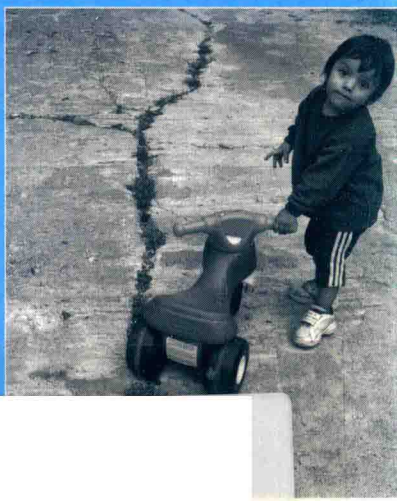
ISSUES IN CANADA

Child Poverty in Canada



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Patrizia Albanese

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Abbreviations

BMI	Body Mass Index
CAP	Canada Assistance Place
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CHST	Canada Health and Social Transfer
CMA	Census Metropolitan Area
CMHC	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
CRC (UN CRC)	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
EI	Employment Insurance (formerly UI: Unemployment Insurance)
EQAO	Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office (Standardized testing)
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LICO	Low-Income Cut-Off
LIM	Low-Income Measure
LSIC	Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada
MBM	Market Basket Measure

NLSCY	National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPVT-R	Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test–Revised
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Introduction

Canada, the Envy of the World?

Most Canadians believe that their country is prosperous, fair-minded, and respectful of human rights—put simply: the envy of the world. And on some level, there is reason to believe this. In November 2000, national headlines reported "Canada #1 in UN Survey—Again" (CBC News 2000). The CBC, like other news outlets, proudly proclaimed that for the seventh year in a row Canada ranked at the top of the United Nations Human Development Index, part of the annual UN *Human Development Report*. Starting in 1990, the Index ranks the basic living conditions across 174 countries, including life expectancy, adult literacy rates, and standard of living.[1] Using these measures, Canada sat at the top of the Index in 2000 (Albanese 2009b). However, the Index is only a partial measure of human development, and the UN warns that Canada falls surprisingly far behind in areas such as human rights and poverty.

At the same time as the Index's release in 2000, Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada public education movement to build awareness and support for a 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000, issued its first *Child Poverty in Canada Report Card*.

While Canada celebrated its top position on the UN Human Development Index that year, Campaign 2000 reported that child poverty rates "grew to a record high." At the end of 2000, 1 in 5 children lived in poverty—an increase of 402,000 children since 1989 (Campaign 2000 2000).

The UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child and Canada's obligations

In 1989 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The 54 articles of the CRC include a universally agreed upon set of standards and obligations to protect a child's rights and well-being. The articles are founded on the principles of respect for the dignity and worth of each individual, regardless of race, colour, gender, language, religion, opinions, origins, wealth, birth status, or ability; they are expected to apply to every child around the world. Its four key commitments are: (1) the best interests of the child; (2) survival and development; (3) children's participation; and (4) non-discrimination. Upon ratifying this agreement, governments are obliged to help improve conditions for children everywhere. This document has been negotiated and signed by 192 heads of state, yet remains to be ratified by the United States and Somalia.

By signing the CRC, the Canadian government is committed to recognizing "the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (article 27). The CRC explains that the primary responsibility of a parent or guardian is to secure the necessary living conditions for a child's development, but also specifies that governments should assist parents by implementing support programs that provide nutrition, clothing, and housing. The CRC, along with a number of national and international documents and declarations supported by Canada—including the United Nation's "A World Fit for Children" and Canada's "A Canada Fit for Children"—has established the elimination of child poverty as a policy objective of top priority. However, putting principles into practice has proven to be challenging; despite the CRC's objectives, Canada

remains among the least successful at addressing child poverty among modern, industrialized nations.

Is There a Child Poverty "Problem" in Canada?

Many Canadians are surprised to know that Canada ranks poorly compared to other industrialized nations when it comes to child poverty. Some have even denied that we have a child poverty "problem" in this country, arguing that we don't have "real" poverty—that some individuals and families only "feel" poor because they have less than "average" Canadians. But most people would agree that not having enough to eat is a good indication that one is poor—and Food Banks Canada (formerly the Canadian Association of Food Banks) confirms that this is a growing reality for many Canadians.

Food bank use

In March 2008, 704,414 individuals were assisted by a food bank or affiliated food program in Canada. This represents a 6 percent increase since 1997, the first year comparable data were available. According to a national survey of food bank users, food banks in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia accounted for 78 percent of food bank use in Canada (See Table I.1). Almost half (42 percent) of food banks in Canada saw an increase in the number of people they assisted in 2008, with four of the ten provinces (British Columbia, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island) experiencing overall increases (Food Banks Canada 2009a). In 2007 Ontario food banks acquired and distributed 7 million pounds of food across the province to help feed individuals and families (Ontario Association of Food Banks 2008).

Food Banks Canada reports that food banks began 26 years ago as a short-term solution to hunger in Canada. Today, they are a necessary supplement to many caught in Canada's tattered "safety net" (Food Banks Canada 2009b). *HungerCount 2008*, a report of food bank use and users in Canada, revealed

Table I-1 Food Bank Use in Canada by Province, March 2008

Province/ Territory	Total Assisted March 2008	% Children	Share of Canadian Total*	Share of Canadian Population**
British Columbia	78,101	31.2%	11.1%	13.3%
Alberta	33,580	42.4%	4.8%	10.6%
Saskatchewan	17,751	45.6%	2.5%	3.0%
Manitoba	40,464	45.7%	5.7%	3.6%
Ontario	314,258	37.6%	44.6%	38.8%
Quebec	156,215	35.7%	22.2%	23.3%
New Brunswick	15,638	33.2%	2.2%	2.3%
Nova Scotia	16,915	35.0%	2.4%	2.8%
Prince Edward Island	2,892	35.4%	0.4%	0.4%
Newfoundland and Labrador	27,260	38.4%	3.9%	1.5%
The Territories	1,340	37.9%	0.1%	0.1%
Total	704,414	37.1%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Food Banks Canada 2009a, 6.

*The province's share of the national total when it comes to food bank use.

**The province's total population as a share of the total Canadian population. The difference between column 4 and column 5 reveals a higher concentration of need in Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland & Labrador. In other words, there is a proportionately higher use of food banks in these three provinces, in relation to the number of people who live there.

that 50.8 percent of food bank users in 2008 received social assistance cheques that clearly do not cover basic needs; 12.7 percent received disability support cheques, again, that were not enough for sufficient and adequate food;[2] and perhaps most surprising, a growing percentage of food bank clients reported employment as their primary source of income (Food Banks Canada 2009a). *HungerCount 2008* reported that the percentage of working poor who use food banks has more than doubled since 1989, from 6 percent in 1989 to

14.5 percent in 2008 (Food Banks Canada 2009a). These recent national statistics reveal that people with jobs make up the second largest group (after people on social assistance) of food bank users in the country—up 1 percent since 2007.[3] This tells us that there are many Canadian adults who are in the labour force but not earning enough to live and eat. And their children are severely disadvantaged as a result.

Among the increasing number of food bank users, children remain over-represented. In 2008, 37.1 percent of users of food banks were children under 18 (Food Banks Canada 2009a).[4] Some of these children lived in single-parent families—still one of the most economically vulnerable groups in the country. Some 27.3 percent of food bank users across Canada are living in single-parent households, most of which are headed by women.

All of this suggests that welfare and other social assistance programs in Canada, which continue to fall below Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut-Offs, do not do enough to ensure food security for many Canadians. It also shows that Canada has a shortage of stable, full-time jobs that pay liveable wages.

Homeless families?

The lack of affordable housing is another major issue compounding the child poverty "problem" in Canada. A study highlighted by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) indicates that homelessness is spreading throughout Canada, and that families with children are increasingly among the homeless (CMHC 2003a). After reviewing the existing literature and interviewing 74 agency informants across the country, as well as 59 families who were or had been homeless, the study reported an increase in the number of homeless families requesting services (including emergency accommodations) over the past 5 years in 9 out of the 10 cities surveyed.

Homeless families were defined as families with one or more children under the age of 18 living and sleeping on the street; sleeping in emergency shelters, hostels, or transition houses; living in transitional or second-stage housing; temporarily

staying with others; or renting a hotel/motel room by the month (CMHC 2003a). A study of 112 homeless shelters across the country revealed that children were living in many of these shelters. Over half of these children were under the age of 5, almost 30 percent were between the ages of 5 and 12, and less than 15 percent were teenagers (CMHC 2001).

The 2003 report cited several causes of rising family homelessness in Canada, including lack of affordable housing, lack of access to social housing, increasing poverty, changing job markets that contribute to little or no income, family violence, lack of support services, political indifference, and discrimination (CMHC 2003a). These and related issues will be discussed in some detail throughout this book.

What is poverty?: Children's perspectives

Not all children who live in poverty are homeless; nor do all of them use food banks. The majority of Canadian children living in poverty reside in our communities—silent and invisible. Those who are seen are stigmatized and socially marginalized or excluded. This inevitably has negative consequences for individual children, as we will see in Chapter 3, but also for Canada as a whole. Our exceptionally high child poverty rates send out the messages that we do not care; that our perception of ourselves as Canadians is not in line with reality; and that Canadian "values" do *not* include social justice, fairness, inclusion, co-operation, and equality.

Canadian children are voicing their perspectives on poverty. For those not yet convinced that Canada has a child poverty "problem," they may want to read the responses of children in grades four and five to the question: what is poverty? They told us that poverty is:

- "Wishing I could go to McDonalds"
- "Getting a basket from the 'Santa Fund'"
- "Not getting to go to birthday parties"
- "Wishing you had a nice house"
- "Not being able to have your friends sleep over because we can't buy snacks or give breakfast"

- "Not having breakfast sometimes"
- "Sometimes it's hard because my mom gets scared and she cries"
- "Not being able to afford a holiday"
- "Not having pretty barrettes for your hair"
- "Not having your own backyard"
- "Being teased for the way you are dressed"

Source: Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition 1998

In this book we will look at just how many of Canada's children live in poverty, exploring trends over time, across provinces, and among various groups. We will see which Canadian children are most vulnerable to poverty and why, and read about the impact of poverty on child development and its outcomes. We will also look at some of the ways that poverty is measured in this country and around the world, and consider Canada in an international context to assess how the country compares—and why. We will uncover the importance of the year 1989 to child poverty in Canada and conclude with a look at the attempts (and failures) to tackle child poverty and the suggestions for improvement—in the hope of, indeed, making Canada one of the best places in the world to live.

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