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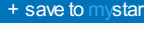
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News / Canada

25 years after Ottawa's pledge to end child poverty, it's time to hit 'reset'

"There's a remarkable degree of consensus on what it would take to end child poverty," says one advocate. But is there the political will?


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Then NDP leader Ed Broadbent rose in the Commons in 1989 to call on Parliament to eradicate child poverty. Twenty-five years later, the pledge to do so, accomplished through a unanimous vote, has fallen far short. Children's advocates are working hard to put it back on the political agenda.

By: **Marco Chown Oved** Staff Reporter, Published on Wed Nov 19 2014

It's been 25 years since members of Parliament unanimously voted to eradicate child poverty. Their self-imposed deadline came and went almost 15 years ago.

In that time, millions of children in Canada have grown up in deplorable conditions, often cold, hungry and ill — and some of them are now raising their own kids in the same situation.

On the anniversary of the government's unfulfilled pledge, almost 1.2 million children go to school hungry, don't have a good winter coat or can't afford to play sports. Religious leaders, economists, teachers and doctors say it's time to reset the clock on the pledge to ending child poverty and embark anew on the road to ensuring that every Canadian child gets a good start in life.

"There's a remarkable degree of consensus on what it would take to end child poverty," said Mary Jo Leddy, a philosophy professor, theologian and co-chair of the Keep The Promise initiative, which has organized a renewed push to get child poverty back on the political agenda.

"What's lacking is not the knowledge, not the smarts, not even the money. It's the will, the desire, the urgency to really, really do this."

Experts say taking the pressure off kids can be accomplished two ways: by reducing the cost of necessities for parents — or by increasing the resources families have to pay for those necessities.

Concretely, this has meant increasing the number of high-quality, low-cost child-care

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spaces, building more affordable housing, raising the minimum wage, boosting child benefits and creating better access to education and job training.

"There's no reason why we can't tackle an issue like child poverty," said Armine Yalnizyan, an economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. "We have the money and more to do it."

The projected federal budget next year gives us the means to make a historic investment, Yalnizyan said, and many examples of successful poverty-reduction strategies from around the world give us a path to follow.

The recipe for success is no mystery. Some examples include the UK's mission to end child poverty, which brought 1.1 million children out of poverty over the decade ending in 2012. Ontario's own efforts reduced child poverty by 9.2 per cent between 2008 and 2011, though they have since stalled.

With the same [\\$3 billion it will cost to allow income-splitting](#) on parental tax returns — a pre-election promise by the Conservatives — Canada could double the National Child Benefit and reduce child poverty by 26 per cent, Yalnizyan said.

Despite the existence of proven methods and the money to pay for them, the situation for children has actually gotten worse since Parliament committed itself to ending child poverty.

In November 1989, when NDP leader Ed Broadbent rose in the house to make the case that no more children should grow up poor, he said there were 1,121,000 children living below the poverty line. By the end of this year, that number will have risen to 1,168,000, according to Keep The Promise.

The problem is particularly acute in Toronto, which despite its wealth, is still the worst city in Canada for children, according to [The Hidden Epidemic report](#) released last week. Here, 29 per cent of kids live below the poverty line, a greater percentage than anywhere else. (We're tied with St. John's, Nfld.)

Upon seeing the report, Toronto's mayor-elect, John Tory, pledged to [develop a strategy](#), with targets and deadlines, for reducing poverty in the city.

He wants to start with the root problems of poverty — adult unemployment, the difficulties of keeping youth in school, transit and housing — and devote long-term predictable funding to tackling those problems.

In Depth: Child Poverty



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Ed Broadbent reflects on the child-poverty pledge of 1989 : [🗨️](#)

The cycle of child poverty

Results from a similar province-wide program, announced in 2008, showed promise. Things started out well for the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, which pledged to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent in five years. From 2008 to 2011, child poverty declined by 9.2 per cent, largely due to increases in the Ontario Child Benefit and minimum wage, according to Keep The Promise.

But post-2011, supports for low-income people were cut and scheduled increases to the Ontario Child Benefit were delayed, part of several austerity measures taken in reaction to the recession. Progress has stalled.

Having programs that work only when times are good is part of the problem that has

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allowed child poverty to fester, said Rabbi Arthur Bielfeld, a longtime social justice advocate and co-chair of Keep The Promise.

“What we need is a national plan, like any good business plan, that analyzes the problem, sets goals and monitors them to determine when we have failed to live up to those goals,” he said.

“People ask me why we are so far behind Scandinavia and the UK. (I tell them that) they monitor, to test the government, to make sure it’s doing what it pledged to do instead of something that is trotted out at election time and then buried.”

Next year, the federal government will record its first budget surplus since 2007. Before the Conservative government [announced tax cuts](#) that included an increased Universal Child Care Benefit and parental income-splitting, the surplus was projected to be \$6.4 billion.

This is more than enough to make a significant impact on child poverty on several fronts at once, said economist Yalnizyan.

First, a proportion of those billions could be used to create many affordable, subsidized child-care centres around the country.

High-quality, low-cost child care [frees parents up to work](#) and increases the amount of money they have to support their kids. Currently, child care costs so much it discourages parents from going back to work, and because [there are only enough licensed spots for 22 per cent of children under 5](#), many [parents are forced to put their kids in potentially dangerous unlicensed care](#).

Also, because rent or mortgage payments are consistently the biggest line item in any family’s budget, [increasing access to affordable housing](#) would immediately free up more money for children in the poorest families.

According to the State of Homelessness report, spending an average of \$640 million per year for the next 10 years could effectively create 84,000 affordable housing units through building programs and tax credits to subsidize very-low-income renters.

Finally, by increasing minimum wage and child benefit payments, parents — especially the poorest — could make sure there’s money left over at the end of the month for their kids.

“You have to wonder: Why would you spend \$4.6 billion on those who need the least help, when you could be improving the potential of those who could contribute to economic growth?” Yalnizyan said. “We’re going to be reliant on that generation of kids in 20 years’ time, when the population ages and we’re going to need all hands on deck in the workforce.”

This week, along with the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and Campaign 2000, Keep The Promise brought 60 students from across the country to Ottawa for a summit on child poverty. The kids, who range from 10 to 15 years old, had a chance to discuss what poverty looks like in their corner of Canada, as well as meet politicians, including Justin Trudeau and Thomas Mulcair.

“We have actually accepted child poverty as normal. That’s the worst part of it,” said Keep The Promise co-chair Leddy. “Nothing is going to unlock those frozen hearts and imaginations until we actually change our point of reference.

“Trudeau, Mulcair and Harper have to stop looking at each other and they have to face the kids who are the future of this country.”

CHANGE IN POVERTY RATES OVER TIME

25%

1989

Children living in poverty in Canada

17%

2014

POVERTY RATES BY POPULATION

HUNGER AMONG LOW-INCOME CANADIANS

40%

Indigenous children

15%

Non-Indigenous children

1.1 million

Canadian children who experience food insecurity

33%

Immigrant and refugee children

22%

Racialized children

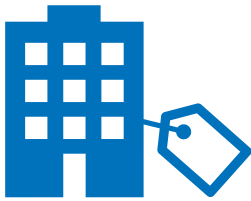
PROFILE OF GTA FOOD BANK CLIENTS

~40%

Those who did not eat for an entire day due to a lack of money

31%

Percent of people lining up for free food in the GTA who are children



\$6.4 billion

Cost of 84,000 new affordable housing units over ten years

IMPLEMENTING INCOME SPLITTING WILL COST \$3 BILLION. THAT MONEY, IF USED TO DOUBLE THE NATIONAL CHILD BENEFIT, WOULD REDUCE CHILD POVERTY BY 26%

10,000

Increase in Toronto's low-income children, 2010-12

29%

Children in low-income families in Toronto

MEDIAN NET WORTH, 2005-12

HOUSEHOLDS THAT RELY ON PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

42%

Increase among top



1/3

10% of
Canadians



-150%

Decrease
among
bottom
10% of
Canadians

Unable to buy school
supplies or clothes for their
children at some point

TORONTO INCOME
COMPARISON

145,890 **118,000**

Low-income
families

Millionaires

SOURCES: Keep The Promise initiative, The Hidden Epidemic: A Report on Child and Family Poverty in Toronto, State of Homelessness report, Ontario government, PEPSO, Broadbent Institute, Campaign 2000 2013 report card, Daily Bread Food Bank 2014 Who's Hungry report

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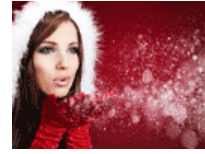
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