

Outlook remains gloomy for Victoria's poor, report says.

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April 27, 2012

Victoria's poor are remaining poor, with little respite in sight, says a report from the Community Social Planning Council.

The study, which looks at census data trends between 1996 and 2006, finds the poverty rate decreased only two per cent, meaning 43,000 Greater Victoria residents continue to live below the poverty line.

"We like to think we live in a place where all people have equal access to being able to support their families and prosper, but poverty is tenacious," said Community Council researcher Marika Albert. "It isn't going away."

Victoria, Esquimalt, the Southern Gulf Islands and Sooke have the highest poverty rates in the region.

The report suggests the picture will be even less encouraging when Statistics Canada releases income figures, in 2013, because of the 2008-09 recession.

"Our incomes are stagnating and affordability is a huge issue," Albert said. "It's increasingly difficult to own a home, renting is more expensive and there is the rising cost of food."

One of the figures shows that 20 per cent of the region's young people between the ages of 15 and 24 live in poverty. That is a major concern, Albert said.

"These are young people trying to start their lives in the labour market and start families. That's our future. We need to find ways to support young people."

The study also found that those between 45 and 64 saw a four per cent increase in their poverty rate and that women have higher poverty rates than men — with the poverty rate of women over 75 nearly six times that of men in the same age group.

Kelly Newhook, executive director of Together Against Poverty, said the lowest vacancy rates in the country and soaring food prices are making life increasingly hard for poor people in Greater Victoria.

B.C. is the only province that does not have an earning exemption for those collecting social assistance, which makes it more difficult for people to gain a foothold, Newhook said. An exemption would allow people to keep a share of any money earned through employment, instead of it being deducted from their social assistance cheque.

"People want a hand up, not a hand out, but they come up against more and more barriers," she said.

"Income assistance and disability rates haven't changed since 2007 and then it was a \$50 increase, and landlords getting rent directly from the ministry just increased their rent."

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