

Study Details Canada's 'Perfect Storm' Housing Problem

Eroding incomes and plunging rental stock leave 380,600 households in 'severe' need. By David P. Ball



Once a student hostel, Vancouver's Dunsmuir House is currently a supportive housing project run by BC Housing. Photo by laniwurm in Your BC: The Tyee's Photo Pool.

New research into Canada's housing crisis has yielded some disturbing conclusions, including findings that 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness every year, and three-quarters of that group is forced to stay in shelters at some point.

Researchers released their State of Homelessness in Canada 2013 [report](#) yesterday, billing it as the first comprehensive look at a growing problem on a national scale. The document also concludes that 380,600 Canadian households are in "severe housing need," and that on any given night there are 30,000 homeless across the country.

The crisis is particularly acute for aboriginal people, as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth, the report found.

"This is the first time we've ever delivered a comprehensive attempt to quantify homelessness in the country," said co-author Tim Richter, president & CEO of the [Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness](#), which commissioned the study.

“The worrying thing is, the numbers may actually be a lot higher than we’re estimating... You see eroding incomes for the poorest Canadians, and 10 per cent of households living in poverty. That’s very worrying. Homelessness is a lot bigger than who shows up in the shelters and on the streets.”

How Vancouver stacks up

Stephen Gaetz, director of York University’s [Canadian Homelessness Research Network](#), told Tyee Solutions Society that Vancouver deserves credit for its “interesting and innovative” approaches to the housing crisis, including implementing a [“Housing First” strategy](#), where some chronically homeless are provided with stable housing and support services in a more holistic way.

Vision Vancouver’s promises to end street homelessness by 2015 also earned kudos from the report’s co-author. But with many experiencing hidden homelessness, such as couch-surfing, as well as long-term emergency shelter use, the city still faces many challenges which do not end simply by getting people off the streets, he added.

“It’s been very successful in reducing street homelessness — not the entire problem, but at least it helps people sleeping outdoors,” Gaetz said. “The approach in Vancouver is different than in other places; your housing solutions often involve housing people in single buildings, rather than a scattered approach.

“But Vancouver’s affordability problems are the spanner in the works there.”

According to The Economist magazine, Vancouver is the most unaffordable city in North America and one of the most expensive in the world. But homelessness, compounded by declining incomes, is “plaguing” cities across Canada. Gaetz argued that despite the high numbers reported in this year’s State of Housing research, the number of people impacted by the crisis may be even greater than reported.

“What makes it even scarier is that we were being as cautious as possible,” he said. “It doesn’t help to overstate the problem. We were really looking at the bottom end; it’s likely much higher.

“The building industry has shifted from building apartments to building condos. We’ve seen that across the country,” he said. “The supply of low-cost rental housing has diminished at the same time that incomes have diminished. It’s the perfect storm.”

‘We need better data’

The study is the first report-card style overview of a growing problem in cities across the country, Gaetz said, adding that his organization and co-researchers at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness hope to issue a State of Homelessness every year.

The root causes of homelessness in Canada, such as structural factors and the federal government’s axing of the national housing strategy 20 years ago, are “fairly well” understood, Gaetz said. But few attempts have been made to improve country-wide data, as this report claims.

“For a long time, we’ve relied on bumbling along in an ad hoc way,” he said. “We need good numbers and program evaluations so we can understand their effectiveness. We need a consistent strategy across Canada. The U.S. does it every year, but across Canada there are different counts, different methodologies. We need better data.”

One ongoing problem the report identifies is the increasing reliance on emergency shelters as a solution to homelessness. Those temporary services were never intended as a long-term fix to the problem, Gaetz said. In the end, shelters wind up costing significantly more in services such as health care, mental health and policing.

The York University researcher likened the homelessness crisis to a disaster such as the raging Okanagan forest fires which pushed 45,000 residents from their homes in 2003. But the difference, he said, is that few would tolerate a failure to solve the housing loss after 10 years, yet homelessness persists.

“We’re not denying there will always be crises that push people out of their homes,” he said. “The problem of homelessness is that we keep people mired in that problem year after year.

“Imagine going back to Kelowna today and there still being people living in hockey rinks. You’d think, ‘Wow, we’ve done something wrong!’ That’s how I see homelessness. We’re using the emergency shelter system, which was only designed for emergencies, and it’s become permanent housing for people who are homeless. It’s inhumane.”

A Housing First approach

That’s why one of the report’s key recommendations is to expand the [Housing First approach](#), which has been tested successfully in Vancouver, Gaetz said.

Such a strategy has proven successful, because when an at-risk person “touches the system” — for instance, by accessing an emergency shelter, being released from hospital, or interacting with police — the whole system responds, rather than having that person just move from shelter to shelter, he said.

Housing First’s integrated systems can work in any community, Gaetz argued.

“If you take most chronic, hardcore homeless person with complex issues, and give them housing and the supports they need — there’s an investment there — then their health improves, as well as their engagement with the community. That’s a strategy we know works... but it needs to be scaled up and accompanied by investment in expanding the affordable housing supply.”

Richter agreed that the solution to homelessness will take greater investment from all levels of government, but explained his report’s ultimate recommendation in surprisingly simple terms: “Housing cures homelessness,” he quipped.

“At the end of the day, we’re not going to get anywhere without significant new investment in market rental housing and social housing,” he added. “There is a fairly serious housing crisis in our country. The economics show it doesn’t make financial sense for our country to ignore that problem.”

An ‘Inspiring’ Summer Camp for Aboriginal Scholars

How a special UBC program supports the next generation of physicists, foresters, nurses and more. By Katie Hyslop



Emerging Aboriginal Scholars alumna Shaniece Angus stands with Melania Alvarez, from the Pacific Institute for the Mathematical Sciences, outside Britannia Secondary School. Photo by Katie Hyslop.

When she graduates from Britannia Secondary School this month, Shaniece Angus will be the first Aboriginal person in the school's history to pass calculus. The 18-year-old First Nations student is also the recipient of over \$6,000 in scholarships for her academic success, and has been accepted to both Northwest Indian College in Washington State, and the University of British Columbia (UBC).

Provincially, 57 per cent of Aboriginal students [graduate within six years](#) of Grade 8, compared to 84 per cent of their non-Aboriginal peers. In Vancouver, where Angus goes to school, the six-year graduation rate [hovers](#) around 30 per cent for Aboriginal students compared to 80 per cent for non-Aboriginal students.

Angus credits her success to her decision to voluntarily give up five weeks of almost every summer from Grades 7 to 12 to improve her math and English skills at the [Emerging Aboriginal Scholars summer camp](#) at UBC. It keeps her mind "stuck" on math and English, in a good way.

"It's inspiring meeting all of these Aboriginal students [at camp], willing to go to school throughout the summer for their education," she told The Tyee. "It supports you so much."

Angus started attending the Emerging Aboriginal Scholars camp in 2008 when she was transitioning from Grade 7 to Grade 8. Co-created by the Pacific Institute for the Mathematical Sciences and UBC's First Nations House of Learning, the first Emerging Aboriginal Scholars camp held in 2007 was for Grades 9 to 12.

A five-week summer program, Aboriginal students spend the mornings improving their math and English skills, and in the afternoon have the opportunity to complete paid internships in a variety of UBC faculties.

At first the main goal was to graduate more students with Math 12, Melania Alvarez, B.C. education coordinator for PIMS, explained. Not only has the program led to a higher graduation rate overall, it's piqued student interest in math and other science-based courses, like physics.

The internships inspire students to explore what they want to do after graduation, and to consider how their high school courses will affect their future. With former camp attendees attending UBC, Langara, and Douglas College next year, Debra Martel, associate director of the First Nations House of Learning, said the program has been a success.

The camp isn't about promoting the university, Martel said. It's about sharing opportunities with students, and helping them plan how to get where they want to be.

"I think a lot of times students focus on, 'I want to graduate,'" she said, "but what's the door that's opening just on the other side?"

For kids who want to work hard

The Emerging Aboriginal Scholars camp, which takes place between July 2 and Aug. 2 this summer, splits into two cohorts: a transition camp for kids leaving elementary in Grade 7 to enter high school in Grade 8, and a camp for kids in Grades 9 to 12 that focuses on improving math and English skills by working with tutors and specialists in those fields, as well as getting the kids to make decisions about their future after high school. Starting with just five kids in 2007, Alvarez says this year's camp programs will have a total of 30 kids, though the official limit is 25.

Angus started the program the summer before Grade 8 on the recommendation of a teacher.

"It just really helped me transition and make new friends, and helped me with my math, too." While she never found the subject particularly difficult, she said, "I started liking math because of this program."

Kids in the transition camp receive a weekly "scholarship" for good attendance and completing program requirements. But the older students are only paid if they complete the additional internships: \$100 for seven and a half hours of work every week.

Angus, who took a summer off from the camp between Grades 10 and 11, had her first internship last year, assisting with a Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FASD) study involving rats. It was Alvaraz, who knew she was interested in pursuing nursing after graduation, who suggested that study.

Angus found the internship valuable, particularly because she knows Aboriginal people with alcohol issues, and some with FASD. She said she hopes to do a nursing internship this summer before she leaves for a year at Northwest Indian College to play basketball.

Other students have completed internships with programs and departments as diverse as TRIUMF — the national laboratory for particle and nuclear physics located on the Point Grey campus — forestry, engineering, fisheries, First Nations studies, English, biology, and medicine.

Campers range in skill level, from academically-advanced students who casually read university-level chemistry papers, to students years behind their peers in reading and writing comprehension. But Alvarez believes every camper is capable of improving their skills, if they're up to the challenge.

"We had a student who could barely read and write, who barely knew math," she recalled. "Last year, in five weeks, he was able to catch up at an amazing rate."

“We work with kids who really want to work very hard, who really want to stay here for the five weeks, who really want to take the opportunity.”

Year-round help

While campers have a leg up on peers who spend the summer forgetting much of what they learned in school, PIMS sees the need for mentoring during the school year, too. PIMS offers year-round mentorship programs at several secondary and elementary schools in east Vancouver. Students are also trained to tutor and mentor their peers.

Angus took advantage of that extra help, and credits Alvarez personally with where she is today.

“She just helped me so much to get my foot in the door with UBC,” Angus said, adding she hopes to attend the university next year to start nursing. “Honestly, if it weren’t for Melania, it would be really hard.”

The camp and tutoring are free for students, but it costs money to pull off. Funding comes mainly from the B.C. government, the Vancouver Foundation, UBC’s faculty of science, PIMS and private donors. Alvarez hopes to secure more funds to expand the camp to Simon Fraser University, and to non-Aboriginal students who come from low-income families.

The camp wouldn’t be possible without school faculty and staff that recommend kids for the camp or house the mentorship programs in their schools, Alvarez said.

“It is true the university is doing this, but there are a lot of teachers and principals who take a lot of extra time to make this program possible, and I think that should be acknowledged, too,” she said.

“Really, the only way this is working is because we are all working together.”

About the Series

By Katie Hyslop

The population of aboriginal people in Canada is growing fast, and is on average 13 years younger than the rest of Canadians. With increasing participation in politics, the economy and mainstream Canadian society, the future could be bright for aboriginal people in Canada for the first time since colonization. But it’s also uncertain.

A significant number of Canada’s new jobs require a post-secondary education. But both on and off reserves, aboriginal people are significantly outpaced by their non-aboriginal peers in both high school graduation and post-secondary participation rates. The best people to recognize how to reverse these trends are aboriginal people themselves. The Tyee Solutions Society’s Katie Hyslop conducted interviews with five aboriginal post-secondary graduates about their educational experiences, asking them, “How would you change post-secondary education to make it a more welcoming and viable option for aboriginal people?”

The result is *Call of the Spirit*: a series of profiles of Aboriginal post-secondary graduates, beginning with Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Download a PDF of the series here: [Call of the Spirit](#)

‘Community Land Trust’: Vancouver’s Affordable Housing Fix?

New rental units on city-owned land earn mixed reviews. By Jackie Wong



View of the Fraser River from the southeast Vancouver site of forthcoming affordable rental and co-op housing projects on city-owned land. Photo courtesy: Mike Lewis.

Thinking back to the eight months he spent last year as one of the more radical Vancouver members of the [Mayor’s Task Force on Housing Affordability](#), Mike Lewis is glad to see one recommendation starting to bear fruit.

On May 15, Vancouver city council approved a staff [proposal](#) to build 355 units of rental housing on four city-owned sites, to be operated by four community land trust partners.

Lewis praises the decision as “one way of pushing back” against the “rank individualism” of our times.

Last year, Lewis co-authored [The Resilience Imperative](#). In it he writes about community land trusts around the world. He sees them as one way of reclaiming the commons and bridging what he calls the gap between the “we” and the “I.”

Community land trusts do that by owning property under a non-profit, multi-stakeholder, democratic governance model. They are guided by the idea that community control of land, instead of real-estate market investor control, helps keep down the cost of housing.

Vancouver’s Community Housing Land Trust Foundation is a registered charity created two decades ago by the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC. Under the new agreement, Vancouver will lease four city-owned parcels of land to the Land Trust Foundation. It in turn will sub-lease those sites to four partners to develop affordable rental-housing units.

The partners are Fraserview Housing Co-operative, Tikva Housing Society, Katherine Sanford Housing Society and HFBC Housing Foundation. The Land Trust will oversee housing development and construction. The four partners will operate the housing after it’s been built, with the Land Trust overseeing things and reporting annually to the city on how they are reaching affordability targets.

With construction slated to begin in March 2014, the first residents are expected to move in by November 2015.

“This is common sense,” Lewis says. “That’s what I’m excited about by this social-purpose development partnership. It’s principled, it’s pragmatic, and it’s leveraging assets.”

Two-bedroom suites for under \$950 a month

Of the 355 units of rental housing, 273 will rent at below-market rates. According to initial estimates, based on rates below BC Housing’s [Housing Income Limits \(HIL\) metric](#), that would translate to about \$769 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. A two-bedroom unit would rent for \$945.

The four sites in southeast Vancouver are at 1700 Kingsway, 2910 E. Kent Avenue, 2780 Southeast Marine Drive, and 2800 Southeast Marine Drive.



The four sites are near the Fraser in southeast Vancouver. Image courtesy Mike Lewis.

Revenues from the 82 market-price units will support the non-market units, approximately 48 of which will serve people with mental health concerns.

Tenants will be identified through BC Housing and the four non-profit community land trust partners co-operating in the project, in order to “ensure that the needs of Vancouver residents are met,” according to the City of Vancouver staff report on the project.

Keeping existing housing affordable

Lewis, also the executive director of the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal, is one of many who views the community land trust project as an important, historic step forward in Vancouver’s affordable rental housing odyssey.

New Westminster Mayor Wayne Wright praises the project as “stepping forward where they need to go.” Wright co-chairs the [Canadian Rental Housing Coalition](#) and praises Vancouver for its innovation.

He’s echoing Vancouver’s rental housing policies in his own municipality. During the same week that Vancouver city council approved the four rental housing project sites, New Westminster city council approved a new [Secured Market Rental Housing Policy](#).

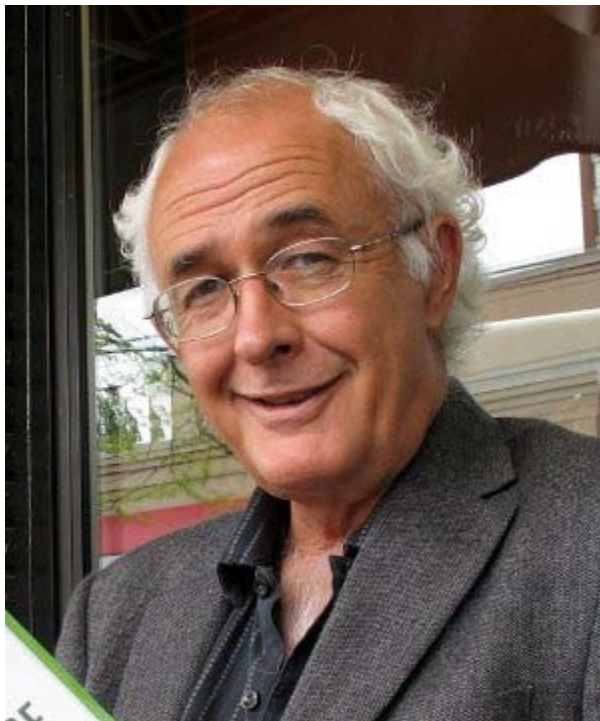
The policy is designed to protect New Westminster’s existing, aging supply of market rental housing. Among other measures, it continues a moratorium on converting rental buildings into strata title (condo) properties, and will explore the use of “density transfer” swaps to preserve existing purpose-built rental stock.

The New West policy primarily deals with rental housing priced at market rates, however. “In order for affordable rental housing to be achieved,” the report notes, “other additional incentives would need to be considered.”

Both Lewis and Wright acknowledged that cities are doing what they can in the absence of either a national housing strategy or extensive provincial funding for housing. To significantly further expand non-market affordability, Wright believes, “We need federal direction.”

He and Lewis echo others involved in affordable housing initiatives who bemoan the lack of federal funding for housing since Ottawa abandoned the field in 1993.

“We don’t have a national housing policy in this country and we should,” Lewis says. “We’re probably one of the few OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries that don’t have one.”



Mike Lewis supports the City of Vancouver's new rental housing project operated by a community land trust. He writes about such trusts in his 2012 book, *The Resilience Imperative*. Photo by Jackie Wong.

Absent guarantees for the neediest

Meanwhile, Vancouver city council has drawn as much criticism as praise for its land trust project from housing advocates who say there's no guarantee of real affordability.

"There are loose, floating 'targets' for below-market rents," said Tim Louis, a former Vancouver city councillor with the Coalition of Progressive Electors. "But just look at the Olympic Village to see what happens when there are no guarantees built-in from the start."

Connor Donegan of the [Vancouver Renters' Union](#) questions whether the non-profit community land trust partners will be able to offer affordable housing without further financial backing from the city. In the initial staff report on the project, the City of Vancouver made it clear that it will not provide any operating subsidies or property tax exemptions.

Donegan points to the city's staff report, which "warns that 'affordability may be delayed' due to 'future market economics.' We need a guarantee that the buildings will be affordable," he says. "City-owned land needs to be leveraged in order to circumvent the market forces that are destroying affordable housing and causing homelessness: this proposal fails to meet that need."

Jean Swanson, a longtime Downtown Eastside housing advocate and co-ordinator of the Carnegie Community Action Project, echoes Donegan's sentiments. "In order to solve the housing crisis, we need government-funded housing. Charities just don't have enough money. And developers won't build enough," she says.

"The good part of this is that it's non-profit. But I don't know how much of this housing is going to be used for people at welfare rates. From our perspective, it would be good if a lot of it were used for people at welfare rates, because they're the ones that have the greatest need."

The City of Vancouver's [Housing and Homelessness Strategy](#) is designed to address the housing needs of people on income assistance. Meanwhile the Mayor's Task Force on Housing Affordability, which paved the way for the community land trust project, is aimed at citizens in a different income bracket.

"The task force, essentially, was focused on a cohort of \$21,000 to \$85,000 household income," Lewis says. "The argument that was made, as I understood it, was that the homelessness strategy and that lower income would not be really the focus here, that we had an affordability problem that was broader than just the acute problem of people at the lowest income levels."

The community land trust project addresses what the City of Vancouver refers to as the 'non-market rental' portion of the housing continuum. Based on the initial estimates that one-bedroom units on the land trust sites would rent for about \$769 a month, those units would be affordable for people making up to \$38,000 a year.

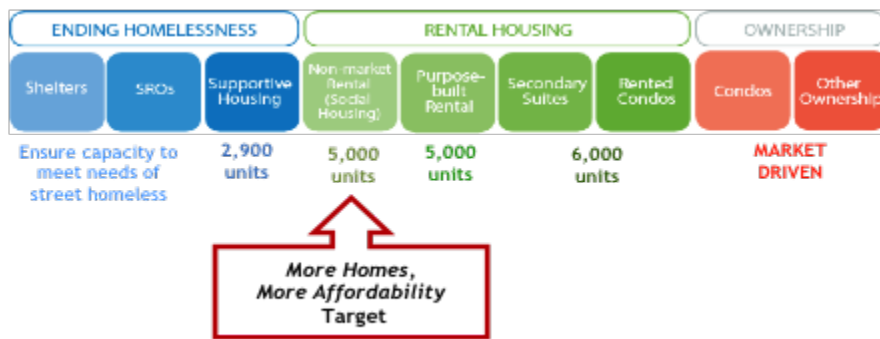


Figure 4: The Housing Continuum

Different housing policies for different levels of need. Source: City of Vancouver staff report to council, “Agreement with the Community Housing Land Trust Foundation to Deliver Affordable Rental Housing on City-Owned Land.”

Ottawa still MIA

People who work in housing at the municipal and provincial levels often speak extensively about how Canada lacks a federal housing policy. In Swanson’s view, the fanfare around the new community land trust project undermines the city’s own goals in lobbying for a national housing plan.

“The city is trumpeting this as a great thing, and by doing that, it undermines its own ability to lobby for a federal, provincial housing program, because it makes it appear that everything is okay and we don’t have a crisis,” she says.

“In 2007, the city had [14 lots](#), and they designated them for social housing. And then they went after the senior governments to get funding for those lots. And they got it,” Swanson recalls.

“I think a strategy like that is needed now, where the city buys land and goes after the senior governments and says, we want you to fund housing on this land. We’re showing that we’re serious. We’ve got this land that’s designated for housing. And we want you to fund it. Because there’s a huge need. We need thousands of units of social housing.”

To former housing affordability task force member Mike Lewis, the solutions lie somewhere between allowing the market to [“fix itself”](#) and relying fully on government forces.

Renters’ rights, however, are under provincial jurisdiction in B.C. During the lead-up to this year’s provincial election, representatives from six Vancouver non-profits compiled a set of 13 recommendations for change in B.C.’s [Residential Tenancy Act](#), in efforts to better balance the rights of tenants and landlords. Its first two recommendations were to toughen rent controls and minimize unnecessary evictions.

“If we divorce social goals from what we think about in terms of economic exchange, which is the essence of ‘let the market decide,’ that’s an inadequate basis for any kind of policy,” Lewis says.

“The market is a social construction. And we have constructed it. This [‘Four Sites’ project] is a way, small way, of pushing back, by saying social relations should be right in the middle of the discourse.”

Gutsy MLAs Requires to Fix ‘Crazy’ Foster Care System, Says Prof

By Pieta Woolley

Will B.C.’s Child and Youth in Care Week, which ends Saturday, June 8, raise enough awareness to break the connection between foster care and youth homelessness?

Stephen Gaetz hopes so — but only if politicians get on board. Government is responsible for much of this mess, he said.

Over the past decade, the York University education professor has interviewed hundreds of homeless youth and young adults. What could possibly lead these teens to the street, he asked, given the hunger, sexual exploitation, the depression and violence associated with living rough?

The answer: foster care. In every study, he said, just over 40 per cent of homeless youth report spending some time in foster care — a provincially run system that cares for kids who can’t live with their families. Many more, he estimates, were affected by the child protection system.

“It’s crazy,” Gaetz said in a phone interview, “just totally crazy what we do. [Foster care is] just totally different from how we treat mainstream young people.”

Part of the reason for the connection between foster care and homelessness, he noted, is that the system ditches most youth at 18 or 19. He’d never expect his own kids, who are university-aged, to make it on their own. Why does Ontario — other jurisdictions in Canada including B.C. — condemn so many vulnerable teens to homelessness?

In his new free ebook, [Youth Homeless in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice](#), Gaetz has collected 26 solutions-oriented articles which together, outline a serious plan for ending youth homelessness, and breaking the connection between foster care and the street.

Three steps to preventing foster care-related youth homelessness, he suggests, are:

- Keep kids in the system until they’re really adults, perhaps to age 25, as Ontario’s Child and Youth Advocate [recommended](#) in January 2013 and in other communications, since at least 2010
- Track outcomes from foster care much better — for example, follow youth for five years after they leave the system — so we know exactly how we’re doing as guardians.
- Galvanize political leadership to create a real plan aimed at ending youth homelessness.

All of these are achievable by one group only, he said: government.

Gaetz is appalled that after so much research, over so many years, there's so little measurable change in outcomes.

“When as a politician there's no gain and it's not a vote-getting thing, it's hard to make it someone's priority,” Gaetz said. “But that's what's gotta happen. Just one province, ending youth homelessness. Then the rest would follow.”

This was B.C.'s third annual Child and Youth in Care Week. It's a partnership of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, Adoptive Families Association, Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents, the BC Federation of Foster Parents Associations and the Public Guardian and Trustee.

This May 14, Ontario celebrated its first Child and Youth in Care Day, though it has yet to be officially proclaimed by the legislative assembly.

In the U.S., May has been National Foster Care Month since 1988, when it was proclaimed by then-president Ronald Reagan.

“I really believe in champions,” Gaetz said, noting the importance of events such as Child and Youth in Care Week. “I don't think homelessness gets taken up enough. In federal elections it never gets discussed. It's never a debate issue. Maybe people's attitudes about kids in care, and negative attitudes about teens, mean they don't care that much.”

Foster Care System Touches One in 20 British Columbians

By Pieta Woolley

All of the four major parties' election platforms are missing a clear strategy to improve B.C.'s foster care system.

Could the reason for the missing outlines be the misunderstanding that the system reaches such a small number of people?

According to this reporter's research, the system directly affects nearly 200,000 British Columbians per year — or about one in 20 of us. Probably many, many more.

Currently, there are just 8,960 children in the care of the province, “the lowest level in more than a decade,” according to B.C. Liberal Party's [materials](#). It represents fewer than one per cent of the province's kids.

But don't let that frequently-used number fool you.

Across the province, about one in 30 kids (or 31,753 of 962,259 B.C. children and youth) has an open file with the [child protection system](#).

The ministry receives another 30,000 protection reports — that is, requests by teachers, neighbours, or family — for investigations each year. That represents another one in 30 kids (there is some overlap).

That's about 61,753 kids. Of the children with open files, there are 34,117 parents recorded by the ministry. For the 30,000 investigation reports, there are two parents per child (at least, at one time), for another 60,000 parents. In addition, there are 3,235 contracts with foster parents — plus an unknown number of spouses, foster siblings, extended family, etcetera. Plus, an unknown number of kinship caregivers.

So a conservative number of people directly affected by the foster care system is 189,105.

This does not count the impressive number of social workers, advocates, nonprofit administrators, front-lines workers, teachers, housing providers, therapists, doctors, addictions specialists, lobby groups, and others involved with the system. Nor does it count the roughly 5,500 young adults between 19 and 24, who are recent graduates of the care system, many of whom are struggling.

This is a big file. Delivering these services is a significant part of what the new government will do. You'd think there would be more chatter.

From the infamous deaths of [Sherry Charlie](#) and the [Schoenborn children](#), to the momentous [Hughes review](#), the hand-over of resources to the [aboriginal care agencies](#), the hiring of the activist-watchdog, B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, her many [damning reports](#) — not to mention the other 500 plus children and youth who have died while receiving services of the ministry (half [not from natural causes](#)), this file asks, “How does B.C. care for its absolutely most vulnerable citizens?”

With Less Support, Family Caregivers Relieve the Foster System

Grandparents and others take in unparented kids, but help can be patchy.
By Pieta Woolley

As a mom, Gracie Pelletier always knew her son was different. Exuberant, defiant, passionate and gorgeous, he arrived at his teenaged years ready for trouble — the kind neither of his sisters attracted. Even so, Pelletier and her husband loved him and parented him through the drugs, the brushes with the law, through sloughing off school. When he impregnated his girlfriend at 19, they stood by him.

But when two years later the police broke down his door to apprehend his daughter amidst charges of abuse and neglect, Pelletier was forced to choose between her relationship with her son and keeping her granddaughter, Jenny, in the family.

A few hours after the incident, sitting in the local office of the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD), Pelletier met with social workers who, she said, had already decided that being removed from her family was Jenny's best hope.

For Pelletier, it was no option at all.

“I knew I needed to save that girl,” Pelletier, a former government worker, told Tyee Solutions Society. “Everyone I know with a foster care experience had been abused. There must be some

good families out there, some success stories. But I was not willing to play roulette with my grandchild's life."

Pelletier spent the next eight hours in the office fighting to keep her granddaughter. One of the Ministry's conditions included enforcing a no-contact order between her son and Jenny. She agreed, knowing even then that raising yet another child would cost her thousands of dollars a year when she was already struggling to pay family medical bills. It would also cost her relationship with her son.

And with that heart-wrenching agreement, Pelletier became one of the grandparents and other relatives parenting 10,000 vulnerable children in B.C.

Many, like Pelletier, do it with little financial support. But given the benefits of family over foster care, some lobbyists suggest it would behoove government — and society — to support all such "kinship-care" givers better. Perhaps even on par with foster parents who essentially do the same work.

Here's why. Vulnerable kids who stay with their extended families experience [less trauma](#), move less frequently, and are more likely to grow up with their siblings than kids in foster care.

That's according to a 2012 [study](#) on Ontario, but its results have been echoed in other recent kinship-care studies throughout North America. In the long term, advocates say those advantages among children and teens cared for by kin are likely to result in less youth homelessness, less addiction, less abuse-related mental illness, and better educations.

The deputy minister in charge of child protection, Stephen Brown, told Tye Solutions Society that kinship care is central to the ministry's upcoming reorganization. In fact, the number of kids routed by MCFD towards staying with relatives instead of in foster care [has doubled](#) since 2007.

Encouraging extended family care shows up as a general aim in the ministry's 2013 service plan as well. But details are limited. And Brown wouldn't say whether all relatives caring for kin will benefit from a new funding formula — or how much they'll be offered.

In other words, we know this works. But is B.C. willing to pay to have family members, most of them grandparents, take up caring for the province's abused and abandoned kids?

Money changes everything

Poor, elderly, single, female: that's generally who takes on the care of a vulnerable kid in their family, according to Carol Ross, the executive director of the Parent Support Services Society of B.C. A social worker with more than 30 years in public and private practice, Ross is also B.C.'s most vocal advocate for the support network Grandparents Raising Grandchildren.

Across Canada, fully one-third of grandparent-headed households with young children have an annual income of less than \$15,000 according to a (dated, but rigorous) McMaster University [study](#). In B.C., seven out of 10 had annual incomes under \$50,000, according to a 2009 study by Ross's Parent Support Services Society of B.C.

In her office near Edmunds Skytrain Station, Ross grew rosy talking about the hard choices kin caregivers face. “One of the worst situations I’ve ever witnessed is watching a grandma decide which of her grandchildren she could afford to take,” Ross recounted. “She couldn’t afford to take all four, so she chose two and sent the other two into foster care.”

But it’s not just grandparents living in poverty who can use the public’s help, Ross pointed out. For some with middle-class incomes, she said, any extra dollars go towards piano lessons and soccer camps. The point for Ross is that government provide the same support to every household caring for a grandchild — or extended-family member — no matter what their household income is.

Until relatively recently, B.C. helped all grandparents (or other relatives) with the cost of looking after un-parented children. Under the Child In the Home of a Relative (CIHR) program, all grandparents, regardless of their income, custody arrangement or a child’s disability status, qualified for payments of between \$257.46 and \$454.32 per month, per grandchild, depending on the age of the child.

Many cracks to fall through

The universal CIHR was axed in 2010 (although the program has been grandfathered out, providing ongoing support to those who qualified before its repeal). In its place is a dizzying array of conditional help for extended families trying to do right by a child.

The Extended Family Program, introduced in 2010 to replace the former CIHR, provides only temporary support; grandparents must not have legal custody of the child; and the child’s parent must agree to the program and the choice of relative — conditions which, Ross points out, exclude many family caregivers who have fought for and secured custody. Qualifying relatives receive payments of up to \$625 per month — more generous than CIHR, but still about one-third less than the \$909.95 that non-family foster caregivers receive.

Then, earlier this year, the Ministry for Children and Family Development introduced Permanent Kinship Care. The good news for caregivers: it pays the same benefits as those paid to foster families, \$803.83 for children and \$909.95 for teens.

The bad news: the program isn’t available to all “kin” providing care. It’s only for families who qualify for and complete six months of support from the temporary Extended Family Program, or those who have a temporary custody agreement after a child has been apprehended by the ministry and is not going to be returned to their parent’s care.

The ministry would not disclose how many children benefit from the Extended Family Program, Permanent Kinship Care or are being grandfathered out of CIHR. According to a communications officer, the ministry feels that an election campaign period is no time to let voters in on information not previously revealed.

For Pelletier, even the basic foster care family payment of \$909.95 per month would be welcome. After gaining custody of Jenny, her family spent about \$5,000 on counselling, out of pocket, to heal the trauma of the violence and apprehension.

For relatives like Pelletier who don't fit those criteria, government seems to offer a veritable buffet of other funding programs, but few caregivers can assemble a full meal from every steam tray.

For example, all extended families in Canada qualify for the Universal Child Care Benefit, which in B.C. pays \$100 per month per child, but only until the child turns six. The [Canada Child Tax Benefit](#) pays an additional \$290.41 a month for families with household incomes under \$24,183. The B.C. ['Family Bonus'](#) pays up to \$181.41 per month for low-income families — and lesser amounts for modest-earning households.

In qualifying circumstances, the federal [Child Disability Benefit](#) offers a maximum of \$218.83 per month for households earning under \$43,561 and caring for a disabled child. At \$80,000, families get \$158.10 and families that earn above \$180,000 do not qualify.

Put simply, under the most extreme circumstance — if a family is very low-income (but not on income assistance), and has a disabled child who is under six years old — the provincial and federal governments will deliver up to \$790.65 per month. If none of those circumstances apply, or the family isn't able to negotiate the maze of applications, child-rearing grandparents like Pelletier get nothing.

Ross' group, [Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#), would like to see this federal-provincial basket of fragmented and highly conditional programs replaced by a restored system of payments to care-giving relatives that is simple, universal and sufficient.

Meanwhile, elsewhere

While B.C. juggles who is entitled to what kind of support, another Commonwealth country, with fewer resources, is moving towards including all grandparents.

On April 13, the Gauteng High Court in Johannesburg — equivalent to a provincial supreme court in Canada — ruled that South Africa's government should extend full foster care payments to all grandparents caring for their grandchildren and also that every grandparent caring for orphaned or neglected relatives should qualify for state support, regardless of their income.

By Canadian standards the benefits at stake are not a lot of money — about \$91 per child, per month. But the universal payment recognizes the contribution of care-giving grandparents.

“I welcome the Court's ruling because it is consistent with the Children's Act, which does not set out a means test to be applied nor does it provide for an investigation of the earnings of foster parents,” South Africa's Minister of Social Development, Bathabile Dlamini, said in welcoming the ruling. “In fact, the Children's Act provides only that a court determine whether a child is in need of care and protection, and... may make an order placing a child in foster care. The Social Assistance Act categorically states that a foster parent qualifies for a foster care grant regardless of his/her income.”

Because Pelletier's husband earns just enough to put the couple outside the “low-income” category, and Jenny is neither disabled nor under six, the family doesn't qualify for the Extended Family Program (she hadn't heard of the Permanent Kinship Care program — and doesn't think she'd qualify for it anyway). Indeed, she receives no money from government.



South Africa's Social Development Minister Bathabile Dlamini welcomed a court order extending benefits to all caregiving grandparents.

Kids are costly

So how much does looking after Jenny cost her?

Pelletier doesn't keep track. But in 2011, financial journalist Camilla Cornell also [attempted](#) to figure out how much raising a child in Canada costs for MoneySense: 'Canada's Personal Finance Web site.'

To do it, she interviewed several Canadian money experts and pulled numbers from Statistics Canada spending reports. Her calculation includes basic food, clothing, transportation, and housing, but not extras such as "birthday parties, presents, family vacations and parent-child bonding sessions over outrageously priced pseudo-coffee drinks." It's striking, if easily challenged, estimate put the no-frills cost of raising a child at about \$1068.68 a month.

As a comparison, the provincial government spends an average of [\\$2,828.75](#) per month to keep a child in a foster or group home, when administration expense is added to the direct cash benefit.

Put another way, Pelletier's willingness to spend what must be many hundreds of dollars a month out of her own family's modest income to keep Jenny out of institutional foster care, saves taxpayers nearly \$36,000 a year, while likely giving Jenny a better life than if she'd been handed over to the system.

However, leveling out the playing field for kin caregivers wouldn't be cheap.

If all 10,000 kids in the care of their relatives in B.C. qualified for the \$625 CIHR payments, it would cost the province \$75 million per year in additional benefits alone and far more to administer. Parity with foster parents at a little over \$900 a month — once the cost of administering the benefit was included — would cost taxpayers \$2.8 billion extra per year.

From another perspective, of course, that's the value of the services that British Columbia society is receiving, in the care that grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended relatives provide to parentless kids — for free or very little.

Heart work

But family care isn't all about the money. Its magic, according to MÃ©tis social worker Jeannine Carrier-Laboucane, is really about heart, family, roots, and identity.

As a child adoptee, she felt lonely and inauthentic: "Meeting my birth family and recognizing my connection to the MÃ©tis Community gave me a sense of belonging for the first time in my life," she wrote in [Native Social Work Journal](#).

Kinship care, she argues, "provides children with a sense of who they are and their important place in family and community." This is heart work, not a job.

Ultimately, that's why Pelletier keeps Jenny with her — even at a cost of untold thousands of dollars. As much as money would be nice, she says, she would care for her granddaughter even if it drove her to bankruptcy.

"We've got a happy girl," said Pelletier. "She's developing a good relationship with her mom, she's doing well at school, she knows who she is and who she belongs to.

"I don't believe we're that special. With the right supports, more families can make this decision."

The Foster Care Discussion BC Politicians Ignore

It's far from a central talking point this election, say three insiders who offer their views. By Pieta Woolley



What can B.C.'s next leaders do to help our most vulnerable?

So far in this election campaign, politicians from across the spectrum have failed to make foster care and child protection — two major government services — a central talking point. Many of the up to 100,000 British Columbians involved in the system have not made the same mistake. See this [report](#) on what's at stake.

The Tye Solutions Society contacted three insiders to chew over what those who want to run the province and the \$270-million child protection system should be talking about.

They are: Nova Kaine, a young mom who has insider knowledge of the foster care system; Kate Hodgson, the executive director of the Downtown Eastside's Network of Inner City Support Services; and Scott Clark, former president of the United Native Nations B.C.

Tyee: Nova Kaine, as a young mom, and as a former foster kid, you have a front-seat view of the system. How helpful has the system been to your own parenting?

Nova Kaine: I have found [social workers] to be helpful and unhelpful. They were extremely helpful, though slightly intrusive at first, but also taught me and helped me get a solid support network for my family. I have heard of much worse. . . horror stories. When the ministry comes in there's no option there, whether you need help or not. If you reach out for help with no open or previous file, you are screwed.

Tyee: Kate Hodgson, before you were the executive director of Vancouver's Network of Inner City Support Services, you were a frontline worker here, and a street outreach worker in Winnipeg. What do you see on Vancouver's streets that reveals the state of the system we have?

Kate Hodgson: I see a lot of children and youth that are not included in their communities, especially in Vancouver's inner city where poverty and race collide to create a climate where young people and their families are not included in "civic life"—our community centres, schools and other institutions. These are the youth that are on the street, are seen as "problems," are attending school seldom or not at all, and are victims of violence and exploitation. I also see second and third generations of children in the care system, which speaks to the fact that we are not intervening at the root and addressing issues in a way that can make a real difference — in ways that support children and youth in the context of their families, their communities and with a view to healthy transitions to young adulthood.

Tyee: Scott Clark, since leaving your post as president of B.C.'s United Native Nations Society (which represents off-reserve aboriginal people), you've become a critic of handing aboriginal agencies power over child protection. This is widely considered to be a Liberal success story; the numbers of aboriginal kids cared for by aboriginal agencies has tripled over their watch. What's the problem?

Scott Clark: We supported transferring services to off-reserve Aboriginal agencies throughout B.C. and negotiated an agreement. Since then we have seen limited success. Some have argued issues have gotten worse. Since there is no strategy in place, many agencies treat our citizens as deficit clients and continue to work in silos and segregation. We seek a strategy of empowerment and peer support in the design, delivery, evaluation and modification of a strategy. Making issues more difficult is the lack of cooperation within aboriginal agencies and between non-aboriginal and aboriginal community representatives.

Tyee: The B.C. Liberal government made some pretty significant changes to the foster care system since taking office in 2001. Yet child protection hasn't been a talking point so far in this election. Why do you think that is?

Nova Kaine: I think it's because they either don't know how bad it is, or they don't know how to fix it — or care to.

Kate Hodgson: I think child protection has not been addressed in this election because of how completely broken this system really is. The state has been a parent that has been particularly neglectful of the children in its care — the type of parent that they would remove children from. The child protection piece is part of a larger, complex issue where there are no easy wins and no silver bullets — not easily digestible in a soundbite or in "program" funding announcement. The

government that we have after May 14 will have to address not only the complete failure of the existing system, as shown in report after report by the Representative for Children and Youth, it will have to protect vulnerable children by implementing changes across many ministries and systems, with support of communities and residents. This will take a shift in thinking and some serious changes to our existing funding streams.

Tyee: How much faith do you have that any government can repair the challenges underlying foster care? In other words, are the system's poor outcomes the fault of the system or something else?

Nova Kaine: I strongly believe that the system's poor outcomes are the fault of the system's poor strategies. There's so much that has been messed up, for decades. . . half a century. I believe they should be trying to educate and help the families instead of the "take the kids, ask questions later" method. It's disgusting how many families I've seen torn apart over easily solvable problems, yet other kids are being looked over.

Kate Hodgson: While there are larger forces at play — economically, primarily — things have not always been this way. We have created systems that are not accountable to communities or to young people. The systems are not focused on creating healthy, engaged youth who will as adults will be leaders and role models. The system is in "reactive" mode, and that is something that can be changed. However, the current system is focused on "silos" and does not see how not investing in a plan that really works with a child to ensure they have supports to finish school and access to proper health services now means that we will be paying much more down the line in our jails, mental system and emergency room costs. Complex problems require comprehensive solutions, but these are well within our grasp and have other living examples from other places to prove this. We need champions to take this on!

Scott Clark: The ongoing violence to our youth in the inner city is but a prime example of how MCFD [the Ministry of Children and Family Development] and its client agencies are continuing to fail our vulnerable children and families. I note the Sept. 21, 2012 suicide pact involving 30 children, all aboriginal and mostly between the ages of 12 to 15. Since this suicide pact was stopped, we have seen and heard of many other incidents in the area of the ongoing violence, be it older men preying on these kids, gangs in the area, police attacks and so forth. Over 80 First Nations bands refuse to support the existing relationship of MCFD and are seeking alternate ways to work with their children and families.

Tyee: If you were going to propose one single, simple solution to breaking the link between foster care and youth homelessness that is achievable by the provincial government, what would it be?

Nova Kaine: Listen to the kids! There is a huge issue about foster families versus families fostering their own relatives. The foster families get more than a family fostering a family member. I find that slightly off. Shouldn't it be the same, being that both styles of home placement is taking care of the same youth? Keep the families the priority! Also I believe that training and education are essential for staying off the street. Life skills, work skills, trade and employment, and most of all people skills. I would like to see more funding to get families working together, and also more in-depth parenting classes for first-timer parents and those that just need the help.

Kate Hodgson: Change the current funding models that only tackle symptoms and move to a “place-based” model that has taken root in Australia, in Harlem and other jurisdictions. The place-based model involves communities in creating solutions and recognizes that one size does not fit all — that what will ensure children are supported and successful in a northern, rural community will be different in a large urban centre. It can tackle issues of poverty that really underlie our failures for children and youth in care. It can focus on prevention — early childhood education, early assessments of special needs, support for young parents — and in bringing together multiple systems like health, education, housing and foster care systems in each place can have some effective and cost efficient solutions that do not ignore the environment children are growing up in and how complex the issues they face are.

Scott Clark: [Along with supporting the place-based model], it would be great to see the provincial and federal governments enhance revenue-sharing with cities so they can use the resources to leverage others to fund a strategy, as opposed to funding programs and projects in isolation of a comprehensive strategy. The system’s poor record is a direct result of the ongoing dysfunctional, segregated, competitive model. Resources need to target the families — not build a parallel [aboriginal] system in the city. Each agency must develop an urban aboriginal strategy within the agency.

Pieta Woolley reports on solutions to breaking the link between foster care and youth homelessness for The Tyee Solutions Society. This article was produced by Tyee Solutions Society in collaboration with Tides Canada Initiatives (TCI), with funding from the Vancouver Foundation. TCI and the Vancouver Foundation neither influence nor endorse the particular content of TSS’ reporting. Other publications wishing to publish this story or other Tyee Solutions Society-produced articles, please see [this page](#) for contacts and information.

Lessons for BC in Florida’s foster care vote?

By Pieta Woolley

On May 1, the beginning of the U.S.’s [National Foster Care Month](#), the House of Representatives in Florida extended care to its most vulnerable young adults.

Reps voted 119-1 to extend Florida’s foster care from age 18 to age 21.

In B.C., foster teens lose their housing and funding at 19.

After the vote, Rep. Nancy Detert, the Florida politician who pushed for this change for a decade, told the Miami Herald, “On your 18th birthday you will have a safety net. You can choose to say ‘I don’t feel comfortable being put out of the street. I would prefer to stay in foster care.’”

Florida isn’t alone. Washington, New York, Nebraska, and last month Hawaii all voted to extend foster care to 21. The reason is most American foster teens get kicked out of the system at 18 years old. Many are left without the skills to survive as adults, so often they hit the streets, go to prison, and apply for welfare.

The movement was started by the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*, one of the last pieces of legislation signed by George W. Bush in 2008. It recognized that most kids are not ready to support themselves at 18.

The solution seems common sense, though its impact on education and homelessness has yet to be measured. Nearly half of all young adults live with their parents for at least part of their 20s. As some advocates say, 25 is the new 19.

If B.C. were to institute the same solution, it wouldn't be cheap. Paying for a teen to stay at home for that extra two years — from 19 to 21 — would cost \$21,838 in direct payments to foster families alone, at 2013 rates.

But given that one homeless person costs taxpayers as much as \$135,000 a year in public services like policing, health care, emergency services and jails (or nearly \$8 million if he or she stays homeless from age 19 to 80), that up-front investment in a kid is a bargain.

Leaders silent on BC's foster care mess

By Pieta Woolley

During last night's debate, no party leader made a peep about fixing foster care or child protection in B.C. But they did awkwardly talk around it.

Here's the context: This province is home to nearly 10,000 youth, aged 16 to 24, who are either finishing or have recently finished their time in the care of the province. We are their collective parents, and whoever becomes premier is elected Mom or Dad.

Since 2007, B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth has been pumping out reports, slamming the province for failing to protect kids, failing administratively, failing to effectively intervene in domestic violence, and failing to fix other problems.

The result is, more than half of kids in care will arrive at 19 without a high school diploma, nearly half will have been caught for a crime, and half will go on income assistance within a few months of their birthday.

(In the U.S., just three per cent of former foster kids earn a postsecondary diploma; B.C. doesn't keep records.)

In addition, many have brain injuries such as fetal alcohol syndrome, and mental illnesses such as depression, and many live with trauma, which reduces their brain function.

In other words, this is a group that's been set up to fail in the so-called "knowledge economy."

Here's what leaders did talk about during the debate: jobs and training, and child poverty.

Adrian Dix accused Clark of cutting skills training, and creating a jobs plan that has resulted in 34,800 fewer private sector jobs.

Clark volleyed back that the Liberals are investing in jobs training, that the province has gained 33,000 jobs, and that the NDP will invest in training but the jobs will leave for Alberta.

Dix noted that young people need jobs training "for the jobs of the future." He promised the NDP will increase apprenticeship completion rates.

Clark said there's 100,000 jobs associated with liquefied natural gas (LNG), and that kids need the training to be ready for those jobs.

Dix brought up B.C.'s continuing record as the top province in Canada for child poverty.

Clark answered that child poverty is at its lowest level in decades, though more work needs to be done. And developing industry will reduce "parent poverty," which is the root of child poverty.

The good news: political leadership can fix it, says a guy who should know.

A few hours before the debate, I interviewed former premier Michael Harcourt. Back when he was a young adult, in the 1960s, he said, well-paying jobs were plenty for those without postsecondary, or even high school.

Now, though, new technology — even in the resources sector — means vulnerable youth who are not prepared for postsecondary are "sunk," he said.

"It's bad news for kids with learning disabilities or those who have traditionally not done well: immigrants who are struggling with language, aboriginal kids, young people with disabilities. This economy can be harsh for certain parts of the community."

Whichever party forms the next government, Harcourt noted that political leadership is sorely needed.

"We have these real challenges: foster care, the prison and mental health institutions and services for vulnerable women with kids. These systems are broken and need fixing. Kids on the street, we know they're dealing with mental illness, abuse, drugs, and also bipolar disorder, depression, and brain damage. . . we have a human tragedy.

"Foster kids we're not serving well, yet. I think we can. The wheels are starting to grind slowly."

On jobs, he said:

"We need to make this the number one issue in B.C. – matching kids in BC to the jobs that are going to be unfilled. There's tremendous potential there. Government, business, education, families, foster care and other institutions – we need to up our game, everyone, that we can satisfy this challenge.

"All these B.C. kids that are wandering and directionless — that's the biggest issue of today.

"We need to focus on it with the same intensity as in 1990s when we ended the war in the woods. We threw the whole weight of the provincial government into fixing it. There were huge initiatives, a new forest practices code, we changed the approach with First Nations, we spent \$2 billion on forest renewal, and we put a lot of energy. When was the last time you heard of a dispute in the forests? We were able to fix that, and we can fix this.

"The reality is, we need them [all youth] and they need us."