

Toronto child poverty rates at 'epidemic' levels ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child poverty in Toronto has reached "epidemic" levels with 29 per cent of children - almost 149,000 - living in low-income families, according to new data ^[3] being released Wednesday by a coalition of community activists and social agencies.

Among Canada's 13 major cities, Toronto is tied with Saint John, N.B., as having the highest child poverty rate, the coalition says.

Across Toronto, almost 40 per cent of the city's 140 neighbourhoods have child poverty rates of 30 per cent or more, according to the coalition's analysis of Statistics Canada's recently released 2012 tax filer data.

But neighbourhood disparity varies dramatically - from 5 per cent in Leaside, Lawrence Park and the Kingsway to 50 per cent or more in Regent Park, Moss Park and Thorncliffe Park, the data show. And residents of African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Caribbean and Latin American background are more likely to be living in poverty.

Most troubling, however, is that after gradually decreasing to 27 per cent in 2010 from a high of 32 per cent in 2004, child poverty in the city is on the rise, the coalition says.

The alarming statistics cry out for strong municipal leadership, starting in the mayor's office, says the coalition, which includes the Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Family Service Toronto, Social Planning Toronto and others.

The groups have invited leading mayoral candidates to address the issue at a community event in downtown Toronto on Thursday morning and to sign a pledge in support of city council's unanimous April 2014 motion to develop a poverty reduction strategy for the city by early 2015.

"We want to make sure that mayoral candidates and city council candidates recognize the severity and the importance of the issue," said Laurel Rothman, of Family Service Toronto.

"Now is the time for the next mayor of Toronto to take political leadership of this important work and deliver results," she added.

The coalition's analysis is part of a larger report on child poverty it is planning to release this fall as the city develops its larger strategy.

"The fact that in 2011 and now again in 2012 we see no reduction but an increase in the number of children living in low-income families is quite disturbing," said Michael Polanyi of the Toronto CAS.

"The hope was we were coming out of the economic downturn," he said. "But it doesn't seem to be translating to improvements in the lives of children."

Toronto single mother Veronica Snooks, 51, struggled to raise five children in poverty.

Although her children are now adults and only her youngest, a 20-year-old son, still lives with her, Snooks worries about other families following in her footsteps.

The city's lack of affordable housing meant she stayed in abusive relationships longer than she should have, causing her to lose her children to child welfare and spiral into addiction and depression.

"You stay longer because of poverty. It just seems easier to take the abuse," she said. "We suffer for our children."

Snooks, who moved into a Toronto Community Housing townhouse in Flemingdon Park eight years ago, credits the affordable rent and social programs aimed at assisting single moms for helping her beat her addictions and turn her life around.

However, her low-income neighbourhood, where 46 per cent of families live in poverty, is often "like living in the midst of a fire with all the police and drug busts," she said.

"I love the community, but not the way we are treated by police and housing management," she said.

The coalition's analysis is the first detailed look at child poverty in the city since a 2008 report by the Toronto CAS.

But unlike that earlier report, which compared Toronto to other GTA cities, the current analysis looks at how the city stacks up nationally.

"We're the highest in terms of poverty, but we're also the highest in terms of wealth and opportunity," Rothman noted. "We need to make sure that the wealth and opportunity is also spread widely and deeply."

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