

It Takes a Nation to Raise a Generation: Why Canada's Sustainability Must Include Poverty Reduction

We're writing to urge the provincial Premiers to make poverty reduction central to their up-coming discussions of environmental and economic sustainability. Canada's on-going success relies upon a healthy population that can sustain itself and flourish. Our Premiers are in a strong position to ensure that all of our young people thrive, not merely survive. The Premiers, with their federal counterparts, need to use their individual and collective positions to ensure that no child or family suffers the debilitating effects of poverty. Using a conservative measure, nearly three-quarters of a million children – about 760,000 - and their families still live in poverty in Canada despite prosperous times – that's one out of every nine children. The substantially higher rate for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children is disgraceful. We can, and must, do much better.

Children's poverty is family poverty. And some families are more vulnerable than others. Poverty rates are disproportionately high for children in mother-led families, visible minority, recent immigrant families and children with disabilities. For children of Aboriginal identity, regardless of where they live, poverty has persisted for too long. This is not the Canada that Canadians want.

There are good reasons why poverty reduction must be part of the sustainability agenda for Canada. Canada's child population is not growing. By 2020, the number of children and youth under 25 is expected to decline to 9.3 million from 10 million. At the same time, First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations are growing rapidly with a birthrate that has outstripped that of the non-Aboriginal community over the last decade. One out of every two Aboriginal people is under 23 years old. As our aging population retires, the declining proportion of working-age Canadians is expected to continue. All of our young people deserve nurturing and support now, as they will be the citizens, parents, workers and leaders of tomorrow.

Child and family poverty in Canada is not going away. At 11.3% the child poverty rate (most recent 2006 data based on after-tax income) remains stubbornly high and about the same as it was in 1989 when the House of Commons voted unanimously to seek to end child poverty in Canada. By the same measure the BC child poverty rate is 16.1%, a situation that begs for an action plan to bring this number down.

Poverty reduction makes social and economic sense and will benefit us all. European countries are successfully cutting their child poverty rates through coordinated action plans. Quebec and Newfoundland & Labrador are actively pursuing poverty reduction while others, including Ontario, are developing strategic plans. An effective poverty reduction strategy will not be a "one size fits all" but must ensure: sustaining employment; livable incomes, including for those unable to work; and strong community supports such as affordable housing; early learning and child care services, well-resourced public education and training programs. Specific policies and investments that address systemic barriers are needed.

Despite some very important achievements, our Premiers and federal politicians have much work to do. Provincial poverty reduction strategies must include specific approaches to meet the needs of urban Aboriginal Peoples, and the federal government has a pivotal role regarding poverty in First Nations. The historic Government of Canada apology to Aboriginal Peoples opened the door to a climate of mutual trust and collaboration. The recently-established Truth and Reconciliation Commission will uncover facts and acknowledge the long-lasting impact of the residential schools. Recent data show that even today low income Aboriginal children, youth and their families face formidable barriers:

- 41% of Aboriginal children under 14 lived in poverty nationally in 2001, rising to 51% in Manitoba and 52% in Saskatchewan (2006 data not yet available),
- 35% of Aboriginal children were being raised by a lone parent in 2001, 46% in large cities
- 1 in 4 Aboriginal lone mothers reported incomes below \$10,000 per year
- At least 80 First Nations' communities do not have enough school space to meet the needs of their children

- Aboriginal children are drastically over-represented in the child welfare system.

This is a crucial time for our Premiers to act. Why not show leadership by agreeing to the basic tenets of a poverty reduction strategy to be implemented in every province and territory? Fiscal capacity is strong within most governments in Canada. The prospect of slowing economic growth means that robust public policies are needed to help prevent families from falling into poverty. Timely, well-crafted attention to poverty reduction will bolster a sustainable society for all Canadians.

Laurel Rothman works at Family Service Toronto and coordinates Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada movement of more than 120 organizations fighting child and family poverty; Penny Irons is Chief Development Officer of the Aboriginal Mother Centre Society, a meeting place and service centre for mothers of young children in Vancouver; Adrienne Montani is Provincial Coordinator of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, a province-wide coalition of 82 organizations committed to supporting BC's children, youth and families.