

Quebec shows the way to fight child poverty ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It's disturbing, but sadly not surprising that a study released last week found that federal ridings with the most child poverty in Canada are also home to the highest proportion of Indigenous, visible minority, immigrant and single-parent families.

They range from rural ridings such as Manitoba's Churchill-Keewatinook Aski, which has an alarming child poverty rate of 64 per cent, to urban ridings like Toronto Centre, where it stands at 40 per cent.

What was surprising in the study by Campaign 2000, though, is that nine of the 10 ridings in Canada with the lowest child poverty rates were in Quebec ^[3]. In those ridings the rate ranged from 4.1 to 6.6 per cent. That's not an anomaly. Last year a Statistics Canada study found that though Quebec has the second-lowest household income in the the country, it also has the second-lowest rate of child poverty.

Why should that be?

According to Statistics Canada it's because the province has chosen to invest generously in two proven poverty busters: universal day care and the most generous provincial child benefits in the country.

Ottawa has a chance to emulate the Quebec model by making universal day care and increased child benefits part of its Poverty Reduction Strategy, due out in the next few weeks. It should.

The programs would cost a lot of money up-front. But in addition to achieving the laudable goal of reducing child and family poverty, they would generate substantial savings and economic benefits for everyone.

Implementing both programs, for example, could save the public \$72 billion to \$85 billion that Campaign 2000 says is currently spent each year on services associated with child poverty, such as urgent health care, shelter costs and the criminal justice system.

And simply creating a universal child care system would result in an immediate boost to the economy and an increase in tax revenues.

A study conducted by the Ontario government, for example, found that every dollar invested in child care would add \$2.47 to the provincial economy. And a TD Bank study found that for every \$1 invested, provincial and federal governments receive \$1.50 in increased tax revenues.

Indeed, study after study has shown a national child care program is the best way to help women get back into the workforce, boost family incomes, reduce child poverty and shrink the wage gap.

But, so far, the Trudeau government has yet to deliver one. That's despite the prime minister's boast at the World Economic Forum in Davos this year that Canada could add \$150 billion to its economy over the next eight years if more women entered and advanced in the workforce.

Instead, his government set aside a mere \$700 million a year over the next decade for child care in last year's budget. That's well under the \$1 billion a year that Paul Martin's Liberal government promised 13 years ago and far short of the \$2.5 billion Quebec invests annually in its program, which delivers quality, universal day care at rates of \$7.30 to \$20 per day. Those are fees Torontonians, who shoulder the highest day care costs in the country, can only dream about.

Ottawa did take a giant step towards reducing child poverty when it introduced the Canada Child Benefit in 2016. That program, which is similar to Quebec's \$2 billion Child Assistance Payments program, is expected to pull 300,000 children out of poverty. But the Trudeau government could do better. After all, there are more than 1.2 million children living in poverty in Canada. They all deserve a helping hand.

In 1989 members of the House of Commons unanimously voted to end child poverty in Canada by 2000. Not only have they not succeeded, but poverty rates for children are higher now, at 17.4 per cent, than they were in 1989 when the rate stood at 15.8 per cent.

It's past time for Ottawa to change that. Quebec is showing the way.

Related link: Riding by riding analysis shows child poverty in Canada knows no boundaries ^[4]

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