

# Kids suffer most as Toronto clings to title of child poverty capital

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## EXCERPTS

Salma Jabeen would love to enrol her 4-year-old daughter in taekwondo or gymnastics. Or buy Zara the small toy she wanted during a recent trip to the mall.

But her husband's earnings as a security guard barely cover groceries and rent for the family's sparsely-furnished Thorncliffe Park apartment.

"Zara doesn't understand that we don't have money for this," says Jabeen, 38. "It is very hard."

A five-minute drive away, Sarah Jordan, 14, is getting ready for her Pilates fitness class. The Leaside High School student is aware of Toronto's deep economic divisions and believes the city's more affluent kids want to help those who are less fortunate.

"When they hear the Rogers Centre can't hold the number of people in Toronto who visit a food bank every month, they gasp," says Sarah, who launched Sarah and Claire's Food Drive with her younger sister nine years ago.

"It matters who our political leaders are," adds Claire, 11, a competitive swimmer. "Cities can definitely make a difference. Communities can too . . . It's about awareness."

The sisters' annual Thanksgiving initiative in which relatively wealthy schools on either side of Bayview Ave. compete to raise the most food, brought in a record 78,000 lbs. for the Daily Bread Food Bank this year.

These tales from Toronto's two economic solitudes, are reflected in the findings of "Divided City: Life in Canada's Child Poverty Capital," being released Monday by a coalition of social agencies.

The third annual snapshot of child well-being in Toronto shows the rate of child poverty dipped slightly from 29 per cent to 27 per cent in 2014, according to the latest available tax filer data from Statistics Canada. Among Canada's largest cities, Montreal is second at 25 per cent, followed by Winnipeg at 24 per cent.

In addition to income, the report draws on other national data to examine key areas of action highlighted in TO Prosperity, the city's 20-year poverty reduction plan passed unanimously by Toronto city council last fall.

While 10,000 fewer children are living in poverty, 133,000 remain in low-income families where they struggle to access affordable arts and recreation programs, decent housing, nutritious food and low-cost transit, according to the report.

Federal and provincial governments have a role to play in eliminating poverty, the report notes. But as the city debates ways to bridge its perennial budget shortfall, Toronto must ensure local taxes are focused on programs that help families most in need, it says.

"Now is not the time to reduce services or raise fees for already unaffordable or inaccessible housing, transit and child care," says the report by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Family Service Toronto, Colour of Poverty - Colour of Change, and Social Planning Toronto.

"Rather, now is the time to move forward with fair and equitable taxation measures to fund the investments in affordable housing, transit, child care and recreation that will ensure that every child has the chance to succeed," it concludes.

"All children deserve a fair start in life, not just those whose parents happen to have high incomes," adds Sean Meagher, executive director of Social Planning Toronto.

The report, which looks at child poverty in Toronto's 140 neighbourhoods, shows stark contrasts in family incomes, living conditions and education outcomes.

For example, Leaside has the lowest child poverty rate in the city at 4.2 per cent. But right next door in Thorncliffe Park, almost 53 per cent of children live in low-income families, the second-highest in the city. Regent Park continues to have the highest rate of child poverty at 58 per cent.

The disparity is not lost on Leaside mother of three Tammy Doane, 45, school council chair at Rolph Road Elementary School.

"We are so close and yet so far in terms of need," says Doane whose sons are 8, 12 and 15.

"When you are a parent, you can't imagine anyone having to struggle with their child," she says. "I can't imagine having to say, no, there is no breakfast."

Children and families at Rolph Road try to do their part. During this year's winter concert, the school will be collecting new and gently-used children's books to donate to the school library at Fraser Mustard Early Learning Academy in Thorncliffe Park, Doane says.

In October, the kindergarten to Grade 6 school raised an average of 14 lbs. of food per student in Sarah and Claire's Food Drive, the highest per-student amount collected among the 14 schools that participated this year, Doane adds.

Despite charitable giving and community concern, poverty remains at "epidemic" levels in many Toronto neighbourhoods, the report says.

More than 40 per cent of kids in 14 Toronto neighbourhoods - mostly in the inner city or inner suburbs - were living in families below the Low-Income Measure, after taxes, or about \$35,600 for a family of two adults and two children under 16 in 2014.

Although the report doesn't speculate on why child poverty in Toronto and other large Ontario cities dipped slightly in 2014, it notes the Ontario Child Benefit rose by \$100 to \$1,310 annually that year.

The new Canada Child Benefit, introduced this past July, will raise annual family incomes by an average of \$2,300 this year and could lead to further reductions, the report adds.

According to the latest available data, children whose families are newcomers, racial minorities, living with disabilities or led by single parents are twice as likely to be in low-income households, the report says.

Half of kids in families with annual incomes below \$30,000 don't participate in arts or sports programs out of school hours while just 7 per cent of children in families with household incomes above \$100,000 don't take part.

Children in low-income families are twice as likely as those in high-income families to enter kindergarten with delays in independence and daily living skills, the report says.

Meanwhile, kids in families with incomes in the top 25 per cent are twice as likely to meet or exceed the Grade 3 provincial standards for reading, writing and math compared to those with incomes in the bottom quarter.

Food bank use in the city has increased by 13 per cent since the 2008 recession with a 48-per-cent increase in the former cities of Etobicoke, North York and Scarborough, the report says. About 17 per cent of kids in Toronto who use food banks report going hungry at least once a week.

Housing is a major concern for low-income families such as Jabeen's. When she came to Canada from Pakistan with her mother in 2004, they lived with her brother's family of four in a tiny one-bedroom apartment.

Although she and her husband have their own one-bedroom apartment today, they pay almost half of their family income on rent and wage a constant battle with their landlord over cockroaches, broken elevators and poor building maintenance.

More than one-quarter of families with children under 12 are living in unaffordable, over-crowded or sub-standard housing, according to the report.

"The landlord doesn't care because demand for apartments in this area is high," says Jabeen, who left her job as a dental assistant due to poor health when her daughter was born. "It is very stressful for us."

Child poverty in Toronto by the numbers:

- 133,000: Number of children under 18 living in poverty.
- 27%: Rate of child poverty.
- 4.2%: Rate of child poverty in Leaside.
- 58%: Rate of child poverty in Regent Park.
- 14: Number of Toronto's 140 neighbourhoods where more than 40 per cent of children are living in low-income families.
- \$35,600: Poverty line for a family with two adults and two children under 16, based on Statistics Canada's Low-Income Measure, after taxes in 2014.
- 48%: Percentage of children in families with incomes below \$30,000 who don't participate in out-of-school sports and arts activities.
- 65%: Percentage of children in low-income neighbourhoods who do not participate in early learning and care programs.
- 18,000: Number of children waiting for child-care fee subsidies.
- 17%: Percentage of children in families using food banks who report going hungry at least once a week.
- 100,000: Number of households on waiting list for subsidized housing.
- 36%: Increase in TTC fares since 2010.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child poverty <sup>[4]</sup>

social equality <sup>[5]</sup>

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