

We Can Make Child Poverty History in Canada

By Dennis Howlett

On November 24, 1989, Canada's House of Commons unanimously passed a resolution stating that: "This House seeks to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000."

More than fifteen years later, and five years after the deadline of 2000, what has happened?

- One in six Canadian children is poor.
- Canada's child poverty rate of 15 percent is three times as high as the rates of Sweden, Norway or Finland.
- Every month, 770,000 people in Canada use food banks. Forty percent of those relying on food banks are children.

These statistics point to a betrayal of Canada's children. What makes the persistence of child poverty all the more disturbing is that Canada is a rich country, a country that ranked fourth in the world on the 2004 UN Human Development Index.

But in the midst of wealth, almost 5 million Canadians live in poverty. Poverty is *increasing* for youth, workers, young families and immigrant and visible minority groups. Poverty among Aboriginal groups remains appallingly high both on and off reserve. In fact, if the statistics for Canadian Aboriginal people were viewed separately from those of the rest of the country, Canada's Aboriginal people would slip to 78 th on the UN Human Development Index – the ranking currently held by Kazakhstan.

Canada needs to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals for poverty reduction globally, but if we are to have any integrity we also need to work at achieving poverty reduction goals at home. The national platform of the [Make Poverty History](#) campaign in Canada puts forward achievable demands that would make a significant contribution to "making poverty history" – globally and in Canada.

What needs to be done

We can achieve the elimination of child poverty in Canada within five years if we:

- 1) expand affordable housing;
- 2) build a universally accessible child care system;
- 3) raise minimum wages and increase the availability of good jobs and living wages; and
- 4) increase the Child Tax Benefit to \$4,900 per child, per year and ensure that all low-income children receive the full benefit of this program.

There are encouraging developments on the first three measures. After almost a decade of inaction, the federal government is funding social housing and homelessness initiatives, and is holding national consultations with stakeholders on a national housing strategy. The federal government has also signaled its commitment to building a universally accessible system of high-quality child care. After many years of foot-dragging, several provincial governments have raised minimum wage rates, although these still fall short of what is needed. And the federal government has announced a review of labour standards legislation – including the possibility of re-establishing a federal minimum wage.

But to achieve an end to child poverty in Canada, we also need action on the fourth key measure – the Child Tax Benefit. That is why the [Make Poverty History](#) campaign in Canada has included this as one of its demands.

The federal government has committed to gradually increasing the Child Tax Benefit to \$3,240 by 2007. While the current program has made a positive difference in the depth of poverty of working poor families, benefit levels are not sufficient to help children and families *escape* poverty. The benefit is also denied to children and families who receive social assistance in most provinces, as the Child Tax Benefit amount is “clawed back” in the form of lower social assistance benefits. We need to end the claw-back that effectively denies this important benefit to children whose families receive social assistance.

Raising the level of the Child Tax Benefit to \$4,900 per child per year would likely cost \$7 billion when fully implemented. It would be a vital investment in Canada’s future. Ending child and family poverty is an important first step.

But ultimately we need to find a way to ensure that no one is poor. That is why the Make Poverty History campaign in Canada is calling for the federal government to involve groups where poverty is predominant – such as Aboriginal People, women, minorities and youth – in the design and implementation of a domestic poverty reduction strategy.

Eliminating poverty in Canada is an achievable goal. We can all make it happen. This is the year to take action.

Dennis Howlett is Executive Director of the National Anti-Poverty Organization.

For more information:

- On the National Child Benefit Supplement – www.makepovertyhistory.ca/e/take-action/ncbs.pdf
- National Anti-Poverty Organization - www.napo-opan.ca
- Campaign 2000 - www.campaign2000.ca
- Canadian Council on Social Development - www.ccsd.ca