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OPINION

EDITORIAL

End child poverty in Canada now: Editorial

Twenty-five years after Parliament voted unanimously to end child poverty, the numbers have grown even larger and there's no excuse for lack of action.

Nov. 21, 2014



Volunteers help sort and pack food items at the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto on Nov. 6, 2014.

Vince Talotta / Toronto Star

Imagine going to bed hungry, not receiving presents on holidays, being an outcast in gym class because you don't have runners, or trudging through snow without boots because you don't own any.

It's tough.

But for the 967,000 children who were [living in poverty](#) in Canada last year it was a daily reality.

That's one in seven, or 13.3 per cent, of our children. It's worse in [Toronto](#), where a study released in August found that 29 per cent of children — almost 149,000 — live in poverty, while 15 of Toronto's 140 neighbourhoods have child poverty rates of 40 per cent or more.

That's also the shocking [rate](#) of child poverty among our aboriginal population.

And it's getting worse. Campaign 2000, which tracks the number of children living in poverty in Canada and advocates on their behalf, is set to release its 2014 report on Monday.

The news is grim, the agency says: numbers are up.

This despite the fact that Parliament unanimously voted 25 years ago, on Nov. 24, 1989, to end child poverty by the year 2000. At the time the number of kids living in poverty was actually *lower*, at 912,000, than it is today.

This has got to stop. And it can.

By any standard, Canada is a rich country.

It is a member of the wealthy nations clubs — the G8 and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development — and ranks 11th out of 186 countries on the UN Human Development Index, which measures standards of living.

So the question is: why is Canada ranked 24th among 35 developed countries by the OECD on child poverty? Or why is it graded at just a C by UNICEF, while smaller economies like Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are consistently ranked with As?

The problem isn't a lack of money.

It's a lack of political will on the part of the federal government that could adopt policies the experts say would pull more families out of poverty.



For example, the OECD says increasing child-care spaces eases child poverty by enabling mothers to get a job (38.2 per cent of Ontario children cared for by single mothers are raised in a low-income environment). But in 2006, the Harper

government killed a national child-care program that would have provided 635,000 subsidized daycare spaces and replaced it with a taxable \$100-per-month child tax credit — which actually benefits the well-off more than the poor.

Cancelling that benefit (since increased to \$160), along with two other tax credits beyond the reach of the poor, and redirecting that money to low-income families would have put almost \$2,000 a year more into the pockets of the poor in recent years.

Instead, the Harper government has just implemented a vote-buying scheme that promises \$26.7 billion over five years in tax breaks and support programs that will disproportionately benefit those who are already doing well. It includes an income-splitting measure that experts say will benefit only about 15 per cent of families, leaving 85 per cent (including the neediest) out in the cold.

A better policy? If the Harper government had even doubled the national child benefit, child poverty could be reduced by 26 per cent, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Or it could focus on what study after study has recommended along with a national child-care program: investing in job training and creating a national affordable housing plan.

Instead, we're living with a situation documented by Food Banks Canada's annual [HungerCount](#), which this year found that 37 per cent of the 841,000 people helped by food banks last year were children.

In the absence of national strategies, which international organizations say are fundamental to ending child poverty, provinces and municipalities have been struggling to fill the gap.

Ontario, for example, lifted 47,000 children out of poverty and prevented another 61,000 from falling into it by increasing the Ontario Child Benefit to \$1,310 a year from \$250 a year in 2007.

But they can't do it alone.

Twenty-five years after Parliament voted to end child poverty, an entire generation of children has grown up in need. Canada's federal government cannot continue to turn a blind eye to them. It must commit to ending child poverty now — as other countries have.



They have the know-how and the means. There's no excuse — just a lack of will.

