

Poverty and Social Assistance in Manitoba Post Canada Assistance Plan

By
Shauna MacKinnon

In the 1990s, following the policy trend in the U.S., Governments in Canada embraced the idea of ‘welfare reform’. This new approach would emphasize incentives (most often sticks rather than carrots) to move people into the labour market.

A Conservative government in Manitoba followed suit in the early 1990s and was given greater flexibility to do so when the Canada Assistance Plan was replaced with the Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1996 (See highlight of changes in table 1). In 1999 a NDP government was elected and continues to be the governing party. While small incremental changes have been introduced, the essence of welfare reform remains with a central objective to move people into the labour market as quickly as possible (MacKinnon, 2015).

Manitoba poverty policy - Changes post CAP

1993-1994	“Welfare Reform” - Elimination of several supplements, exemptions and services. Emphasis on employment begins. Established Welfare Fraud Line
1996-1997	Elimination of CAP replaced with CHST; Manitoba “Social Assistance Act” renamed “Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) Act. Focus on short-term training toward employment. Long term PSE supports scaled back.
2000	Reversed clawback NCB supplement, Eliminated Welfare Fraud Line
2000-2010	Minimal attention to social assistance – focus on employment and ‘employability’
2009	<i>All Aboard Strategy</i> , minor increases to shelter benefits
2010	Ombudsman report - 68 recommendations for ‘administrative improvement’ and a ‘rate review’
2010	Implementation of timelines and targets to increase social housing
2011	Poverty Reduction Strategy Act
2013	Rent Assist – move toward increasing rental allowance to 75% of median market rents
2015	Expansion of Rent Assist

Since the elimination of CAP Manitoba has continued on the path of ‘work-first’ welfare policy. More recently there have been small incremental changes to social assistance arguably resulting from the policy advocacy efforts of grassroots antipoverty organizing including Make Poverty History Manitoba and the Right to Housing Coalition.

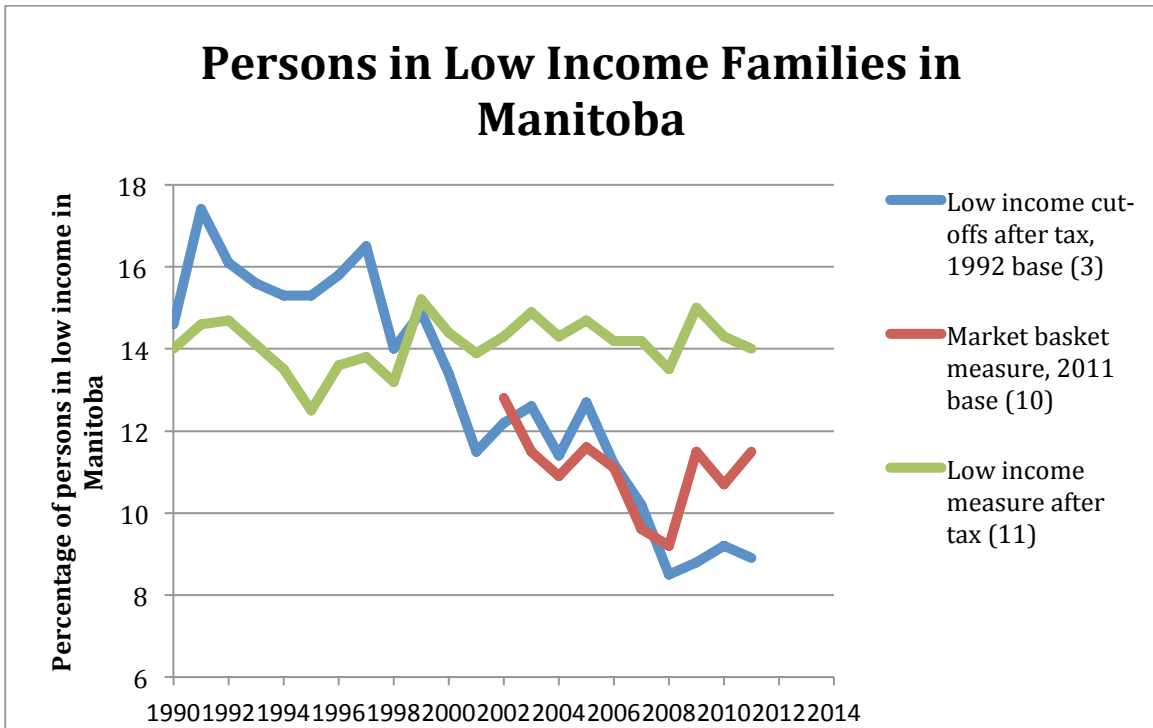
Following the lead of other provinces east of Manitoba, and as a result of pressure from a growing number of community groups, the Manitoba government implemented the *All Aboard: Manitoba’s Poverty Reduction Strategy* in 2009.

There have been several policy and program changes aligned with Manitoba’s *All Aboard Strategy*. The strategy outlines four central pillars including: 1. Safe, Affordable Housing in Supportive Communities 2. Education, Jobs and Income Support emphasising “Key actions and programs need to focus on skills development, literacy supports, transitions from unemployment to work, education and training opportunities and incomes supports.” 3. Strong, Healthy Families Strong; and 4. Accessible, Co-ordinated Services

Arguably the main focus related to individuals and families on social assistance has been on program and service expansion aligned with employment objectives with the goal to address poverty and income through employment. Income supports has been less of a focus of social assistance policy with very minor changes in rates since 1992 primarily benefitting persons with disabilities.

Recognizing the reality that low-wages are a central issue for people living in poverty, the Manitoba government has made incremental changes to the minimum wage regularly since 1999. The current rate of \$10.70 per hour puts Manitoba in the middle of the pack in Canada. When cost of living and other government supports are considered, Manitoba’s minimum wage earners fare better than minimum wage earners in most other provinces and territories.

As shown in the following table we have seen a decrease in poverty generally in Manitoba since 1999, with brief increase following the 2008 economic crisis, followed by decline.



in 2015, the focus of income assistance under the NDP government remains consistent with the principle of “work-first” with an emphasis on ‘labour market participation’

Opportunities for education and training for income assistance recipients continues to emphasise short term, labour market focused training supported at the discretion of Employment and Income Assistance workers.

Manitoba government has been resistant to changes and arguably have taken action as a result of community pressure. Manitoba has a very vocal and strategic anti-poverty movement (See Bernas and Mackinnon, forthcoming) which has produced two consecutive reports titled *The View From Here: Manitobans Call for A Poverty Reduction Plan* (2009 and 2015), endorsed and advocated for by upward of 90 community based organizations across the province. The Right to Housing Coalition has actively and successfully campaigned for increases in social housing; and the Employment and Income Assistance Network lobby for ‘rate review’.

Moving Forward

The Manitoba government announced in its 2015 budget a movement toward a guaranteed annual income for persons with disabilities and to a number of initiatives proposed in the *View From Here*. However there is an election in the spring of 2016 and progress on these promises will depend on whether the current government is re-elected.

Regardless of the outcome, community-based advocacy efforts appear to be deeply entrenched and we can expect continued pressure on whichever government is in office in 2016.

It should be noted that political advocacy related to poverty and income assistance is on two separate but complementary tracks. Make Poverty History Manitoba has focused on incremental changes (as outlined in the View From Here), and has had some success in recent years. The Basic Income Network has more recently organized in an effort to convince the Manitoba government to move toward a guaranteed annual income for all Manitobans. This initiative has drawn some attention but the likelihood of a basic income scheme is not currently on the horizon.

References:

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