

Ontario urged to make ending child poverty an election issue ^[1]

Annual child-poverty report being released in Ottawa Tuesday looks to all parties to address the issue in the 2018 Ontario election.

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

Ontario's proposed \$15 minimum wage, legislation to address precarious work and a plan to double the number of licensed child-care spots for young children represent promising progress in the battle against child poverty, a new report says.

But with a provincial election just over six months away, any gains could be swept away at the ballot box unless all parties make ending child poverty a key platform, warns Ontario Campaign 2000 in its annual report card being released today.

"Children and families in Ontario need commitments from all parties to say enough is enough," says the network of advocacy groups dedicated to eliminating child poverty. "It is time to work together to ensure ending child and family poverty is a top priority."

More than 475,000 Ontario children — or 17.2 per cent — are living in poverty, says the report, which uses 2015 taxfiler data, the most current available.

That is slightly below the Canadian average of 17.4 per cent, or 1.2 million children, according to the network's national report, also being released Tuesday.

Ontario's child poverty rate dropped by almost 2 percentage points from the previous year and is the lowest since 2008 when Queen's Park pledged to cut the rate by 25 per cent in five years. (In 2008, one in five, or 20.1 per cent of children in the province were poor.)

The report defines poor children as those in families living below the Low-Income Measure after taxes, or 50 per cent of the median family income. That was about \$24,500 for a lone parent with one child or about \$36,400 for a couple with two kids in 2015.

Ontario's introduction this fall of free tuition for families with incomes below \$50,000, free prescription drugs for children and youth under age 25 starting in January 2018 and a three-year anti-racism strategy are also important provincial anti-poverty measures, the report says.

Nikkie Edwards, 23, would love to take advantage of the free tuition to go to college and study for a Personal Support Worker certificate. But the lack of affordable child care is preventing her from becoming a "contributing, taxpaying member of society."

"As long as we are struggling, we can't chase those dreams," she said Monday as she marched in a rally for universal, \$10-a-day child care with members of Toronto ACORN, an advocacy group that fights for social and economic justice for low- and moderate-income residents.

Edwards, her boyfriend and their one-year-old daughter Isabelle Mary are living with his parents in Etobicoke while they get on their feet. Her boyfriend is still in college and is only able to work part time. Edwards is grateful for the support, but knows living with parents isn't an option for most low-income families.

"I grew up in Montreal where they have public child care," she said. "It meant my mother had money to buy healthy food and other necessities with the money she made."

Quebec has the country's lowest child poverty rate of 14.4 per cent. That province's \$7-a-day publicly funded child-care program, with fees capped at \$20 a day for the wealthiest families, is widely viewed as key to Quebec's relatively lower child-poverty rate.

The report acknowledges the federal government's "significant" boost to the Canada Child Benefit in 2016 is not yet reflected in the data. Families are eligible to receive up to \$6,400 per child under age 6 per year and up to \$5,400 per child between the ages of 6 and 18.

"But further anti-poverty measures do not have to wait until the results are in," it says.

After missing its goal to cut child poverty by 25 per cent by 2013, the network calls on Ontario to commit to a 50-per-cent drop by 2019.

Although Ontario's recent drop in child poverty shows promise, it is not clear if all children are benefiting equally, the report says.

Children and families who are Indigenous, racialized, newcomers, living with disabilities or in lone-parent, female-led households experience much higher rates of poverty, according to the 2016 census.

A recent Toronto report based on the census noted children across the region in racialized families — or families of colour — are twice as likely to be living in poverty than other children. Almost half of kids in newcomer families — most of whom are racialized — live below the Low-Income Measure, after taxes. And a troubling 84 per cent of Toronto's Indigenous families with children are living in poverty, according to the report by a coalition of local agencies serving vulnerable families.

The disparity is mirrored by province-wide data that shows 26 per cent of racialized children and 49 per cent of newcomer kids are living in poverty, statistics that show this is not just a problem facing the Toronto region, the report notes.

"No one moves to Ontario with a dream that their children will have a one-in-two chance of living in poverty," said Jessica Mustachi, Ontario co-ordinator for Campaign 2000. "We must ensure that the government takes significant action now to address these disparities through policies that will address the systemic factors causing such high rates of poverty for some children."

According to taxfiler data, almost 16 per cent of children in Canada were living in poverty in 1989 when Parliament unanimously pledged to end child poverty by 2000. But due to lack of federal action on the promise, child poverty in Canada rose to 22.3 per cent in 2000.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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