

NOW UNICEF RESEARCHERS ARE WONDERING: WHEN WILL CANADA TAKE CHILD POVERTY SERIOUSLY?

By Steve Kerstetter

A new report card from the research arm of UNICEF casts grave doubts on Canada's commitment to fighting child poverty.

The 2005 version of *Child Poverty in Rich Countries* said Canada had a child poverty rate of 14.9 percent in 2000 using the most common international measure of poverty. That put us in 19th place in a survey of 26 member nations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Denmark had the lowest child poverty rate at 2.4 percent followed closely by Finland, Norway and Sweden. Switzerland, the Czech Republic, France, Belgium, Hungary, Luxembourg and the Netherlands also had reasonable showings - all under 10 percent and all well ahead of Canada.

The section of the report on Canada was subtitled "children still waiting." It made specific reference to the 1989 resolution passed by the House of Commons to work to end child poverty by 2000, then added this sad commentary:

"... Canada's target year 2000 came and went without agreement on what the target means, or how progress towards it is to be measured, or what policies might be necessary to achieve it."

The reference to policies for fighting child poverty was particularly biting, because the report said poverty is largely the result of government policy - or in less diplomatic language, government neglect.

"Variation in government policy appears to account for most of the variation in child poverty levels between OECD countries," the report said. "Higher government spending on family and social benefits is clearly associated with lower child poverty rates."

The researchers acknowledged that labour market and social conditions also play important roles as determinants of poverty. In the case of Canada, however, the report shows a wide range of improvements during the 1990s - most notably increases in the earnings of mothers and fathers.

The report put Canada in the category of little or no change in child poverty rates between 1991 and 2000. The actual rate was down by 0.4 percentage points, a tiny decline given the great expansion of the economy in the late 1990s.

The measure of poverty used in the report is one-half of median income after government transfer payments to individuals and after taxes. The results are similar to rates using Canada's low income cut-offs after income taxes.

UNICEF researchers gauged the impact of government policies on child poverty by comparing poverty rates before transfers and taxes with poverty rates after transfers and taxes. Government policies in Finland, for example, reduced the child poverty rate from 18.1 percent before transfers and taxes to 2.8 percent after transfers and taxes. France went from 27.7 percent to 7.5 percent.

Government policies in Canada took the child poverty rate from 22.8 percent to 14.9 percent. That put us in the bottom third of the table. Next to last was the United States, with a dismal child poverty rate of 26.6 percent before transfers and taxes and a dismal 21.9 percent afterward. The very worst record was Mexico, where the child poverty rate went from 29.5 percent to 27.7 percent, hardly any change at all.

The report is the sixth in a series on the well-being of children in OECD countries by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy. It restated past concerns about child poverty and urged wayward nations to redouble their efforts against child poverty..

“It is the fundamental responsibility of government to protect the vulnerable and to protect the future. Children are both.”

More specifically, the report urged countries to set “time-bound targets” for reducing child poverty. For most developed countries, it said, a realistic target would be a child poverty rate of less than ten percent.

It also said governments should establish a “backstop” child poverty rate when they first take office and make a commitment that under no circumstances will child poverty be allowed to increase on their watch.

And it said people need to realize that child poverty is the result of government priorities that are reflected in budget speeches, tax policies and various government benefit programs.

“Granted the difficulty of determining what proportion of government spending is directed towards protecting children, it is nonetheless the case that rhetorical commitments to reducing child poverty are often not matched by resources.”

That has certainly been the case in Canada, first under the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney, then under the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. There has been talk about fighting child poverty from time to time, but more self-congratulation than action and almost no progress.