

Ottawa lacks plan to fight child poverty, coalition says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When it comes to helping Canada's 639,000 children living in poverty, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

That is the sobering message from Campaign 2000, a national coalition of more than 120 groups and individuals that has been lobbying for federal action on the issue for two decades.

"Neither the promised poverty elimination or plans have materialized," the group says in its 20th anniversary progress report on Ottawa's 1989 pledge to tackle the issue. The report, obtained by the Star, is being released Wednesday and calls on the government to cut poverty by at least 50 per cent by 2020.

Canada's poverty rate in 2009 was 9.5 per cent. And although the rate has inched up and down with the business cycle over the past 20 years, the report notes that the problem remains largely unchanged from 1989, when 11.9 per cent of the nation's children were living in poverty.

"This change of 20 per cent over 20 years is strikingly small when compared to the unprecedented period of growth since 1998 . . . and should not be mistaken for long-term improvement," the report says.

Since Campaign 2000's first report in 2001, the Canadian economy has more than doubled. But the incomes of the country's poorest 20 per cent of families have remained stagnant, the report notes.

Meantime, the gap between rich and poor families has widened leaving middle income families working longer hours just to keep up.

In recent years, two federal reports, one from the Senate and another from a House of Commons committee, have offered extensive national plans to fight poverty.

The lack of a coordinated federal strategy dismays Toronto mother Becky McFarlane, 36.

As someone who grew up in poverty, left home at 17 and dropped out of university, McFarlane is determined to ensure her daughter Levia, 3, doesn't suffer the same fate.

After several years on welfare, she found work in a restaurant that trains people recovering from mental health and addiction problems. Thirteen years later, McFarlane has worked her way up to executive director.

"I really did buy into the boot-strap mentality to pull myself out of poverty," she says. She paid off \$12,000 in student debt, bought a modest semi-detached house and started a family with her partner.

But her meagre maternity benefits and the scramble to find affordable child care threatened to plunge her back into poverty.

McFarlane racked up \$8,000 in credit card debt to pay monthly child care bills of \$1,900 while she waited for a subsidy. But when she took on a second job to help pay down the debt, she no longer qualified for a subsidy.

She is now going to school part time - in addition to working two jobs - in the hope of switching to a better-paying career that will allow her to keep her head above water.

"Everyone says we are supposed to get a job to support ourselves. But it is literally impossible to do that without good, affordable child care," she says.

The federal government has said the best way to fight poverty is to grow the economy, noting that its Economic Action Plan created 460,000 new jobs since 2009.

But McFarlane says Ottawa needs to understand how poverty is linked to affordable housing, child care, education and employment.

"Child care is not just one aspect of a poverty reduction strategy - it is an essential and inherent part of it," she says. "Poverty reduction is like a machine that has many parts and without one part, it is broken."

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