

Toronto child poverty divided along racial lines ^[1]

Child poverty rate in Toronto is twice as high in racialized families according to a new study based on the 2016 census.

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

Toronto remains the child poverty capital of Canada with more than one in four kids living in low-income families, says a new report based on the 2016 census.

But even more troubling is the racial divide among the region's poor children, according to the report being released Wednesday by a coalition of social agencies serving vulnerable families.

Children from racialized families — or families of people of colour — are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty as those from non-racialized families, or 23.3 per cent compared to 11.4 per cent, says the report. And about 84 per cent of Toronto's Indigenous families with children are living in poverty.

When it comes to newcomer families — many of whom are also racialized — almost half of Toronto region children whose parents arrived in Canada within the past five years live in poverty. That is almost three times the rate of poverty experienced by children in non-immigrant families, according to the report titled "Unequal City: The Hidden Divide Among Toronto Children and Youth."

The report is particularly worrying in light of recently released census data that shows more than half of city residents identify as members of visible minority communities.

"In a city whose motto is 'Diversity Our Strength,' we must ask ourselves whether we are supporting this diversity if we are allowing children who are racialized, Indigenous, and newcomers to live with rates of poverty that are several times higher than other children experience," the report says.

Children are considered to be living in poverty if their family income is below Statistics Canada's Low-Income Measure, after taxes, which in Toronto was \$31,301 for a household of two and \$44,266 for a household of four in 2015, based on the census. The measure is calculated as 50 per cent of the median after-tax family income.

For newcomers Jotika Hossain and Drabir Khan, who came to Toronto from Bangladesh under the federal skilled worker program, the report sends a sobering message about their future in Canada.

"We are very happy to be here and are ready to work hard," said Hossain, 28, a banker in her home country. "We just need a little help to make the transition a little bit smoother."

Khan, 30, who was marketing manager for the largest retail chain in Bangladesh, took an employment bridging program for newcomers when the family arrived in May.

But with no affordable child care for their one-year-old daughter, Hossain went back to Bangladesh so her extended family could help while she continued working at the bank to earn more money.

When Hossain returned to Toronto in August to prepare for the birth of the couple's second child, Khan took a minimum-wage job at Staples to support the family. But he had to quit to help his wife when their son was born by Caesarean section in October.

"Affordable child care is the number one issue facing our community," said Sultana Jahangir, of the South Asian Women's Rights Organization, an advocacy group dedicated to helping newcomer women in the city's Oakridge/Crescent Town area near Danforth and Pharmacy Aves.

[Graph indicating the rate of child poverty by city. Toronto being highest (26.3%), followed by Winnipeg (22.9%) and Montreal (22.6%). View full graph online].

Oakridge, which has a high concentration of highly educated young immigrant families from Bangladesh, has the third-highest rate of child poverty in the city. About 55 per cent of children in the area are living in poverty.

"Child poverty is the consequence of women's poverty and the cause of women's poverty is low labour force participation," Jahangir said.

Her group along with COSTI Immigrant Services is holding a forum on Dec. 9 at Oakridge Community Centre to discuss barriers to employment including lack of child care and low-wage precarious work.

Children in a city divided along racial and income lines have unequal access to basic supports and services such as education, good housing, social and recreational opportunities, child care and decent transit services, says the report.

As part of Toronto's 2015 poverty reduction strategy, city council has approved a range of strategies to improve access to housing, child care, good jobs, and to provide supports and services to vulnerable populations.

The report calls on the city to spend an estimated \$66 million in the 2018 budget to fully fund those initiatives. The city should also create and fund equity offices focused on Indigenous people, gender, newcomers and immigrants, accessibility needs, anti-Black racism and racial justice to ensure growing inequities are addressed as part of city policy and planning decisions, the report adds.

"Poverty is not inevitable. It should not be the reality for children and youth. The choices we make, as a city, can prevent and reduce poverty," the report concludes.

A rebounding economy, increases to federal and provincial child benefits as well as a minimum-wage hike in 2015, contributed to a 2.5 percentage point drop in child poverty in 2015 over the previous year, based on comparable data taken from annual taxfiler data, according to the report.

But the disparity among different groups and neighbourhoods is stark, with the child poverty rate ranging from 4 per cent in Kingsway South to 60 per cent in Thorncliffe Park. Thirteen city wards have areas of child poverty where rates are 50 per cent or higher, according to the report.

"The report is called 'Unequal City,' but what we are really talking about is the divide in the lives and experiences of children, especially along lines of racial identity," said Michael Polanyi of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, one of the agencies that worked on the report.

City council must also focus on the "staggeringly high" rates of child poverty among Indigenous children in Toronto, beginning with the city's proposed Indigenous affairs office, he added. "But it will have to be adequately funded and staffed to be effective."

Avvy Go, with the advocacy group, Colour of Poverty — Colour of Change, which also worked on the report, said the numbers speak to the need for targeted measures to reduce poverty among racialized and other vulnerable groups.

"What we are seeing is that poverty has a lot to do with the colour of your skin," Go said.

"Even though the overall poverty rate may have dropped a little bit, the inequities among the groups are very much racialized and gendered," she said. "If we continue to ignore the racialized and gendered inequality, then we will continue to see the gaps even as the overall numbers continue to drop."

Since 80 per cent of people get their income from employment, the city should promote equity hiring when it is procuring services from outside contractors, she said.

Toronto Councillor Joe Mihevc, who is responsible for the city's poverty reduction efforts, said the city should be ashamed of its status as the child poverty capital of Canada.

"How is it possible in a city that has attracted so much global and national wealth that this level of poverty exists? It is astounding," he said.

Most Torontonians don't see the poverty because it is hidden in apartment buildings and in corners of the city where more well-off residents don't often visit, he argued.

"It is this invisibility or semi-invisibility that is making it hard to make it a public policy issue," he said. "Our job is to get the mainstream to understand that these numbers are real."

[Struggling to survive: sequence of stories featuring four Toronto families living in poverty, trying to eke out a living, available to view online].

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