



British Columbia's  
Office of the Human Rights  
Commissioner

# Human rights in Chilliwack

Community Brief | April 2024



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APRIL 2024

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British Columbia's  
**Office of the Human Rights  
Commissioner**

A black and white photograph of a cornfield, with the stalks and leaves of the corn plants visible. The image is overlaid with teal-colored graphic elements: a large semi-circle in the top right corner, a semi-circle in the bottom left corner, and a rectangular shape in the bottom left corner. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

**This Community Brief is based on research conducted on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Stó:lō Coast Salish people. We are grateful for their historic and current stewardship of these lands. We thank the leadership of Stó:lō Nation and the staff who support Stó:lō people for their contributions to this project.**

## Table of Contents

<b>Thank you</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Who we are</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Why we created this Community Brief</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>How we created this Community Brief</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Community Background</b> .....	<b>5</b>
A short history of Chilliwack. ....	5
Snapshot of Chilliwack today .....	6
<b>Housing</b> .....	<b>7</b>
The housing crisis. ....	7
Inequities in housing: Indigenous peoples .....	8
Inequities in housing: The spectrum of diverse housing needs .....	9
<b>Health</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Right to health care. ....	10
Discrimination in health care. ....	11
Mental health and substance use .....	12
<b>Discrimination and hate</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Rise of anti-LGBTQ2SAI+ hate .....	15
<b>Employment</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Underemployment. ....	17
Discrimination in the workplace .....	17
Working and living conditions of migrant workers. ....	18
Adverse impacts of climate change on migrant workers .....	19
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>20</b>
References .....	21

If you are unsure about terminology used in this report, we invite you to visit our Human Rights Glossary at: [bchumanrights.ca/glossary](https://bchumanrights.ca/glossary)



# Thank you

This work would not have been possible without the contributions of our Chilliwack Community Connectors: Chilliwack Community Services, Mountainside Harm Reduction Society and Unique Get Together Society. In addition, we would like to offer our gratitude to the Chilliwack Society for Community Living for generously connecting us with many individuals who access their programs and services.

# Who we are

B.C.'s Human Rights Commissioner is an independent officer of the Legislature. Under B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*, the Commissioner is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights in the province.

BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHRC) envisions a province free from inequality, discrimination and injustice, where we uphold human rights for all and fulfil our responsibilities to one another. We strive to address the root causes of these issues by shifting laws, policies, practices and cultures. We do this work through education, research, advocacy, inquiry and monitoring.

# Why we created this Community Brief

Shortly after BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner was established in 2019, we began work on the Baseline Project, a multi-year project to map out the state of human rights in B.C. As part of the Baseline Project, we wanted to better understand human rights issues in different regions and in both urban and rural communities. To do this, we conducted in-depth research in several communities, including Chilliwack.

Each individual Community Brief tells the human rights story of a single community. Our Community Briefs series offers a sample of the critical human rights issues affecting people in different parts of the province and explores how they manifest in unique ways in each community. The Community Briefs also celebrate community strengths and actions being taken to address inequality, discrimination and injustice in communities throughout B.C.

# How we created this Community Brief

Between November 2022 and June 2023, BCOHRC and local community organizations acting as “Community Connectors” held focus groups and interviews with 74 individuals in Chilliwack, including service provider staff, those who access Community Connector programs or services and other people with lived experience of human rights issues.

This Community Brief reflects what we learned from all those who contributed to this project, supplemented with data from Statistics Canada, media sources and other relevant secondary sources. All quotations are from people who participated in the focus groups and interviews.

By necessity, this Community Brief is not comprehensive. We know there are human rights issues in Chilliwack that we were unable to learn about or include here and that much more could be said about each issue that is included. This Brief is offered as a snapshot intended to reflect significant human rights issues in the community and to inspire action to address those issues.



**17**

interviews



**8**

focus groups



**74**

participants



# Community Background

## A short history of Chilliwack

The Stó:lō people have lived in the region now known as Chilliwack and the Fraser River Valley since time immemorial<sup>1</sup> and their estimated population before contact with Europeans was between 40,000 and 60,000. The name Stó:lō means “people of the river;” the Stó:lō primarily rely on the Fraser River and its tributaries for their way of life.<sup>2</sup> The Stó:lō speak Halq’eméylem (a dialect of the Coast Salish language Halkomelem).<sup>3</sup>

Attracted to Chilliwack for its agriculture opportunities, European settlers brought diseases that reduced the population of Stó:lō people by approximately 90 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Settler colonialism introduced Christianity to the region and by the 1930s Chilliwack had a large Mennonite population that increased further after World War II.<sup>5</sup> Chilliwack experienced several other waves of immigration, including Chinese immigration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Dutch immigration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

The Chilliwack area was also the site of Coqualeetza Residential School, which operated until 1940 when Indigenous children were instead sent to the Alberni Residential School. The Coqualeetza site was then converted into Coqualeetza Indian Hospital, which operated until 1969. Today, this site has been reclaimed as the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre, which exists to preserve and promote Stó:lō culture and language.<sup>7</sup>



# Snapshot of Chilliwack today

The City of Chilliwack has a population of

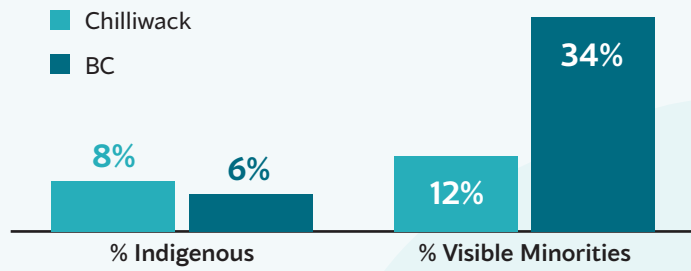
**93,203**

people<sup>8</sup> and is rapidly growing at a rate of

**11%**

which is faster than the provincial rate of 8%. Due to the rise in the cost of living in Metro Vancouver, Chilliwack's population is expected to grow, especially with younger families relocating to the area.

**As of 2021 about 8% of residents were Indigenous, 12% were visible minorities and 80% were white.** The visible minority population doubled from 2016 to 2021.



**Chilliwack has a diverse refugee population** including people from Ukraine, Syria and Lebanon.

Today, **Chilliwack is home to major agricultural and food manufacturing industries** and has numerous services to meet the needs of its growing population.

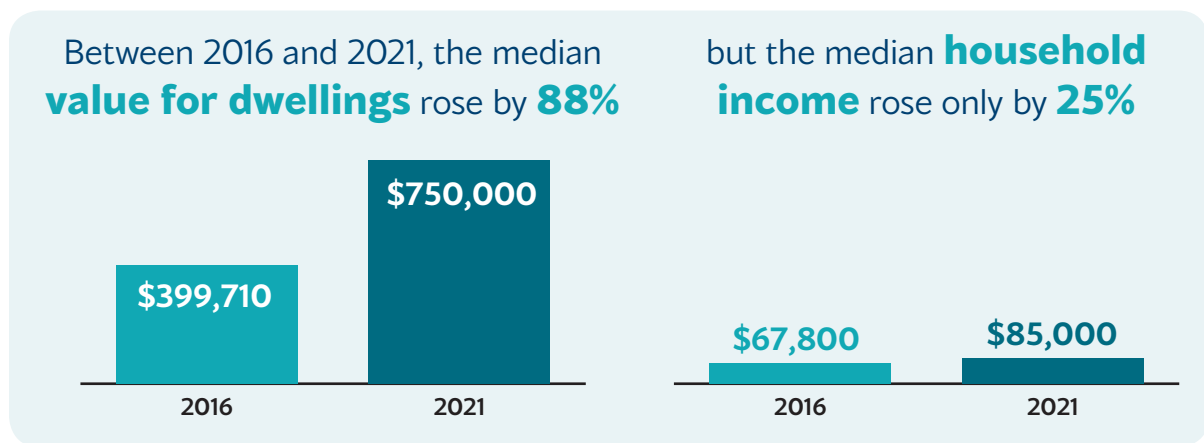




# Housing

## The housing crisis

The housing crisis was the human rights issue that participants most frequently raised in Chilliwack. Between 2016 and 2021, the median value for dwellings in Chilliwack rose by 88 per cent from \$399,710 to \$750,000. This far exceeded the provincial rate of 57 per cent.<sup>9</sup>



In 2023, the maximum a landlord could raise a tenant's rent was by two per cent.<sup>10</sup> However, we heard that some people's rent was illegally doubled or tripled while others were forced to leave their homes due to renovations.<sup>11</sup> Renovations, coupled with low rental supply and rising living costs, contribute to the risk of homelessness.

***“We’re a two-income household. We make decent money. We make well above the average and I’ve been renovicted.... We have moved fourteen times. We have been homeless twice for three months at a time. We had deposits upfront. We had references. We have steady jobs. We have everything in line and we were still homeless twice. We had to live with family.”***

Participants discussed pressures on the housing market in Chilliwack. For example, some described how the housing market in Chilliwack is spurred by out-of-town investors and developers who purchase homes that are traditionally low-income housing and keep the properties derelict before tearing them to down to build high-end housing. Others noted that the recent Trans Mountain Expansion pipeline project increased the number of individuals looking for rental accommodations in an already tight market.

We heard that the average one-bedroom rental unit in Chilliwack rents for \$1,400–1,500 per month, which is more than the monthly disability payment for individuals (\$1,358.50 per month).<sup>12</sup> Advocates shared that most rental units do not meet their accessibility needs<sup>13</sup> and that rental application requirements like credit and criminal record checks and bank statements are barriers to finding affordable housing. These barriers are especially challenging for people with disabilities, those with service animals, newcomers to Canada, people with low incomes and single mothers who were previously financially reliant on a partner.

According to the Fraser Valley Regional District point-in-time (PiT) Homeless Count and Survey Regional Report, 413 individuals identified as experiencing homelessness in Chilliwack on March 7-8, 2023. This is an increase of 107 individuals from 2020 or an increase of 35 per cent since 2020.<sup>14</sup> We know that the Homeless Count is an undercount of the true extent of homelessness in Chilliwack. Many who experience homelessness are less visible in Chilliwack as people camp in less visible areas such as by the river and woods. Participants described how people living in encampments have been forcibly displaced or moved, heightening their insecurity and precarity.



***“Traditionally, people experiencing homelessness are often thought to be either struggling with substance use or mental health or both. But we are seeing more and more people who are just... they just can’t afford it. They have jobs. They have cars... but they don’t have a home because either they can’t find one or they can’t afford the one that they can find.”***

We also heard that some people with mental health conditions who are unhoused and living with addiction feel “dehumanized” by the services they require, such as housing, employment, medical care and psychiatric services. Participants also shared that anti-homelessness infrastructure has been built into bus stops, making these spaces uncomfortable so they cannot be used as an impromptu shelter at night.

***“The new bus stop benches have those useless armrests that aren’t armrests. They’re designed to not let people lay down on a bench.”***

## **Inequities in housing: Indigenous peoples**

For decades, Indigenous peoples have been facing a chronic housing crisis across Canada for numerous reasons. These include colonialism, racism and discrimination, barriers created by the *Indian Act*, the lack of developable land and infrastructure and chronic underfunding.<sup>15</sup> We heard that some Indigenous people living on reserve reside in substandard housing and are in poor condition. Homes reportedly have black mould, experience sewage leaks and lack running water, electricity and heat. We also heard that for Indigenous people living off reserve, there are no Indigenous specific housing options despite the community being surrounded by reserves and having a large Indigenous population.

In 2020, Chilliwack had the highest proportion of homeless people with Indigenous ancestry in the Fraser River Valley at 25 per cent.<sup>16</sup> We heard there are Indigenous children who are homeless and attending elementary school and that “it’s a miracle that they are getting to school every day.”



## Inequities in housing: The spectrum of diverse housing needs

Like many other B.C. communities, we heard that Chilliwack requires a wide spectrum of housing types to serve the needs of its residents.

**Complex care and other care facilities:** We heard that some individuals require additional homecare support to live in the community. These include seniors, people with disabilities and unhoused populations. Creative solutions are required to address this need. For example, BC Housing and the Phoenix Society<sup>17</sup> are establishing a supportive housing building that will have 22 spaces for complex care housing and 42 shelter beds.<sup>18</sup> This initiative, however, will only meet a small portion of the need in the community.

We also heard that some youth aging out of government care, especially those with disabilities, face challenges accessing appropriate housing options that meet their needs. Staff-supported homes with 24/7 care are limited and many youth who are placed in a home-share model are not adequately prepared with life skills such as doing their laundry and following a budget.

**Short-term housing solutions:** We heard that women fleeing violence and families facing homelessness require short-term housing solutions. While there is a low-barrier transition house for women in Chilliwack, the demand exceeds the supply of rooms. We also heard that there are no shelters in Chilliwack designed to take in families and that the environments of current shelters are mostly inappropriate for children.

**Safe housing for gender-diverse people:** We heard there is a lot of anti-LGBTQ2SAI+ rhetoric in Chilliwack, sometimes in the context of diverse religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup> For example, while there is a shelter in Chilliwack that welcomes gender-diverse clients, we heard that this shelter is run by a religious organization, which can cause tension for gender-diverse clients staying there.



# Health

## Right to health care

The health care system across B.C. is facing numerous challenges including front-line staffing shortages. This leads to long specialist wait times and difficulty accessing primary care, which in turn creates additional strain on hospital emergency rooms.<sup>20</sup> The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is a fundamental human right under international law and fundamental to human dignity.<sup>21</sup> Participants listed several critical barriers to accessing health care in Chilliwack.

**Transportation and specialized treatment:** Certain medical services are not available in Chilliwack, requiring patients to travel to other cities for care. For example, Abbotsford is the closest city for cancer treatment<sup>22</sup> and some people travel to Vancouver for gender-affirming care. We heard how a lack of reliable public transportation makes accessing health care especially challenging for people who do not own a car. This was exacerbated by the four-month Fraser Valley bus strike that concluded in July 2023.<sup>23</sup>

**Transportation from reserve:** Although there are programs to help Indigenous people travel to medical service facilities from their homes both on and off reserve in B.C. (e.g., covering the cost of travel, accommodation and meals), we heard how uptake could be improved by addressing informational and administrative barriers.

**Navigating services pathways:** Some people told us that navigating health care and community service pathways in Chilliwack is confusing, even for well-versed advocates. For those who live with additional barriers, such as seniors with cognitive impairments or those who speak English as an additional language, navigating these pathways can be incredibly challenging.

**Access to dental care for people on fixed income assistance:** We heard from some participants that there are gaps in health services offered under the Health Services for Community Living program, including dental care.

*“I only had two dentist appointments this year and I’ve already gone through whatever money the disability has for my dentist. They’re like, well if you need another dentist’s appointment, you’re going to have to pay for it. I can barely afford food right now.”*



## Discrimination in health care

Participants discussed how racism in the B.C. health care system has significant impacts on Indigenous patients and contributes to inequitable health outcomes.<sup>24</sup> Some concerns we heard regarding the health sector include the following.

**Stereotyping and stigma:** Indigenous people, people who are unhoused and people who use drugs are sometimes not prioritized at the emergency room because they are seen as “drug-seeking” or as having “illegitimate reasons” for coming to the hospital. Some participants who reported being stereotyped noted that they do not want to use Chilliwack health care services because they do not feel safe or trust the health care professionals.

**Whole-person care:** People who are unhoused in Chilliwack may have complex care needs including mental health and substance use-related needs, medical conditions and physical disabilities.<sup>25</sup> Participants described how the medical system is often ill-equipped to provide holistic care to these individuals, failing to account for their unique challenges.

*“Being unhoused is a huge barrier to health care. They go to hospital. They get treated like dogs. [Health care professionals] give you antibiotics or antipsychotics but how are you supposed to take them? Even if you are in a huge crisis, they move you through as quickly as they can. You’re triaged even if you’re ready to kill yourself. People are just not served for health and mental health.”*

**Delayed treatment:** Negative presumptions about marginalized people made by some hospital staff have resulted in delayed care. We learned of two high-profile cases involving Indigenous patients that garnered public attention and were raised by participants in focus groups and individual interviews.<sup>26</sup> The details are highlighted below.

### CASE STUDY: Accidental poisoning

First Nations leadership and service providers shared this event: In 2015, a First Nations man with disabilities arrived at the emergency room feeling ill. He was presumed to be inebriated when he mistakenly drank anti-freeze. Lab results confirmed the accidental poisoning and severe health consequences of his condition within three hours of his arrival at the hospital. However, these lab results were overlooked, resulting in his preventable death. We heard that he faced discriminatory attitudes based on both his Indigenous identity and disability during his stay at the hospital.

## CASE STUDY: Sustained injuries

First Nations leadership and a family member shared this event: In 2017 a First Nations woman went to the hospital after being hit by a truck. We heard that the first responders, including the RCMP, paramedics and hospital staff, assumed she was intoxicated and did not take her injuries seriously. After an X-ray, she was prematurely dismissed by hospital staff and subsequently had to return for major surgery for her broken bones and fractures.

*“They shipped her out... in just a hospital gown.”*

**Minimized interaction with medical staff:** For patients who speak English as an additional language and patients with cognitive challenges such as dementia, we heard concerns that medical staff were more likely to speak with their family members or advocates than with the patients themselves.

**Expanding beyond Indigenous cultural safety training:** We heard calls for further training, particularly in cultural humility, and practice for medical staff to serve the growing Indigenous and visible minority populations in Chilliwack.<sup>27</sup>

## Mental health and substance use

People in Chilliwack told us repeatedly that better access to mental health and substance use support is a major human rights priority in Chilliwack.

Suicide rates have consistently been shown to be higher among Indigenous people in Canada than the rate among non-Indigenous people.<sup>28</sup> We heard that Indigenous people in the Chilliwack region also have high suicide rates. A contributing factor is living in a community that receives few resources, including few culturally relevant supports such as smokehouses and sweat lodges.

*“We’re losing young people left and right to suicide because they’re feeling hopeless.”*

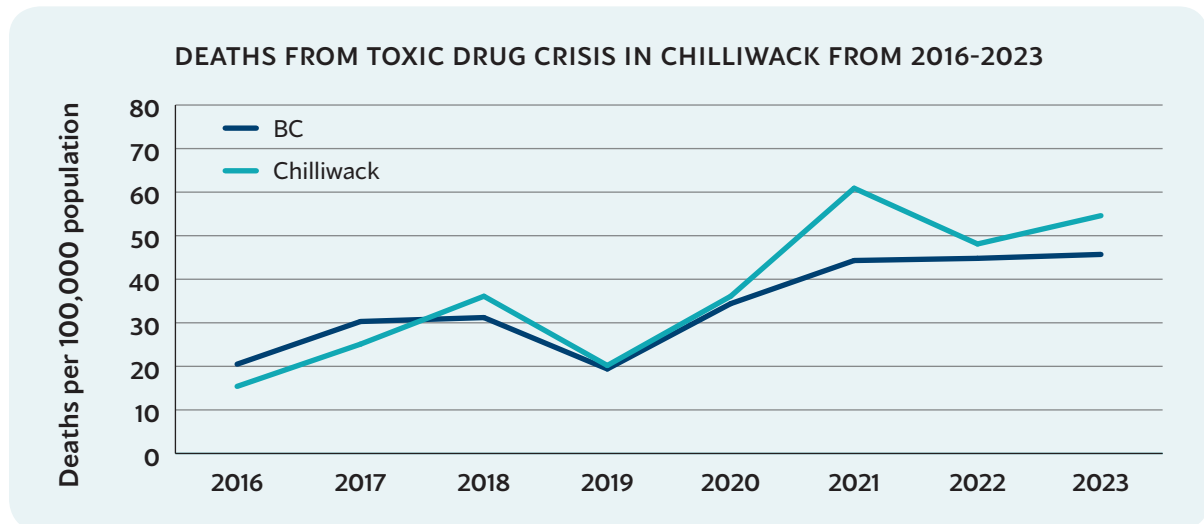
Additionally, we heard that there is a lack of available, consistent and permanent mental health clinicians for youth and adults. This is especially problematic since the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted youth mental health; youth are experiencing more anxiety and depression across the world.<sup>29</sup> Once youth turn 19 they must transition to adult services, which are overstretched and can have a waitlist of six to 12 months.

We also heard that the mental health services offered to adults are even more limited than those for youth due to underfunding. For psychiatric care, this can result in limited choices in psychiatrists, short-term care and prioritization of patients based on severity level. We heard that even if a person had a suicidal incident, it could take years for them to see a specialist.

*“...[T]wo years ago, my life went downhill and I wanted to kill myself. I was literally going to drive my car off the bridge. But I made a phone call earlier that day.... I just saw that specialist two months ago.”*



Since 2015 there has also been an increase in deaths from the toxic drug supply in Chilliwack.<sup>30</sup> The year 2023 was one of the worst years for the city in terms of deaths from the toxic drug supply.<sup>31</sup>



We heard that there is no “one-size-fits-all” treatment that will work for everyone. For those who have experienced trauma from colonial policies and institutions, such as Indigenous people impacted by the Sixties Scoop, alternatives to institutional detox and treatment services are important. We also heard calls for culturally based and trauma-informed services, particularly to serve Indigenous clients who use substances.

***“I was taken from my mother.... I was traumatized by that, and it took me 48 years to recover from that and I’ve only done that by accessing community services in a non-government entity.”***

Participants also shared that access to a peer support network and workers is important to fill gaps and build relations. They can “provide understanding” and “bridge the gap” between service providers and care needs.

***“I have a peer worker and... I’ve been seven months clean. I can relate to her [and her] past experiences.”***

We heard that harm reduction is especially important. Harm reduction is evidence-based and necessary to prevent “undue health and social harms both for people who use substances as well as B.C. communities.”<sup>32</sup> There are three overdose prevention sites (OPSs) in Chilliwack and Mountainside Harm Reduction Society offers peer-run drug-checking at these sites.<sup>33</sup> Participants shared that these OPSs have been working well and are key to preventing deaths. However, some participants disclosed that there have been drug arrests in front of the OPSs that challenge the sense that OPSs are safe spaces to use drugs. We heard that access to OPS could be further improved with extended hours of operation.

Another barrier is that there is no detox treatment centre within Chilliwack, with the closest one in Surrey. We heard that some people who use drugs would prefer to access detox services within their own community to be close to their support network and receive post-treatment follow-up care such as second-stage housing.

***“We need detox beds in every single community. When a person is ready that day, they need to be able to go that day because the next day they could be dead.”***

We found that people who have co-occurring conditions face challenges accessing the care they need. For example, for someone who uses substances and has a cognitive disability, an addiction treatment program that requires journaling for self-reflection may not fit their needs or abilities. We heard that mental health services are less accessible for people who use drugs and have mental health conditions. They are told to get treatment for their drug use first, which is problematic as some people are using drugs to cope with their mental health struggles.

### **WHAT HELPS: Community Collaboration to Reduce Stigma**

The Mountainside Harm Reduction Society, the Chilliwack Community Action Team (CCAT) and Shxwhá:y Village partner annually to host the “No More Stigma, No More Shame” event to commemorate International Overdose Awareness Day (August 31). This event, which was discussed by participants in our focus groups, addresses discrimination against people who use drugs through its activities and speeches and creates a space for community connection. This family-friendly event is peer-run and features Indigenous Elders leading conversations. It offers crafts, food trucks, face-painting by local Indigenous small businesses and peer-run drug checking from Mountainside. Many attendees included organizations that are led by and serve people who use drugs.<sup>34</sup> The highlight of the event is the community grieving activity led by CCAT that features a collective live butterfly release to symbolize lost loved ones.

***“I feel like there should be a lot more like peer-led organizations and things like [Mountainside] rather than someone that doesn’t have lived experience... so, they can empathize with you more, more compassion, more equality.”***



# Discrimination and hate

In addition to the discrimination in health care summarized above, many people with diverse identities shared broader experiences of discrimination and hate across many areas of life in Chilliwack.

We heard from Indigenous and Black people about regular discrimination experienced in retail settings. They shared their experiences of racial profiling, exemplified by close surveillance by staff while shopping.

Iranian women reported negative reactions to wearing a hijab in Chilliwack. They reported experiencing misinformed stereotypes about their religion, including that they are affiliated with terrorists. Based on these interactions, there are fears that discriminatory laws will spread to B.C., such as Quebec's prohibition on public servants and some politicians from wearing religious symbols at work.

## Rise of anti-LGBTQ2SAI+ hate

Participants observed a troubling rise of anti-LGBTQ2SAI+ hate in Chilliwack. Gender diverse and trans youth shared that they experience blatant discrimination in the form of individuals refusing to affirm their pronouns and gender identity. We heard that some LGBTQ2SAI+ youth from religious families and communities face the prospect of being forced out of their homes when they come out.

In addition, there have been several events in Chilliwack that have had a detrimental impact on the LGBTQ2SAI+ community. Participants shared the following examples.

- Chilliwack city councillors voted against a request to install a rainbow crosswalk in 2019.<sup>35</sup> The councillors have also denied requests to fly the pride flag at city hall.<sup>36</sup> In response, a group of community members worked with community organizations and local First Nations to paint 16 rainbow crosswalks throughout the city on private property and on First Nations land.<sup>37</sup>
- While the recent school board elections have increased representation of the LGBTQ2SAI+ community in education leadership positions, we heard that there are still human rights issues impacting LGBTQ2SAI+ individuals and allies in schools. Some Chilliwack school board trustees expressed opposition to SOGI 123 (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities), a tool introduced in 2017 to help educators make schools inclusive and safe for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities.
- The Chilliwack Football Club Board gave players a two-day suspension for putting LGBTQ2SAI+ patches on their jerseys without board approval in 2020.<sup>38</sup>
- We heard that proponents of a book ban in Chilliwack aim to remove LGBTQ2SAI+ content. Participants stated that those seeking the ban promote misinformation about the content of these books and inaccurately state that these books are available to young elementary school students.
- In response to the establishment of gender-neutral bathrooms in schools, misinformation was spread on social media that claimed children are identifying as cats and that litterboxes have been placed in schools.<sup>39</sup>



- Some participants shared that women in elected positions who are part of, or are allies to, the LGBTQ2SAI+ community have been harassed by their male colleagues and far-right networks through emails.
- There have been anti-LGBTQ2SAI+ protests at some dances for high school youth. At the 2022 Pride event in Chilliwack, the RCMP had to escort two protestors out due to the disruption of the event.

*“The LGBTQ2SAI+ community is just starting to form and there is a really violent and aggressive pushback against that community formation. I think that it can push some people away from even joining in the benign things like it’s something as simple as going to a youth dance. You get protests or, like, that youth now going becomes a political act. It shouldn’t be a political act. It should just be ‘I’m going to hang out with my friends.’”*

### **WHAT HELPS: Queer café**

LGBTQ2SAI+ community groups, supports and events in Chilliwack have expanded over the past few years. We heard that for youth in the LGBTQ2SAI+ community, it is especially important to have a safe space to socialize. One example discussed in the focus groups and interviews is the weekly Chilliwack Queer Café, run by the Chilliwack Pride Society and sponsored by the Chilliwack Métis Association.<sup>40</sup> Planned recurring events include open mic/ karaoke, drag queen bingo and board games.<sup>41</sup> We heard from participants that the Queer Café has a diverse group of participants of all backgrounds and economic means.



Community partners provide feedback on the Chilliwack Community Brief, Summer 2024

# Employment

Under B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*, employers are required to maintain a work environment that is free from discrimination. Below are examples of human rights issues relating to employment that participants shared.

## Underemployment

Underemployment occurs when an individual cannot find full-time work or takes a job that does not reflect their education and training, thus making it difficult to meet their financial needs.<sup>42,43</sup> We heard that underemployment and the underutilization of people's skills is especially prevalent for two communities in Chilliwack: immigrants and people with disabilities.

***“I managed ten or twelve projects from the United Nations ... but here, I am a laundry attendant. Can you believe that? Because I can't find another job close to my position.”***

A single person on disability assistance can earn up to \$15,000 from employment income annually, after which government docks their assistance payment.<sup>44</sup> This severely limits the individual's ability to supplement their disability payment with income through employment. We heard that this keeps people trapped in a poverty cycle.

## Discrimination in the workplace

We heard that people have experienced discrimination at work based on personal characteristics protected by the *Human Rights Code*.<sup>45</sup> We heard from Indigenous people and racialized immigrants who felt ostracized and ignored by their colleagues. Participants shared that some newcomers felt they needed a white Canadian colleague's support when speaking to their employer to be taken seriously.

***“My boss... doesn't listen to anybody unless they're Canadian. She says, 'I can't take your word for it and no one of your kind' and so [the racialized employee] has to find a white Canadian who doesn't have an accent.”***

Lastly, we heard that some women face barriers to career advancement due to some employers believing that women and their family responsibilities will interfere with their employers' needs.

***“Women often get left out of high positions in the workplace... especially if you're young. The employer thinks the person has kids... they take that into consideration, and women are sometimes discriminated against because of that.”***

## Working and living conditions of migrant workers

Agriculture is a dominant industry in Chilliwack, employing many migrant workers. In 2022, there were 11,831 temporary foreign workers in the agricultural sector in B.C., most of whom migrated from Mexico.<sup>46</sup> Most of these agricultural migrant workers come to Canada on the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), which allows temporary foreign workers to work in the agricultural industry for eight months. As part of the SAWP, migrant workers have their work visas tied to an employer, which can create a disproportionate power imbalance.

***“These guys are just totally powerless in this situation. There is an endless stream of people who want to work in Canada, so if they speak up, if they report, if they injure themselves, they are sent home and told ‘You’ll never work in Canada again.’ Then their whole livelihood that might be supporting an entire family for the year is gone”***

We heard that migrant workers face substandard working and living conditions. Some employer-provided homes have been described as crowded, unhygienic, covered with mould and with poor heating and cooling for Chilliwack weather.

***“Poor conditions, poor living conditions. There are mushroom farms that, like a lot of places don’t provide proper supplies, so [migrant workers] are exposed to horrible chemicals.... People have scars all over their hands and arms because they aren’t given proper equipment.”***

We heard that some migrant workers experienced different forms of abuse by their employers such as:

- psychological abuse including being yelled at by their employers every day, derogatory language, intimidation and threats
- financial abuse where wages are withheld
- physical abuse including unsafe working conditions due to lack of safety equipment, working 16–18 hours per day, being physically hit or pushed by their employers
- sexual abuse



Migrant workers also face the risk of being exploited by licensed recruiters who help employers in B.C. recruit foreign workers.<sup>47</sup> We heard that there is a lack of provincial and federal oversight to prevent this. Participants spoke of a well-known recruiter in Chilliwack:

***“...he goes to Mexico and goes to usually smaller villages and recruits a ton of people. He is connected through churches... and then he says, “If you give me \$2000, I’ll give you a job in Canada,” which is illegal, but they don’t know any better, and they want a job in Canada, so they give him \$2000. The farm gets a cut of that money, (again, very illegal). He brings them to Canada and then he has done this whole process, and they have no idea what any of their rights are, and as far as they know he controls every farm, everywhere, so they’re terrified of him.”***

## **Adverse impacts of climate change on migrant workers**

Climate change is deeply intertwined with global patterns of inequality. The poorest and most vulnerable people often endure the worst of climate change impacts yet contribute the least to the crisis, a fact that is illustrated well in Chilliwack.<sup>48</sup>

In 2021, B.C. experienced record-breaking high temperatures from late June through mid-July, causing 619 heat-related deaths in the province.<sup>49,50</sup> Similarly, the 2021 Chilliwack flood was “unprecedented and disastrous” as a month’s worth of rain fell in just over two days.<sup>51</sup> In both cases, the poor working and living conditions many migrants already face were exacerbated by the crisis. We heard that some migrant workers fell through the cracks as various levels of government and their agencies did not address the needs and uphold the rights of these workers.

***“The migrant workers are in a constant state of emergency. The flood just brought everything to the surface ... and it will only continue each day with climate change getting worse.”***

For example, during the flood, we heard that emergency services and community organizations were not prepared to support migrant workers because they were not in contact with migrants before the flood and were not aware of their unique needs. In addition, migrant workers were initially not entitled to the \$2,000 in Red Cross flood relief support that was allocated to Chilliwack residents.<sup>52</sup>

### **WHAT HELPS: Migrant workers’ organizations**

Participants highlighted the benefits of organizations dedicated to improving conditions for migrant workers. One particular organization that was discussed by participants was Dignidad Migrante Society, a workers’ organization dedicated to the protection and defense of Temporary Foreign Workers. Dignidad Migrante employs a worker-to-worker model and teaches migrant workers about their rights in their mother tongue. We heard how during the floods, a Dignidad Migrante representative in Chilliwack helped to translate, advocate, complete paperwork, inform migrant workers about their rights and provide emotional support.

# Conclusion

As in other communities in B.C., many people living in Chilliwack are experiencing significant human rights challenges, including poverty, inadequate access to housing and health care and discrimination and hate. Through conversations with community members and leadership of Stó:lō Nations we heard many examples of critical service provision and advocacy work by community organizations and others to help address these human rights challenges. Many people living in Chilliwack are working toward a more equitable future for their community. We hope this Community Brief contributes to those efforts.



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