

B.C. has highest child poverty rate in Canada ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

British Columbia has the highest child poverty rate in Canada, with one in five kids considered statistically poor, says a report that calls for quick action to alleviate a worsening situation in the western province.

The report by the child and youth advocacy group First Call said B.C.'s child poverty rate is 18.6 per cent compared to the national rate of 13.3 per cent. Manitoba's rate, the second-highest in the country, stands at 17.3 per cent.

"B.C. stands out as having done the least among all provinces to bring down child and family poverty through government supports and programs," said Adrienne Montani, First Call's provincial co-ordinator.

"Concerted government action in the form of a comprehensive poverty reduction plan for the province is long overdue," she said in a statement Tuesday.

But Children and Family Development Minister Stephanie Cadieux said the government has taken action, focusing on economic growth, raising the minimum wage, funding social housing and making child care more affordable and accessible.

"The reality is that there are families that continue to struggle economically and, therefore, we continue to focus on growing the economy, creating jobs and providing supports where they are most needed," said Cadieux in an statement.

The authors of the 2013 Child Poverty Report Card used the most recent economic data available from Statistics Canada to issue their "dismal" findings for B.C.

"The child poverty rate rose from 14.3 per cent in 2010 to 18.6 per cent in 2011," said the report that used the agency's low-income cutoffs before tax as a measure of poverty.

"On this measure, one in five B.C. children were poor - the highest rate of any province. The number of poor children in B.C. was 153,000 - enough children to fill the (Vancouver) Canucks' stadium over eight times," it said in reference to Rogers Arena, which has 19,000 seats.

First Call's report card makes 16 recommendations, including increasing and indexing the B.C. minimum wage and welfare rates and adopting a \$10-a-day child care program to cut the child poverty rate to seven per cent within the next seven years.

"First Call's overarching recommendation for B.C. is for government to adopt a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines and a cabinet minister with the authority and responsibility to ensure government is achieving its targets on time," the report said.

It recommended raising B.C.'s minimum wage to \$12 per hour from the current \$10.25 an hour and indexing future annual minimum-wage increases to cost of living increases.

Female single-parent families appear to be hit the hardest by the rise in child poverty, Montani said.

She said there was a dramatic increase in families headed by female single parents, with a rise to 49.8 per cent in 2011, up from 21.5 per cent a year earlier.

"We were pretty shocked by this statistic. The only thing we can find so far that actually corroborates it is that the median market income for female lone-parent families dropped between 2010 and 2011 from \$32,000 a year to \$21,500 a year for B.C.," she said in an interview.

Every other province saw median income increases for female single-parent families, Montani said.

The report also recommended bringing welfare rates up to the poverty line, especially in urban areas such as Vancouver.

"In 2011, a B.C. two-parent family with two children aged 10 and 15 on income assistance received a total income of \$22,005," the report said.

"That's a whopping \$21,287 below the Statistics Canada poverty line for a family of four in a large urban area like Metro Vancouver."

The report stated a single parent on welfare with one child received \$17,404, which is \$11,602 below the poverty line. It also cited B.C. government numbers that said there were 37,777 children in families on income assistance in 2011.

Montani said the report does not include cost estimates to implement the poverty reduction plans, but she urged the government to

review its tax and investment policies.

"Generally, we need a fairer taxation system, first of all," she said. "Government has been giving away tax revenue by lowering tax rates, both for individuals but also for profitable corporations. There's always choices in government in finding money for this and that and we know that this kind of investment in children's health and well-being will start to reduce those health care costs everybody's freaking about."

However, Cadieux said the government's focus on jobs is working, and unemployment rates are in the single digits across B.C.

"That growth allows government to continue providing targeted supports to low-income families," she said.

She said the government has invested \$3.6 billion over the last decade to provide affordable housing, and more than 98,000 households benefit from social housing.

The minimum wage is among the highest in Canada, she added, and during the next three years the government will open an additional 2,000 child-care spaces on top of the 100,000 that now exist.

Cadieux said the B.C. Early Childhood Tax Benefit will provide additional relief to families when it starts in 2015.

"But there will always be more to do. That's why we will continue to focus on growing the economy, creating jobs and providing supports that target the effects of poverty on low-income families," she said.

NDP children and families critic Carole James said under the Liberal government, B.C. has had the highest rates of child poverty for nine of the last 10 years.

She said the government's only attempt at a solution was to develop a pilot project that was abandoned after it served only 72 families when thousands of kids are living in poverty.

-reprinted from the Province

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

Tags: poverty ^[3]

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