

Unchecked inequality is driving child poverty ^[1]

Author: Robinson, Randy

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EXCERPTS

Take a guess: what year was Ontario richest? Was it 1945? 1967? 2002?

The correct answer is 2019. That year, inflation-adjusted economic activity per person — what economists call real GDP per capita — hit a record level. Just before COVID-19, Ontario was richer than ever.

Yet we still had half a million children in poverty.

The contrast gets pretty stark in downtown Toronto. Canada's Big Six banks have offices there, near the corner of King and Bay. They made \$46.6 billion in profits in 2019. Their CEOs' salaries averaged more than \$11 million.

But east of Bay Street, the federal riding of Toronto Centre has the highest child poverty rate in Ontario. Thirty-five per cent of kids there never have enough.

Living in poverty can mean not enough food, or not enough nutritious food. It can mean black mould in the walls. It can mean being cold all winter and hot all summer. It can mean living with bedbugs, cockroaches and rodents. It always means stress and anxiety.

For too many children, that's life in the shadows of the bank towers.

Toronto Centre is the most densely populated riding in Canada. It is fast-growing and diverse, with a population that's younger than the Ontario average and more likely to be working. Seventy per cent of adults have a diploma or degree, well above the 55-per-cent provincial average.

In northwestern Ontario, the federal riding of Kenora has the second-highest child poverty rate in Ontario. It is a vast land of immense wealth. It covers 290,000 square kilometres. Its gold mines alone hold millions of ounces of a precious metal that retails for \$1,800 U.S. an ounce.

Yet 34 per cent of this land's children live in poverty.

Wealth and poverty sit side by side in every part of Ontario. There is money here, and it's more than enough to wipe out child poverty — if we decide to.

Unfortunately, the powers-that-be aren't in any hurry. Ottawa says it will cut child poverty in half by 2030. Queen's Park has no specific timeline.

This lack of urgency is shocking.

To be fair, the child poverty rate would be twice as bad if not for government transfers like the Canada Child Benefit. In Ontario, just over one child in six lives in poverty. Without transfers, it would be one in three.

But we must do more to help kids now. We need to increase transfers, boost parents' wages, and make life more affordable.

We know how to do it. We can raise the minimum wage and improve labour standards; put the brakes on discrimination in the job market; build more non-market housing and get rents under control: and recognize the rights of Indigenous peoples. We can make child care affordable and help thousands of parents go to work.

Good policy is not enough, though. What we need is political will.

If Ontario is richer than ever but 500,000 children are in poverty, then clearly the problem is one of distribution.

With the right leadership, at every level of government, we can fix this. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that when governments dare to use the tools at their disposal, they can do big things.

Ontario is a place of incredible wealth. That wealth can end child poverty.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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