

Reversing income inequality in Toronto possible, experts say ^[1]

Author: Metro News

Source: Metro News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Feb 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Experts and activists agree that reversing inequality is possible. The Star asked five of them to offer their solutions to Toronto's income disparity problem.

New research from United Way says Toronto is now the income disparity capital of Canada, with inequality growing by 31 per cent over the past 25 years.

But the study also shows that our city is resilient and ready for change: 95 per cent of residents still feel they can make a difference in their community, and 57 per cent think most people can be trusted.

"That's a really good starting place," says United Way's director of research, Michelynn Laflèche.

Healthier Jobs

As far as Access Alliance Health Services is concerned, the minimum wage needs to be \$14 an hour.

From contract staff to summer students, the organization is trying to ingrain a living wage and full-time work in its business model. That perhaps is not surprising, given that executive director Axelle Janczur sees the physical impact of income inequality and precarious work every day at her clinics.

"You don't have good food, you don't have good clothes ... That impacts your mental health. People have stress. People have digestive problems."

But by making workplaces healthier, employers make a difference, she says.

Sometimes the changes are simple: giving workers the right safety equipment, providing kitchen spaces, or promoting proper occupational health information. But systemic change is part of the solution, too.

A recent report by the Wellesley Institute revealed that one-third of workers in Ontario do not have access to medical or dental benefits through the workplace. Under the province's Employment Standards Act, employees are not guaranteed any paid sick days. Many employers are choosing to hire people for multiple part-time positions rather than one person for a full-time role to cut costs.

But experts argue that stable, well-rewarded work translates into a more prosperous, more equitable economy. And that presents an opportunity for businesses to make informed choices about hiring practices and wages, says Janczur.

Decent Work

The temporary-work economy has gone too far, says John Cartwright of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council.

"We need to reverse the trend of so many companies that no longer hire you for a job," he argues.

That is now within the realm of possibility in Ontario: the province has just announced a review of its employment standards and labour relations laws.

Cartwright hopes the government will regulate practices wherein temporary agency employees get lower wages and poor benefits even when performing the same roles as permanent staff.

Better models already exist in places like Australia, where casual employees must be paid 15 to 25 per cent above minimum wage to compensate for having fewer benefit entitlements. In France, temp-agency workers get a 10 per cent bonus upon completing an assignment.

Cartwright hopes to see employers taking greater responsibility for temps, along with government action.

"It really needs to be peer pressure within corporate Canada to say ... we've made a mistake and the pendulum's gone too far this way," he says.

Youth Opportunities

In fostering opportunity, collaboration is key, says Kofi Hope, managing director of Community Empowering Enterprises.

Hope's group breaks down barriers for Toronto black youth. He wants to see more formal jobs partnerships between community agencies, schools and the private sector.

Through "education-to-employment pipelines," businesses would identify skills shortages and communicate them to grassroots groups. Those groups could then recruit young people and help connect them to college training programs to fill the gap.

The result? Better jobs for young people, more students in schools and more skilled workers for businesses.

Such partnerships have already proved effective in places like Cleveland. There, through the co-ordination of the city's community foundation, a transit-accessible workforce training centre was established that provides educational scholarships based on hiring needs. Among adult graduates there, 85 per cent get jobs in their field.

Collaboration on that scale is not yet happening in Toronto, says Hope.

"We have three different parts of the equation that talk different languages that don't always talk to each other ... (but) we all have that shared goal," he adds.

And he's hopeful that the idea is starting to gain traction in the city, with initiatives like the Metrolinx Community Benefits Agreement.

"It's really at that experimental stage right now in Toronto," he says. "But I think that is part of the future."

Building Community

"One of the challenges of income inequality is that people get disconnected from one another and we get pockets of social isolation," says Michael Hall, vice-president of program research and development at the YMCA of Greater Toronto.

"We need to bridge the divides that income seems to be creating in our community," he says.

Hall points to high youth unemployment in the city as evidence that the needs of young people in particular require attention, an area that the YMCA is already working in.

One of the programs the YMCA runs for youth is a free night of activities for teens planned by the youth themselves.

"The teen-nights program is free, so it doesn't matter if you belong to the YMCA or whether you have money."

Hall says youth need more such spaces across Toronto where they can meet a broad cross-section of their peers and learn from each other.

A teen night can mean formal resumé and leadership workshops or recreational activities like open-mic nights or sports.

No matter what the activity, the nights help build social skills, says Hall.

"When you fight social isolation, you're creating the social ties that help build a social community," Hall says.

Increasing availability and quality of child care

When it comes to barriers women face in the labour market, Heather McGregor, CEO of YWCA Toronto, sees a clear front-runner: "Access to affordable child care, high-quality child care."

McGregor says this is "critical" for women to be able to work and have a "sustainable income so that they will have a better, healthier life for their children and themselves."

She's worried about the potential sale of TDSB schools, saying many of them house precious child-care facilities.

"There are about 16,000 (children) on the waiting list for subsidized child care right now," says McGregor.

She points to a lack of a national child-care policy and a lack of investment at the provincial and city level.

In addition to increasing the number of spots available to families, flexibility of child care also needs to be addressed.

"Many of the women we work with have precarious employment in that they have several part-time jobs," says McGregor.

As a result, traditional daycare hours between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. don't always work for them.

"Many, many families in society have this problem," she says.

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/equality> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce>