

## INCOME SUPPORT CASELOADS IN ALBERTA

**Governments play a critical role in maintaining our social safety net. It is arguably their most important responsibility.**

The social safety net is designed to catch people who fall due to illness, disability, poverty, job loss, adverse childhood experiences, poor choices, or difficulties brought about by events beyond their control. The purpose of the social safety net is to prevent people from falling so far, or landing so hard, that they cannot recover.

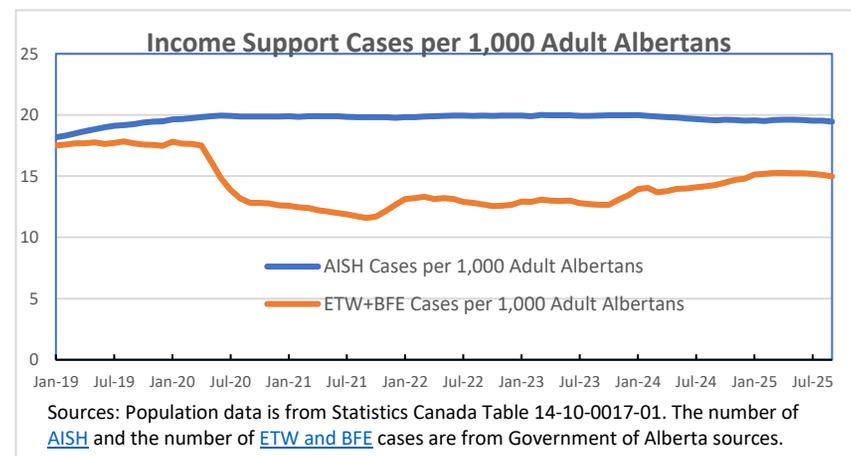
The social safety net includes family and friends but also includes charities and faith-based organizations. The latter typically provide income *in-kind*. Examples include food supplied by food banks and second-hand clothing and furniture. They also provide re-training, protection from domestic violence, and much more.

**Income support caseloads are noticeably lower in Alberta than in Ontario and British Columbia.**

Since the 1950s, governments in Canada have taken on an increasingly larger role in maintaining the social safety net. They do so by providing income support to people unable to establish or maintain employment adequate to earn sufficient income to pay for housing, food, and other necessities.

In Alberta, the provincial government maintains programs of income support that vary in design according to the characteristics of the people they are intended to assist. Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) provides income support to adults with a permanent disability which limits their ability to earn a living. Gaining access to AISH income support is challenging. Applications to the program must be accompanied by detailed and closely vetted medical reports. For people without permanent disabilities, the provincial government delivers two alternative income support programs, one for those Expected to Work (ETW) and one for those who have Barriers to Full Employment (BFE).

Providing income support is expensive to governments and to those whose taxes pay



for these programs. It is important for governments to ensure their programs are not so generous that enrollment grows beyond what is appropriate to need.

One way of determining this is to examine data such as that presented in the graphic above. It shows the number of income support cases per 1,000 adult Albertans since January 2019. We adjust for population growth because the number of people dealing with a disability is proportionate to population. The number needing income support for other reasons is also proportionate to population but is also sensitive to the state of the economy.

Summing AISH, ETW and BFE cases, in 2025 there were 34.7 income support cases for every 1,000 adult Albertans. This compares to 36.6 per 1,000 adults in 2019. Contrary to an emerging narrative, the AISH caseload has been remarkably constant as we might expect of a program intended to deliver support to people with a disability. The ETW+BFE caseload is more variable as it is sensitive to the state of the economy. In 2025, the caseload for the equivalent income support programs in Ontario and B.C., two provinces frequently used as comparators to Alberta, were 48.6 and 41.6 cases per 1,000 adults, respectively.