

# Ending child poverty: A promise unfulfilled <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Twenty years ago this week Parliament voted unanimously to eliminate child poverty within a decade. It didn't happen. Ten years on, it still hasn't happened.

The most recent statistics, taken in 2007 before the recession hit, show 637,000 children, or 9.5 per cent of all Canadian kids, living in poverty. Why has Canada failed where other wealthy countries succeeded? In part because voters and governments have balked at aggressively redistributing wealth. But that's only a small part of the story. More significant, according to sociologist John Myles, is a sea-change in Canadian work and family life.

Parents can be poor for a host of reasons, but the two most powerful predictors of a slide into poverty are the loss of a job or the breakup of a marriage.

The past three decades have seen higher divorce rates and a near doubling of the proportion of single-parent families, from 6 per cent to 11 per cent. As Mr. Myles argues, this is significant because family formation is unlikely to respond to public policy.

When parents suddenly becomes single parents, they lose the economies of scale associated with a partnership: shared costs of accommodation and food, for instance, as well as the insurance of having a potential second earner. Of all families living in poverty, more than 40 per cent are led by a single parent.

Another growing trend is for highly educated (and high-earning) women to marry highly educated men, creating super-earning families at the top of the scale and stagnation at the bottom. In 1980, Prof. Myles said, the top earning women were married to men in the lower-middle income bracket. Today the top-earning women are married to the top-earning men, and the lowest-earning women to the lowest-earning men.

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The majority of children under six are being raised by parents under 35. But the earnings of workers under 35 have fallen or remained the same in relative terms over the last 30 years, which is blamed on the decline in manufacturing, growth of the service sector and drop in the rate of unionization among other factors. Young people also stay in school longer, so it takes longer to establish a career, he said.

Another factor is that recent immigrants earn substantially less than their Canadian-born counterparts, despite their higher levels of education. The poverty rate for immigrant children under 15 in 2005 was 33 per cent, compared to 12 per cent for non-immigrants. Among First Nations people living off-reserve, the rate was 34 per cent.

Poverty is not a life sentence, however. People move up and out of poverty all the time, although there is a minority stuck at the bottom of the scale, according to a recently published study by economists Shelley Phipps and Peter Burton. The 10-year study found that 5 per cent of children stayed in the bottom quintile of income over that decade, forming a small but significant chronic poverty group.

They also found that a child whose primary caregiver becomes a working single parent is 21.5 times more likely to slip to the bottom 20 per cent of the income scale.

Ms. Phipps said it's surprising that Canadians governments, cited abroad for addressing poverty among seniors so effectively, have failed in targeting poverty in the very young.

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- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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

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

demographics <sup>[4]</sup>

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#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/09/12/ending-child-poverty-promise-unfulfilled> [2]

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