

Welfare income rose in 2009 but still too low: report ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The National Council on Welfare issued a good-news, bad-news annual report on Monday, finding that welfare incomes were up across most of Canada last year - but remained woefully inadequate.

"For increasing numbers of women, men and their children impacted by the recession, 2009 was a year in which they discovered the state of welfare the hard way," John Rook, chairman of the arms-length government advisory body, wrote in the introduction.

"They may never have imagined needing welfare until they exhausted unemployment benefits or failed to qualify."

The 118-page study found that most welfare rates in 2009 increased more than the modest 0.3 per cent rate of inflation compared with 2008, some by as much as five per cent.

Welfare income ranged from a low of about \$3,800 for a single person in New Brunswick to a high of \$24,000 for a couple with two children in P.E.I.

Ontario had the highest rate for a single person with a disability, \$12,900, while Newfoundland and Labrador led the country for a single parent with a two-year-old, at \$19,300.

The council report stated that regardless of what measure is used, welfare remains far below "most socially accepted measures of adequacy."

In only three provinces - Quebec, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador - were single parents on welfare able to reach or get close to the poverty line.

The report compared welfare incomes across the provinces and territories for four distinct family types: a single employable person; a disabled single person; a lone parent with a two-year-old; and a couple with children aged 10 and 15.

"The worst off have always been single people considered employable and the situation did not change in 2009," the report said.

While there was some year-over-year improvement in welfare incomes from 2008 to 2009, the study found that over the last 20 years there have been some major declines.

The council also took aim at asset exemption levels for welfare recipients, which vary from province to province and have also been undermined by inflation.

"It has become harder to qualify for welfare over time," said the report

"Even though the cost of living has increased substantially, the liquid asset exemption levels have not kept pace, and in some cases have decreased."

The council also found there's just not enough information yet to say whether the Working Income Tax Benefit, introduced by the Conservative government in 2007 to help people escape the welfare trap, is living up to its goal.

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