

Child poverty rate called 'tragedy': Despite boom times, pre-schoolers most at risk, report says [CA] ^[1]

Author: Thompson, Allan

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EXCERPTS:

A decade of economic prosperity in Canada has done little to reduce poverty and, in an alarming new trend, pre-school children are the most likely age group to live in "chronic poverty," the annual poverty profile report from the National Council of Welfare says.

"This is a tragedy. How do six-year-olds who have spent those critical developmental years in poverty have a fair chance at life?" the acting chair of the council, Allyce Herle, said at a news conference yesterday.

"It is not acceptable that Canadian governments and citizens tolerate this," Herle said. "The fight against poverty and exclusion seems to be slipping off the public agenda in Canada and out of the public eye. This is dangerous ... because we are wasting human potential."

At a time when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has asked a team of top bureaucrats to craft a new policy package for him to unveil this fall, the council, which advises the federal human resources department, called yesterday for the kind of political will that would result in a coherent new strategy against poverty.

Key elements of such a strategy would include an "adequate" minimum wage to help the working poor, a national child-care policy that would be of special importance to single mothers living in poverty, and a housing strategy to help the poor before they slide into homelessness.

The poverty profile report is based on the latest complete data available from Statistics Canada, for 1999. It shows poverty rates did decline slightly in 1999 from the year before, from 16.9 per cent in 1998 to 16.2 per cent in 1999.

But that 0.7 percentage point drop in poverty levels was nowhere near the impressive growth rate of the economy during the same period. The economy grew by almost 5 per cent from 1998 to 1999.

In 1999, there were about 4.9 million Canadians living in poverty - more than a million, or 26 per cent, more than in 1989. And a quarter of those living in poverty were children.

And despite the over-all reduction from 1998 to 1999, poverty rates actually worsened for some groups.

Poverty among unattached, senior women increased. The same was true for couples under 65 without young children and unattached men under 65.

Single-parent fathers were the only group who seemed to be benefiting from the economic boom. Their poverty rate fell by 5.1 percentage points. In 1999, about 18.7 per cent of children lived in poverty, a rate higher than the national average.

This year's report has a new section titled "duration of poverty" that draws upon a Statistics Canada study that started in 1993.

The Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, rather than measuring poverty on an annual basis, follows the same set of people for six years in a row. According to that study, pre-school children were more likely than any other age group to have been living in poverty for the last six years.

"Of all age groups, the highest rate for this chronic poverty was among pre-school children, despite the fact that in 1989 the House of Commons unanimously passed a motion to eliminate child poverty by 2000," Herle said.

The council called for an integrated family and labour market policy to overcome lack of co-ordination within the federal government and with the provinces.

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