

Toronto still 'child poverty capital' of Canada, warns report

Regent Park has city's highest rates of child poverty

By Solomon Israel, CBC News Posted: Nov 14, 2016 9:47 AM ET | Last Updated: Nov 14, 2016 1:34 PM ET



Children living in poverty face barriers to accessing programs like early childhood education. (Shutterstock/Rafal Olechowski)

Toronto remains Canada's "child poverty capital," with 133,000 children living in poverty according to a new report.

"Divided City: Life in Canada's Child Poverty Capital," released Monday by a partnership of local non-profit groups, describes Toronto as a "deeply divided city" in terms of youth poverty.

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"In some neighbourhoods child poverty is almost non-existent, as low as four per cent," said report co-author Michael Polanyi on CBC Radio's *Metro Morning* on Monday.

"In other neighbourhoods, three neighbourhoods in the city, it's 50 per cent or higher."

Regent Park is the Toronto neighbourhood with the highest rates of child poverty, according to the report, with 58.1 per cent of children living in low-income families, followed by Thorncliffe Park in East York and Oakridge in Scarborough.

In comparison, less than five per cent of children live in low-income families in affluent neighbourhoods like Leaside-Bennington, Lawrence Park South, and Lawrence Park North.

The effects of poverty on children

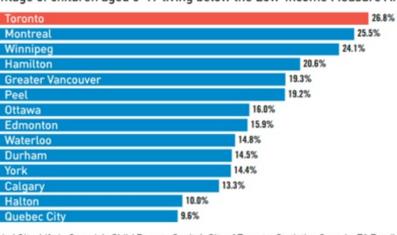
Poverty affects the ability of Toronto children to access important programs like childcare, early learning, and extracurricular activities like sports and arts, warns the report.

"There's been a lot of talk in the city about the challenge of even getting your child into a swimming program, and when you pay for it, there are also barriers," said Polanyi on *Metro Morning*.

Data from the Toronto District School Board bears that out. Among families with incomes below \$30,000, 48 per cent of children don't regularly attend sports and arts activities outside of school. In families with incomes of \$100,000 or more, just 7 per cent of children don't participate in those activities.

Child Poverty in Canadian Cities

Percentage of children aged 0-17 living below the Low-Income Measure After Tax



Sources: Divided City: Life in Canada's Child Poverty Capital, City of Toronto, Statistics Canada, T1 Family File 2014

The lack of access to programs and activities puts children from low-income families at a disadvantage in the classroom.

"We found that children in the lowest-income neighbourhoods were twice as likely to have these physical [and] emotional challenges, even at kindergarten level," said Polanyi.

"Already, lower income children are in danger of falling behind right when they're starting school."

Child poverty linked to housing, food insecurity

Better access to affordable housing would help alleviate child poverty, says the report, which notes that the average rent for a Toronto apartment of any size is \$1,200 per month.

Just over a third of Toronto families with children aged 17 and under pay more than 30 per cent of their income on rent, notes the report, and more than a quarter of Toronto families with children aged 12 and under are living in housing that is overcrowded, unaffordable, or in disrepair.

Inadequate housing "causes family stress and hinders child development and well-being," says the report.



Children are overrepresented among users of Toronto foodbanks, according to the report "Divided City: Life in Canada's Child Poverty Capital." (Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty)

Unequal access to nutritious food also poses a risk to child development, the report warns, citing statistics that show how children are overrepresented among Toronto food bank users.

The "key causes" of food insecurity — unemployment, increasing food costs, and low incomes — must be tackled at their roots in order to end child hunger in Toronto, according to the report.

Update to momentous 2014 report

The report is an update to "The Hidden Epidemic: A Report on Child and Family Poverty in Toronto," released two years ago. That report led Toronto city council to approve the city's first poverty reduction strategy in 2015.

Despite the bleak headline, this year's report suggests child poverty in Toronto may be improving.

Between 2013 and 2014, 10,000 fewer Toronto children were living in poverty, said the report, the first reduction since 2010.

Poverty reduction strategy "has accomplished some things," citing Mayor John as Tony's decision to **make the TTC free for children aged 12 and under** as "a significant step forward."



Speaking on CBC Radio's *Metro Morning*, report co-author Michael Polanyi said more needs to be done to address child poverty in Toronto. (CBC)

But Polanyi expressed concern that the city's commitment to alleviating poverty might be fading.

"We've just been hearing a bit less about the inequities in the city and the challenges of poverty from leadership at the mayor's level and council, and the last budget was a disappointment in terms of the level of investment."

"Going into the 2017 budget, we're seeing talk of up to \$600 million in spending reductions on these very programs and services that we found that children don't have good enough access to," said Polanyi.

With files from *Metro Morning*



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