

Poverty stalks Canada's single parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

SAINT JOHN, N.B. - More Canadians than ever - many of them fathers - are confronting the plight of the single parent in an age of economic uncertainty and growing disparity between rich and poor, new census numbers released Wednesday suggest.

The number of single parents jumped eight per cent between 2006 and 2011, including a 16 per cent spike in the number of single fathers, Statistics Canada reported. Single mothers, who still comprise about 80 per cent of all single-parent families in Canada, increased by six per cent.

Regardless of gender, sociologists say there's a divide among their ranks: on one side are those for whom steady work lifts them narrowly past the poverty threshold, while on the other, parents are left behind to contend with everything from mouldy walls to mental illness.

At the First Steps Housing Project in Saint John, N.B., Amy Young cuddles her 15-month-old son Striker, weeping as she reflects on a troubled past of addictions and a broken relationship - and a future she's determined to ensure means a better life for her baby.

"It's not about you any more," Young said, Striker happily playing nearby. "It's all about your child and the good decisions you have to make for them."

First Steps, a centre for homeless, single mothers, is a safe haven, a daycare and a provider of in-house high school education to the dozen women currently living there.

For Young, the converted convent next to a city hospital seems like "a mansion" compared to the squalor of her old neighbourhood, where many of Saint John's lone-parent families continue to live.

"There were stabbings," she recalled. "You would find syringes in the street, crack pipes and stuff like that."

Lone-parent families represented 16.3 per cent of all census families in 2011, nearly twice the percentage of 1961, before the advent of 1968's Divorce Act and a steadily growing proportion of parents who never got married in the first place.

In 1961, roughly two-thirds of lone parents were widowed, and the rest were either divorced or separated, with a small percentage never having been married. Since then, the proportions have changed dramatically: half are either divorced or separated, while the ranks of those going it alone from the outset have grown tenfold.

In 2011, there are more single fathers in Canada than ever before. And they face many of the same issues as single mothers, including the need for more education and income, said Edward Monzerolle, 39, a roofer who's father to two boys aged five and 14.

"I don't think there's much difference between males and females raising their kids," Monzerolle said. "My time is very tight - very tight. I go to work, I go home, I cook supper and it's time for bed."

That makes completing his high school education all but impossible, he added.

Lidia Sok, who became a single mom a year ago at 19, said First Steps has inspired her to get a high school diploma, much like the 40 other graduates whose photos are proudly displayed on the centre's main floor.

"This program saved me from being homeless when I was pregnant," said Sok. "They helped me with schooling and they helped me get into an apartment."

In Saint John, single parenthood and poverty seem to go hand in hand in some neighbourhoods, said Sharon Amirault, who's been running the First Steps centre for the last 10 years.

"Poverty can be caused by addiction and mental health, the pregnancy can be the result of mental health issues and poverty," Amirault said. "We have created more issues for families, and as more issues have arisen, unfortunately, the public services going along with them haven't grown."

Still, there's also a wider national trend of some parents making their way to better lives, as single mothers gain education and enter the workforce.

A 2008 University of Toronto study of Statistics Canada data found poverty levels among single mothers following a downward trend between 1980 and 2000, with average earnings rising by 39 per cent and their low-income rate declining by 11 percentage points.

A Statistics Canada study done last year showed that trend continuing through to 2009, even as broader poverty rates climbed during the

recession.

But single mothers and fathers with jobs still lead difficult lives, cautioned sociologist Sylvia Fuller, an associate professor at the University of British Columbia.

"Women have definitely improved their material standard of living for themselves and their children through employment, but the employment is often stressful," Fuller said.

Saint John single mom Andrea Zaoinz, 27, struggles to balance her full-time job at Xerox with child care for her seven-year-old daughter.

She's eligible for subsidized daycare, but the centre closes just as her shift ends, forcing Zaoinz to rely on her network of friends and family to help with pickups and babysitting.

"I love my daughter more than anything else in the world, so you do what you have to do to make it work," she said.

Like other younger single mothers, she's found the Internet an invaluable tool that allows her to manage her life - and even peruse online dating services once in a while.

"I'm sure I'll remarry again, eventually. I'm in a relationship now and I'm very happy."

Canadian governments facing budget deficits must resist the temptation to cut back on programs designed to help mothers and fathers improve their education and overcome barriers to employment, said social worker and researcher Michael Saini.

But single parents will always be a reality - one that will remain irrevocably tied to poverty, unless public policy changes its course, Saini said.

"There needs to be a way to help these young parents get out of poverty as well, to give them opportunities for education and to enhance their skills," he said.

"If we make healthy children and healthy families. It will be to the benefit of society."

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