

As the Canada Child Benefit turns 1, who has actually benefited?

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Source: Global News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Jul 2017

AVAILABILITY

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The Canada Child Benefit, a central plank of the Liberal government's election platform and one of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's favourite things to reference in speeches across the country, has just celebrated its first birthday.

Launched on July 20, 2016, the benefit was designed to replace the multi-pronged system in place under the Conservative government, which included the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the Universal Child Care Benefit and income splitting.

The new payments, received once a month, are scaled to each household, taking into account income, the number of children under 18 and their ages. Families bringing in under \$30,000 annually qualify for the most support: \$6,400 per child under the age of six per year, and \$5,400 per child aged six to 17.

"The old child-care system was broken, so we fixed it," Trudeau told a crowd gathered in Barrie, Ont. on Thursday.

Overall, according to the Liberals, the average family is now receiving about \$2,300 more per year compared to the Conservative programs (independent analysis puts the number closer to \$1,860).

But 12 months in, has the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) really yielded the reform, and fairness, the Liberals promised?

Nearly 9 out of 10 eligible families getting cheques

Documents tabled recently in the House of Commons offer a glimpse of how the money is being distributed, and to whom.

In response to a written question submitted by NDP MP Sheri Benson in early May, the government provided the number of households (or "recipients") eligible for a monthly cheque across Canada as of April 2017.

That number stood at 4,056,060 recipients, representing just over 7.1 million Canadian children.

Of those eligible recipients, 3,579,250 — or 88 per cent — were getting monthly cheques at some point in the CCB's inaugural year. That number may go up or down as the months go by, the government notes.

Who's missing out?

In the documents requested by Benson, officials explained that there are several reasons why a family that is eligible might not be getting payments. Families who were not already signed up for the previous benefits under the Conservatives (because a child was born during the changeover in programs, for example) need to apply for the CCB from scratch.

Not every family has done that, and it seems some of Canada's most vulnerable children may be losing out as a result.

Taxpayers' ombudsman Sherra Profit recently launched a probe into the Canada Revenue Agency's (CRA's) efforts to reach out to women living in shelters with their children, for instance, after receiving complaints that these parents were not getting the information and guidance necessary to make sure the cheques reached them.

Indigenous parents on reserves and in Canada's North, who tend to experience higher levels of poverty, are also reportedly among those struggling to access the CCB. According to documents obtained by CBC News, many First Nations families are either unaware of the program or are not qualifying because of lapses in filing their tax returns.

Because the program is income-tested, parents and caregivers must file their returns on time with the CRA each spring in order to have their CCB calculated and approved for the next fiscal year.

Finally, immigration status can also create a barrier for some families. Permanent and temporary residents who have been in Canada for at least 18 months can receive the benefit, but not so for some sponsored spouses. Anti-poverty groups have called that unfair.

According to Benson, there are many people in her riding of Saskatoon West who have struggled mightily when trying to get their paperwork in order. It's one of the most common complaints her constituents bring into her office, she said, usually after trying to deal directly with the Canada Revenue Agency.

"It's not an affluent riding, and people don't have a lot of money," Benson said Friday.

"They have to provide birth certificates, notes from their landlord, sometimes notes from their doctor saying that these in fact are their children and they're in their custody. They don't hear back sometimes for up to ten weeks, two-and-a-half months. In the meantime, CRA has cut their benefits."

The CRA's "service standard" for processing applications and issuing a cheque is eight weeks for a digital application and 11 weeks for a paper one.

But the agency needs to be much more specific about exactly what documents are needed, Benson said. She noted that the CCB program is a good one, it just needs refining.

What about inflation?

One of the other key criticisms of the CCB, even around the time it launched, was that the benefit is not tied to inflation. The parliamentary budget watchdog noted last year that this means fewer families will qualify for the CCB over time.

In response, a national coalition of anti-poverty groups recently asked the Trudeau government to boost the basic amount the CCB provides, and to ensure it keeps pace with the cost of living. It's unclear if that will happen.

"We just want to make sure people first get it," Benson said, but she agreed that indexing the CCB to inflation would be an improvement.

"I just feel that the support to get the program out the door to the most vulnerable doesn't have enough resources to do that. In my office, we feel like we are the counter service, the front desk, for CRA."

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