

# REDUCING CHILD POVERTY SHOULD BE EVERYONE'S GOAL



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Earlier this month, *The Economist* published a chart based on a study conducted by UNICEF showing that child poverty in the “rich world” had increased over the past decade. While the Nordic countries reported child-poverty rates of less than five per cent, 15 per cent of Canadian children live below the national poverty line. Expressed another way, UNICEF reports that Canada is 19th among 26 countries ranked according to their records on child poverty, which is no change from the situation five years earlier when it placed Canada 17th of 23 countries. For those who are interested in comparisons with other jurisdictions, some of the countries ahead of Canada are Denmark, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.

In terms of numbers, during the boom times from 1996 to 2001, more than 2.1 million children — one-third of all children in Canada — were exposed to at least one year of poverty.

As distressing as these indicators are, we should also be concerned about the way in which poverty is distributed within the population.

More than 33 per cent of children who are identified as members of a visible minority and 49 per cent of the children of recent immigrants are classified as poor and living in poverty.

In addition to the stark reality of child poverty is the evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth that suggests one-quarter of Canadian youth may be “developmentally vulnerable at school entry” and, therefore, at risk in our school systems. Not surprisingly, we find that the proportion of children with delayed vocabulary development is less than eight per cent of children from affluent families compared to more than 35 per cent among poor children.

The issue of child poverty should be a matter of concern to all of us, whether or not we are parents of young children. The costs of poverty can be expressed in two ways: in personal terms for the individual, or as costs that society assumes when a person falls into the poverty trap.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing appreciation in academic circles of the importance of the first

five years of life to individuals and, as a corollary, to society as a whole. As a result, the early-childhood period has a public-policy component in addition to being a private matter for families. Research findings in this area has been so consistent that one can now say that “the experiences of early childhood can have a profound impact on health, well-being, and coping skills across the entire life course.”

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Moreover, there is also very compelling evidence provided by a 2004 OECD study that demonstrates the strong relationship between government social spending (excluding health) and the percentage of people who live in low-income circumstances. This study found that Denmark, with the highest level of social spending, reported the lowest level of poverty, whereas countries such as Mexico and the United States spend the least and have the highest incidence of poverty among the OECD countries.

It was the growing appreciation of the linkage between poverty, early-childhood education, intellectual and social development, and government spending that has influenced some of the recent policy thinking in this area. This holistic approach has been supported by OECD research that has concluded that the “systematic provision of early childhood services, subsidized and properly supervised by government, yields better results for both mainstream and disadvantaged children than a multiplicity of special services funded in response to family crisis or social pressures.” Even so, public funding for these activities is inadequate. For example, the current spending on child care and development programs for the zero-to-five age cohort in British Columbia is less than one-fifth of what it is for public education starting at age six.

Without the full benefit of new funding, “early childhood education and care services seem insufficient, inconsistent, and under funded.” While the federal government has taken a number of very positive steps in recent years, including the Federal-Provincial Early Childhood Development Agreement and the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care. Both of these agreements have resulted in a commitment from the federal government to provide more than \$5 billion over a five-year period to early childhood initiatives.

However, on more than one occasion, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden has argued that money alone will not solve child poverty. In

fact, he has challenged service providers and social activists to look beyond the financial elements of this problem and confront the issue by asking, “how do you build a system when you are nowhere near having one...?”

In response to his challenge, we need to invest more in eradicating child poverty by investing in the early education of our children, not just purchasing day-care places. One element is to recognize that, although money to support poor parents may help in the short term, the challenge is to develop long-term programs that are aimed at the social and intellectual development of children under six across this country.

Second, we need to have a set of operating principles or values on which to build the early-childhood-education infrastructure. The principles currently being proposed — such as quality, universality, accessibility and developmental programming — are a good starting point.

Finally, and most important, all levels of government must develop the political will to commit to meeting a national goal or standard so that new funding is appropriately accounted for. As a starting point, why not set out to better the child-poverty rates of the Nordic countries and measure ourselves against these international standards?

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