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NEWS EDITORS - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BC CHILD POVERTY RATE STILL WORST IN CANADA DESPITE CONTINUED DROP

British Columbia's child poverty rate came down in 2008 -- still the worst of any province, Statistics Canada reported Thursday.

An analysis of the latest figures by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, showed a drop in the BC child poverty rate from 13 percent in 2007 to 10.4 percent in 2008. The number of poor BC children dropped from 108,000 in 2007 to 87,000 in 2008.

Even with the latest drop, BC has had the worst child poverty record of any province for seven consecutive years from 2002 through 2008. The BC rate remained higher than the national child poverty rate of 9.1 percent in 2008, and has been higher than the national rate since 1999.

"Children are only young once. Given all the research evidence about the harm caused by growing up in poverty, we should all be alarmed by these numbers and commit to bringing them down," commented First Call Chairperson Julie Norton.

The decline in the 2008 rate is welcome, but must be looked at in the context of the impacts on the economy from the recession in subsequent years. According to the Ministry of Housing and Social Development, the number of people on welfare in BC has climbed from 145,700 in March 2008 to 179,394 in March of 2010, an increase of 33,674 people. In 2009 alone over 80% of BC's food banks saw an increase in people needing food, and one third of BC food bank users are children. A comparison of unemployment figures for April 2008, the year from which these poverty statistics are drawn, and April 2010 show an increase from 4.3% to 7.3%, or an additional 75,600 unemployed British Columbians, and there are serious concerns about people who have exhausted their Employment Insurance benefits.

Laurel Rothman, National Coordinator of Campaign 2000, noted, "Poverty elimination must be at the forefront on any recession recovery plan. Canada can and must do better than families relying on food banks."

The poverty rate statistics from Ottawa are based on the low income cut-offs of Statistics Canada using family income after government benefits are received and after federal and provincial income taxes are paid. The poverty line for a family of four in BC ranged from \$34,738 in a large city to \$22,724 in a rural area.

The poverty rate for children living in families headed by female lone-parents fell significantly from 37.4 percent to 18.6 percent. However, the rate for BC children living in two-parent families rose from 7 percent in 2007 to 9.2 percent in 2008, meaning an additional 17,000 children in two-parent families in BC were poor. These statistics require further examination to understand why this is happening.

For all persons the poverty rate in British Columbia increased from 11.1 percent in 2007 to 11.4 percent in 2008 (from 477,000 people in 2007 to 494,000 in 2008). The overall poverty rate was also the worst of any province.

First Call is a coalition of provincial, regional and local organizations, communities and individuals who believe that children and youth should have “first call” on the resources of government and the community. Child poverty has been a continuing concern because it affects the health and well-being of children both in the short term and the long term.

First Call has been pushing the BC government to enact legislation with targets and timelines for reducing child poverty. As noted by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, BC’s Representative for Children and Youth, “If we continue to ignore the issue of child poverty, we will continue to lead in child poverty.” First Call’s detailed recommendations include a higher minimum wage, reasonable rates of social assistance, publicly-funded high-quality, affordable and accessible child care, more social housing, and removing financial barriers to post-secondary education.

At the federal level, First Call urges an increase in the Canada Child Tax Benefit, changes in Employment Insurance to make sure most workers will get benefits if they lose their jobs, universal coverage for prescription drugs and dental care, as well as greater investments in social housing and a national child care plan. With partners in Campaign 2000 across the country, we call upon the federal government to act on the November 24, 2009 House of Commons resolution to “*develop an immediate plan to eliminate poverty in Canada for all.*”

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(Editor’s Note: Statistics Canada also made available Thursday poverty statistics based on its low income cut-offs before income taxes. The child poverty rate in BC dropped from 18.9 percent in 2007 to 14.5 percent in 2008, and the number of poor children was down from 157,000 in 2007 to 121,000 in 2008.)

For further information or to arrange an interview, please contact the First Call office in Vancouver at 604-873-8437:

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