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GTA

# Toronto children need more prosperity, not more charity: Hume

New report finds nearly 30 per cent of Toronto kids under 18 come from poor families

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By Christopher Hume Contributing Columnist

Toronto, the richest city in Canada, is also one of the poorest. Newly compiled figures tell us that fully 29 per cent of children in this city live in poverty.

*The Hidden Epidemic: A Report on Child and Family Poverty in Toronto*, released last week by the Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto, calls the figures “shameful.” Even worse, after dropping from 32 per cent a decade ago to 27 per cent in 2010, the numbers are rising again.

No one need be told this is shocking. The fact that 145,000 kids under the age of 18 come from poor families flies in the face of everything we like to believe about Toronto.

Appropriately, mayor-elect John Tory [wasted no time declaring](#) that he would do everything in his (limited) power to turn this around.

But political promises to end poverty have been heard before and none have gone anywhere. If poverty isn't an intractable problem, it's clearly one we have been unable to solve. Perhaps that's because we're going about it the wrong way.

“To seek ‘causes’ of poverty,” the late Jane Jacobs argued, “. . . is to enter an intellectual dead end because poverty has no causes. Only prosperity has causes.”

As we all know, there's no shortage of prosperity in Toronto; it just doesn't extend to all residents of the city. In other words, the problem might more usefully be seen as lack of prosperity rather than the presence of poverty. This logic may sound circular, but the distinction is critical, most of all for policy-makers. 

Typically, the response, public and private, is to focus on programs that deal with the symptoms of poverty rather than its sources. That means food banks, subsidized rents, social services and the like. We have created a vast bureaucratic infrastructure that depends on poverty for its existence. As well intentioned as these programs may be, they're better at keeping the lid on things than changing them.

Not so long ago, there was general consensus that the best way to approach poverty was to redistribute wealth through income taxes. Today, when governments are more focused on making the rich richer, that's politically incorrect, if not politically unacceptable. (Though one wonders what good living in a world full of poor will do for even the richest.)

“(H)eat is a result of active processes,” Jacobs explained, “it has causes. But cold is not the result of any process; it is only the absence of heat. Just so, the great cold of poverty and economic stagnation is merely the absence of economic development. It can be overcome only if the relevant economic processes are in motion.”

Whatever these “relevant economic processes” may be, they're not in motion in Toronto, at least not to the extent we need. As Jacobs also pointed out, however, because economic activity is measured at the national not civic/regional level, the economies of cities are rolled into a larger and mostly irrelevant category.

Ottawa has abandoned the poor and the cost of poverty to local governments, which don't have the means to deal with either, even if that were possible. That's because cities have little control over economic matters, except indirectly through property taxes and infrastructural projects, which, again, they cannot undertake on their own.

Yet cities, not national governments, are the engines that drive the economy and create prosperity. In a highly mobile post-industrial age where cities compete against one another to attract human and financial capital, the failure to empower urban centres both exacerbates poverty rates and leaves cities unable to deal with them.

Meanwhile, the Conservative government boasts of its impending surplus. This is pure illusion; the deficit hasn't gone away, it's been dumped on Canada's cities.



*Christopher Hume was the Toronto Star's architecture critic and urban issues columnist and remains a freelance contributing columnist.*



