

# Flagship program to ease child poverty missing those most in need say critics [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Bailey, Sue

**Source:** Canadian Press

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 26 Oct 2002

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

OTTAWA (CP) - Paulette Halupa of Summerside, P.E.I., knows well that weary quip of the poor: Too much month, not enough money. Aimee Clark of Fort Smith, N.W.T., eats less or goes without when there isn't enough food to go around.

Four years after federal Liberals launched their flagship program to fight child poverty, both mothers say they're no better off and neither are their children. "I could probably go out tomorrow and get an \$80,000-a-year job," said Clark, 42, a former accountant and single mother of five.

"But I can't afford the day-care costs."

She and Halupa are among thousands of Canada's poorest citizens who've yet to feel a boost from Ottawa's biggest effort to lift 1.3 million kids - and their parents - out of poverty.

The National Child Benefit was the government's answer to a problem that has long stymied policy-makers: how to get people off welfare and into the workforce.

Last year, Ottawa spent \$2.5 billion on extra supplements for low-income families. This year, the child benefit pays up to \$2,380 for two kids of working parents who earned less than \$22,400 in 2001.

Payments fall as income increases and the government cites a slight decrease in the number of low-income families as proof the program is working.

But in many parts of the country, those on social assistance - the poorest of the poor - have seen no hike in their meagre monthly budgets.

That's because Ottawa allows provinces and territories to claw back the National Child Benefit from those on welfare. Federal money recouped by those governments is to be used for child care, health services and other programs to help parents land and keep jobs.

Provinces, territories and First Nations spent \$735 million on such initiatives last year.

"The National Child Benefit tries to ensure if you leave social assistance you're not financially worse off," said John Walsh, a director of income support and social policy for Human Resources Development Canada.

Trouble is, the program in its current form is robbing a cash-strapped Peter to help out Paul, critics say.

"The government comes up with this program to put money in the hands of families," said Clark in an interview from her home near Alberta's border with the Northwest Territories.

"But then they say: 'Let's think of ways to take it away from them. And let's do it to the ones who aren't working: those lazy so-and-so's who are at home raising their children.' "

The territorial government takes back \$367 a month from Clark's social assistance cheque and puts it in a pool of funds for local programs, she said.

But the one that would help her most, a nursery school for her five-year-old twins, would still cost \$195 a month, she said. And there's no help with transportation costs.

"When you don't have enough money to cover groceries, it can be very difficult to do."

A nearby Aboriginal Head Start program isn't an option either because her children aren't native.

"I'm funding these programs but my kids can't access them."

And despite the best intentions of the National Child Benefit, Clark will suffer when she goes off welfare next month and raises her

\$1,300-a-month income with accounting contracts and more child support from her ex-partner, she said.

She will lose drug, dental and seasonal clothing benefits.

"It's incredibly frustrating," said Clark, who has four children aged 2 to 11 at home.

Full-time day care for the youngest three would cost a prohibitive \$1,800 a month and subsidies aren't enough, she said.

"You just can't get ahead. They said they would reduce child poverty rates. That's a joke.

"They're not addressing the issues," she said of those in power. "The issues are having higher wages, having jobs available, child care.

"If you have young children at home, it's practically impossible for you to work."

Federal officials acknowledge more must be done.

Manitoba and New Brunswick are among few provinces that let welfare recipients keep most of the child benefit, said Walsh.

The Liberals have promised long-term boosts to the National Child Benefit that will eventually raise incomes for all low-income families - including the poorest.

And Ottawa in 2000 earmarked \$2.2 billion to be spent by 2006 on early learning, day care, parental resources and other initiatives. The programs are to be set up and run by the provinces and territories that have constitutional jurisdiction over such matters.

That won't excuse more than four years of "abhorrent" social policy, said Martha Friendly, co-ordinator of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit at University of Toronto.

"Why do we think the gap between rich and poor is getting bigger? It's because of things like that," she said of the National Child Benefit clawback.

"If you want to create good social policy there are other things you can do to encourage people to work.

"We need to have affordable housing. We need to have universal child care."

The federal government cuts cheques but doesn't press the provinces to spend that money on needs stressed by child experts for years, Friendly added.

Unwieldy funding deals between governments, coupled with vague goals, make tracking the funds a challenge.

In Ontario, federal money needed for child care was spent last year on children's mental health programs that should have been funded from provincial health budgets, Friendly said.

A report Thursday by a coalition of 85 groups working to erase child poverty says 82 per cent of Canadian kids under six had no access in 2001 to a regulated child care and early learning space.

Campaign 2000 based the figure on data collected by the Childcare Resource and Research unit headed by Friendly.

Ottawa's efforts to wean people off welfare also lack a labour market strategy to offer relevant skills, training and support, she said.

As the federal government plays tug-of-war with the provinces and territories for power over social policy, those who need help the most aren't getting it, she concludes.

"The level of thoughtfulness, vision and plans for implementation are very thin. I expect more . . . of elected governments in Canada."

In Summerside, Halupa, 46, dreams of having enough to last the month and a bit extra for her kids to take the odd school trip.

A mother of seven, she has five children aged 12 to 19 still at home and two in university. Her husband was badly hurt in a snowmobiling accident 16 years ago and can't work.

Halupa works 12-week stints at the local Salvation Army for \$7 an hour, but can usually only land two contracts a year. The thought of student debt keeps her from upgrading her education.

While on social assistance, the provincial government takes \$200 off her monthly cheque for programs like the one that subsidizes prescription drugs for working-poor families.

"The programs themselves that they're offering are good things," Halupa said. "It's just not a good idea to take the money from the poorest people in the communities to do it."

No one wants to wind up on welfare, but life throws sudden curves, she added.

Halupa has tried repeatedly to get off social assistance, only to be driven back by poor wages, high prescription drug costs and other factors.

"There really doesn't seem to be a big helping hand out there."

-Reprinted from Canadian Press.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** subsidy <sup>[3]</sup>

poverty <sup>[4]</sup>  
affordability <sup>[5]</sup>  
federal programs <sup>[6]</sup>

---

**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/07/flagship-program-ease-child-poverty-missing-those-most-need-say>

#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/07/flagship-program-ease-child-poverty-missing-those-most-need-say> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/subsidy> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>