



Child Poverty and Growing Inequality – Unjust and Unsustainable

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BC has had the dubious distinction of having the worst child poverty rate in the country for eight years in a row and has exceeded the national average for eleven years – through boom and bust economic cycles. The most recent statistics put BC's rate at 12 percent (2009 after-tax measure, while the national rate was 9.5 percent.) That's 100,000 BC children.

During the same decade, income inequality in BC has increased significantly. In 2009, the bottom half of BC families with children received less than one quarter of the total income pie. Meanwhile, the richest 10 percent of families walked away with more than 27 percent of the pie. In fact, over the last 20 years, the average annual income of that top 10 percent group increased by \$89,000. But the average annual income of the entire bottom 50 percent of families only went up \$539, and some groups in this half actually saw their income drop by thousands of dollars.

Whether you are in the top or the bottom half of the income pie, you would do well to pay attention to these statistics. Together, high child poverty rates and growing inequality are unsustainable and unjust.

They are unsustainable because poverty threatens children's health and development and increases social costs, and because the widening rich-poor gap is undermining our social fabric and productivity. Poverty and inequality are already costing us a lot through the social ills they create – everything from higher rates of violence and incarceration to increased incidence of mental illness and addictions. We are already paying for higher, and totally preventable, rates of chronic illness directly linked to these trends.

They are unjust because poverty disproportionately affects children in female-led lone parent families, children of immigrants and of Aboriginal identity, children in racialized families and those with a disability. These groups' over-representation in poverty statistics is evidence of systemic problems in the labour market and in our taxation and social policy regimes.

They are also unjust because families at the lower end of the income scale are working harder than ever, more hours and often multiple jobs, but they are still living in poverty. Forty-eight percent of BC's poor children have one or more parents working full-time, full-year.

These destructive trends are largely preventable, yet we have failed to act.

Recognizing the seriousness of the negative consequences of poverty and the strong public support for taking action, seven provinces and three territories have, or are developing, comprehensive poverty reduction strategies. With Alberta's new premier promising to do the same, BC is close to being the last

province to step up to the plate. The federal Conservative government has also failed to act on the unanimous 2009 House of Commons resolution to “develop an immediate plan to end poverty for all in Canada.”

Generous responses to the plea from an inner city Vancouver teacher on behalf of her impoverished students and the usual end-of-year focus on food bank donations show us that people want to do something about poverty.

But adopt-a-school programs, seasonal donations, and other forms of charity, while laudable, are not the answer.

What poor children and their families really need is to have their rights to living wage jobs and stronger, family-supportive social policies recognized and acted on. Public and private sector employers can show leadership by ensuring their lowest paid regular and contract employees are paid wage rates that allow them to meet their basic needs, properly support their children and avoid chronic financial stress.

Thousands of children would be lifted out of poverty if the Canadian Child Tax Benefit was increased and indexed against inflation. An increase in welfare rates to make them match actual food and shelter costs would reduce the depth of poverty for some of the poorest among us. Affordable quality child care, lower post-secondary tuition fees and an increased supply of affordable housing options are just some of the public investments we should be making to build stronger and healthier families and communities.

In the annual BC Campaign 2000 child poverty report card, published today, we call for a number of public policy initiatives. Chief among them is the adoption of a poverty reduction plan for BC with targets and timelines we can hold government and ourselves accountable to. Twenty years ago when we signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we promised to make things better for all children. It's time to deliver.

Adrienne Montani is the Provincial Coordinator for First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition.