms within this legislation related to the prevention of violence when a child leaves a facility for a short period of time. There is a significant gap regarding cultural considerations in private guardianship of Indigenous children. In other

words, there is no mention of ties to their community or social networks. There is also no clause within the Act for children who may come to Canada under refugee status or have no legal status in the country.

Most aspects of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act reflect tertiary prevention strategies, i.e., removing a child from a violent situation. However, the Act also has the potential to prevent future cycles of violence as a primary prevention strategy through the provision of services for children experiencing violent situations, thereby improving their mental and emotional health.

The gaps mentioned previously may perpetuate violent environments for children accessing the programs. When children access the government facilities outlined in the Act, there is no mention of violence prevention within government support services. Furthermore, the preliminary stages of intervention involve only government officials or police authorities, exposing the decision to remove a child from their family to potential bias which may further harm a family. Given the violent history of law enforcement authorities and marginalized communities, the lack of culturally appropriate services accessed prior to removal of a child may severely harm family ties and decrease the wellbeing of the child. The language within the act is also vague; for example, “severe domestic disharmony” is labelled as a criterion for emotional injury of a child, which can lead to further bias in decisions to remove a child from the violent environment.

## 5. Strategies and Recommendations to Advance Primary Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence through Financial-Related Social Supports

Some of the policies outlined in this report present a response to domestic and family violence and are not necessarily focused on primary prevention. As such, recommendations for the Government of Alberta are organized in terms of primary and secondary prevention responses and informed by the research evidence. We also outline where amendments to Alberta policies and legislations could be made to shift policy attention to primary prevention.

### Strategy #1: Use of different policy analysis lens, frameworks, and principles

Use of a social determinants of health lens or health equity principles support improved understanding of an individual's life and context. The social determinants of health are defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.<sup>74</sup> These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, social norms, social policies and political systems. Examples of the social determinants of health, which can influence health equity include income and social protection, education, job security, food security, housing, early childhood development, social inclusion, and access to safe and quality health services. Intersectionality and related analytical techniques are currently being used across the Government of Alberta by staff and continued improvement in this area is ongoing. A cross-ministry coordination would be required to ensure a partnership approach across both government and civil society organizations. Complementary work was undertaken by the provincial Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) program with the development of the new Accountability Framework<sup>75</sup> which identifies family and sexual violence across the lifespan as a provincial priority.

### Recommendations focused on primary prevention

- Examine financial need through a social determinants of health lens, which allows for consideration of the systemic and structural factors shaping people's abilities to be and feel financially secure. For example, invest more resources in early childhood development services on the period from conception to school entry. It is important that investments in early childhood development are continued throughout developmental years.
- Establish a cross-ministry working group (e.g., Health, Seniors, Community and Social Services, Indigenous Relations, Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women, Justice, Children Services) to explore how the incorporation of health equity principles, intersectionality, and gendered analysis into decision-making processes for financial-related social policy and program design is a critical step in

addressing the systematic and structural barriers that some populations face, particularly those at a greater risk of domestic and family violence. For example, the Government of Alberta could focus on strengthening family-friendly employment policies, promote gender equity in employment, and expand the definition of “family” when determining eligibility for benefits.

- Outline clear and consistent definitions for eligibility of supports, specifically those related to childcare in Alberta childcare policies. Assessing eligibility across programs may have value for cross-program consistency.

### **Strategy #2: Further investment in employment training and workforce development**

Employment training in the province is available to all Albertans. Investment in workforce development or training programs can facilitate the transition to financial independence for individuals whose partners restricted their access to employment and education, which is often necessary to secure paid employment after leaving the relationship.

### **Recommendations focused on primary prevention**

- Examine existing programs for education, employment, and training for newcomers, people with disabilities, career transitions, and learners, and determine and provide more flexible and responsive training models for individuals whose partners restricted their access to employment and education.
- Support girls and women's enrollment in STEM fields which may lead to more distal effects of promoting attitudes and beliefs about women as equals thereby increasing gender equity.

### **Strategy #3: Expand childcare supports**

Policies are in place in Alberta to support individuals with financial needs and the mix of providers in the childcare system allows for choice in terms of appropriateness. All Canadian parents are entitled to 35 weeks of parental leave, plus up to five weeks specifically for the parent who did not give birth to the child(ren) under Employment Insurance (EI). Eligibility criteria under EI are beyond the jurisdiction of the Government of Alberta. In Alberta, employees are eligible for up to 16 consecutive weeks of unpaid leave if they have been employed for 90 days or more with the same employer. Paid parental leave supports new parents by providing paid time off to care for and bond with a new child without interruptions to household income or conflict between work and family responsibilities. This bonding period may be invaluable in fostering positive parenting skills, creating secure attachment, and promoting healthy family relationships and lifestyles<sup>76,77</sup> which are protective factors against domestic and family violence.

### **Recommendations focused on primary prevention**

- Expand paid parental leave policies to strengthen economic supports and reduce financial stress on the family.<sup>20</sup>
- Implement a Government of Alberta-wide assessment and new approach to policy development to extend paid parental leave in Alberta.
- Implement policies for equal pay for equal work, or policies that put value on unpaid childcare at home through basic income which may impact domestic and family violence through similar pathways. These policies have previously been recognized as potential approaches to increasing economic stability and decreasing gender inequality.<sup>40</sup> The Alberta Human Rights Act is clear that differences in pay for the same or similar work must not be based on gender.
- Government of Alberta-wide discussions are needed on inclusive economic value of unpaid work and performance and how to operationalize recognition of unpaid childcare.

### **Recommendations focused on secondary prevention**

- Ensure that all childcare services and supports are affordable, accessible, and appropriate regardless of social identity, particularly for individuals at-risk of domestic and family violence or fleeing an unsafe home or relationship. This will require a Government of Alberta-wide assessment of the provision of affordable, accessible, and appropriate childcare supports.
- Prioritize access to free care without delay for individuals at-risk of domestic and family violence and wanting to leave, who need support to parent, and children awaiting kinship care placements.



- The Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services and Children's Services could conduct third party audits of childcare services provided under government legislation, such as the government facilities involved in the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, to ensure children do not experience violence within the government run institutions.

#### Strategy #4: Focus on child safety to prevent future cycles of violence

The Ministry of Children's Services has been a leading force in child welfare and safety issues. Child protection has the potential to prevent future cycles of violence as a primary prevention strategy, however, it also has the potential to result in an adverse childhood experience. To limit harms to the child, supports need to strengthen communities and families.

#### Recommendations focused on primary prevention

- The Government of Alberta could look into adopting a wellbeing budget approach, similar to what New Zealand has implemented,<sup>78</sup> which would focus on improving outcomes for children, both through a different approach to child protection and through preventive approaches to domestic and family violence.

#### Recommended Amendments within Existing Federal and Alberta Social Welfare Policies

Below, we provide suggestions for amendments to some of the policies and legislations reviewed.

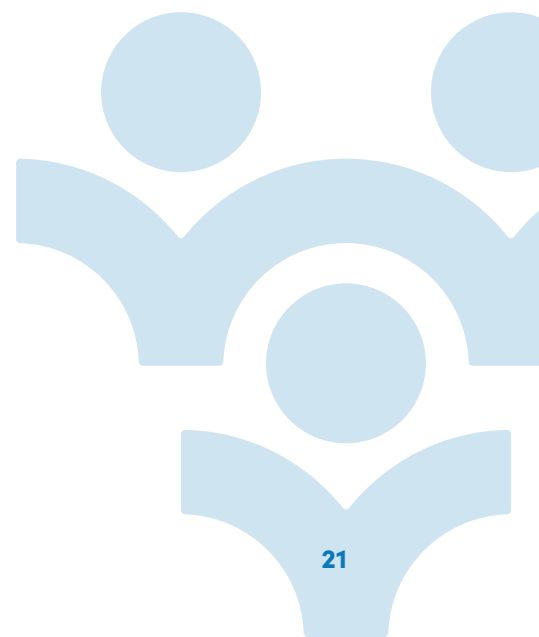
- Amend the **Early Learning and Child Care Act**, **Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act**, and **Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act** in Alberta to include clear and consistent definitions for eligibility of supports within predetermined criteria, specifically those related to childcare.
- Amend the **Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) Act** to consider the income of the individual who is making a claim as opposed to the cohabiting partner's income. Currently, a cohabiting partner's income is considered when adjusting the claim amount and this can create issues for the individual accessing the claim if they are separated from their partner or if their partner is not supportive.
- Amend the **Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) Act** to increase the monthly financial benefits to account for higher cost of living in Alberta and to rising inflation rates. People living with disabilities have a higher poverty rate and lower rate of unemployment than the overall Canadian population.
- Amend the **Canada Education Savings Act** to consider the number of children in a family and the costs related to raising these children. Currently, the number of children within a family is not taken into account when determining savings.
- The **Canada Disability Savings Program** has informed the services and supports outlined in the **Disability-Related Employment Supports and Services Regulation** in Alberta. As previously stated, the eligibility criteria under both policies are limiting in that financial assistance is provided to individuals with a physical disability only. The eligibility criteria should be amended to account for mental health illness.
- Amend the **Employment Standards Code** in Alberta to expand on its definition of "minimum" standards that employers must adhere to. The Code also does not apply to employees within female-dominated occupations, like caregiving and restaurant and food service workers.
- Amend federal and provincial childcare policies to expand the hours of childcare/daycare services that accommodate families whose jobs involve shift work. Licensing and childcare systems should accommodate varying schedules and shift work to reduce barriers for women's employment to prevent violence.

#### Amendments to secondary prevention policies

- Amend the **Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act** to include more diversity of individuals involved in making decisions related to a child's wellbeing. The Act should include participation of social workers, psychologists, cultural and community leaders, social networks, and other necessary individuals involved in the child's mental and emotional health.
- Amend the **Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act** to expand family supports.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings from this policy study highlight several gaps in social policies and programs that provide direct financial assistance and support for families. When examining how these policies address underlying, or “upstream,” risk and protective factors for domestic and family violence, gaps were noted in the definitions for eligibility of supports, specifically those related to childcare in Alberta childcare policies, and the definition of “family” within these policies. Additionally, the social and cultural realities of some families and individuals and their unique circumstances are poorly reflected in social welfare policies. By examining financial need through a social determinants of health lens, policy and decision-makers can better understand the systemic and structural factors shaping people’s social and economic circumstances.



## 7. Appendix

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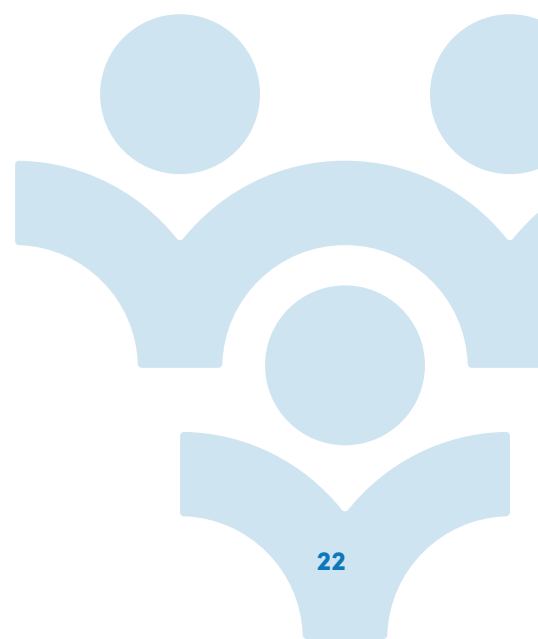
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