

Almost 900,000 Canadian children living in poverty, StatsCan finds [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Almost a decade after the deadline by which the House of Commons was unanimously resolved to eliminate child poverty, Statistics Canada says there are still almost 900,000 children living in the poorest of homes.

The latest census numbers released Thursday show that an estimated 879,955 Canadian children are living in low-income households, and that more than a third of these deprived children are in the care of single mothers.

That grim portrait of the country's most vulnerable has changed little in a quarter of a century.

In 1980, 20 per cent of pre-schoolers and 18.7 per cent of school-aged children lived in low-income families.

Twenty-five years later, those numbers barely improved to 19.3 per cent and 17 per cent respectively.

J.J. Stiles doesn't exactly fit the typical image of Canada's poor.

The single mother of two girls has a university degree, a diploma in radio and television arts and a certificate to teach English-as-a-second-language. She works in Toronto as an administrative assistant and makes just over \$37,000 a year.

Although Statistic Canada's low-income cutoff - Canada's closest equivalent to a poverty line - for a Toronto family of three is \$31,801, Stiles comes up against financial difficulties every month.

"Come on. If I'm above the poverty line - you've got to be kidding me, because I am living in poverty," she said.

"The poverty line? I think they need to reassess that."

After rent and groceries, Stiles sometimes finds herself at the end of the month washing clothes by hand and hanging them to dry in the bathtub. She can't go into her purse and find a spare loonie for the laundry, as she simply doesn't have one.

A few months back her daughter needed black pants and black shoes for a school concert. Stiles was unsure where she would get the money. Thankfully her mother offered to buy the new togs.

"I don't have money in my bank. I don't have RRSPs. I don't have any savings. I don't have any extra money to put away for my children, for their school," she said.

"I live paycheque to paycheque."

In 1989, the House of Commons unanimously passed a resolution to eliminate poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000.

Statistics Canada defines low-income families as those who spend at least one-fifth more of their income than the average family on basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing.

Stiles was lured to Toronto more than a year ago with hopes of a better paying job than the one she had in North Bay, Ont. - where her yearly income was \$14,000.

Not only did the move mean a higher income, but she believed it would mean a brighter future for her girls.

Things didn't pan out the way she had envisioned.

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Instead of fresh vegetables and cuts of meat, she buys chicken fingers and frozen vegetables. These are the more frugal options at the grocery store.

The 2006 census marks the first time low-income rates were calculated based on after-tax income, a move the agency said more accurately reflects what families have available to spend.

Using the old criteria, before-tax income, there were some 1.2 million children living in poverty in 2005 - relatively unchanged from the 2001 census.

For a family of four in a large city, an income of \$38,610 is the cutoff point. The same family in a rural area would be considered low-income at \$26,579.

Lars Osberg, an economics professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said the median income has been flat in Canada since the early 1980s and that at the very bottom of the income distribution the country has "seen really significant cuts to social assistance and social programs."

"Income gains in Canada have been very narrowly concentrated at the top of the distribution," said Osberg. "Most people haven't seen much change in their real income."

While many Canadians think of children living in poverty as an issue in developing countries, for the Canadian children living in poverty the third world seems a lot closer to home.

World Vision is an international development agency but after donors asked about home-grown poverty, the organization took an in-depth look at Canada's poor and decided there was a need for some of their work to be done here.

Their study entitled "Living Below the Line" was based largely on the 2001 census numbers as well as their own research.

Clayton Rowe, with World Vision, said the study found Canada's poor was made up of new immigrants to the country, aboriginal peoples and that the largest group of most vulnerable children came from families headed by single mothers.

He also found 40 per cent of these poor children live in urban centres, such as Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Vancouver.

"How do you compare poverty in sub-Saharan Africa with poverty in Canada?" Rowe asked, adding that it is difficult to ignore the ones in front of us for the others across the ocean.

He said no matter where they live, children should have the opportunity to be healthy, educated and safe.

So when the economics of a household falls below a certain level, Canadian kids may not necessarily be starving but they go to bed hungry, Rowe said.

He gave the example of people earning the minimum wage in Ontario will not be able to make it out of poverty. He cited the example of a single mom with two children who barely have enough to pay the rent, let alone the child-care issues.

The latest Ontario budget just lifted the minimum wage to \$8.75.

Ann Decter is the national coordinator of Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada public movement to build awareness and support for the resolution to end child poverty.

She said politicians made a grand statement to end child poverty, but they didn't talk about the steps needed to be taken in order to achieve that goal.

"Basically there is a complete failure of implementation," she said, adding that Campaign 2000 is trying to push the government to adhere to timetables and targets.

While the federal government has failed to do enough to end this problem, she said some provinces are trying.

Decter mentions Quebec's expansion of affordable childcare, increased child benefits and improved parental leave has resulted in a consistent decline in child poverty rates since 1997.

Decter said Newfoundland has started to bring in changes but it is too early to know if those measures have taken affect.

She says the rest of Canada will have to adopt what has worked in Quebec in order to reduce child poverty.

A 2007 study by UNICEF, "Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries," found that kids in Canada fared better than children in the United States and Britain. But Canada is hardly a leader of the international pack.

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Twenty-one countries were ranked as to how well they looked after their children.

Overall the Netherlands was ranked in the top spot (4.2) when it came to child well-being. The United States (18) and the United Kingdom (18.2) nearly tied for last place.

Canada tied with Greece (11.8) for a spot in the middle, just above Poland (12.3) but below Germany (11.2).

- reprinted from The Canadian Press

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