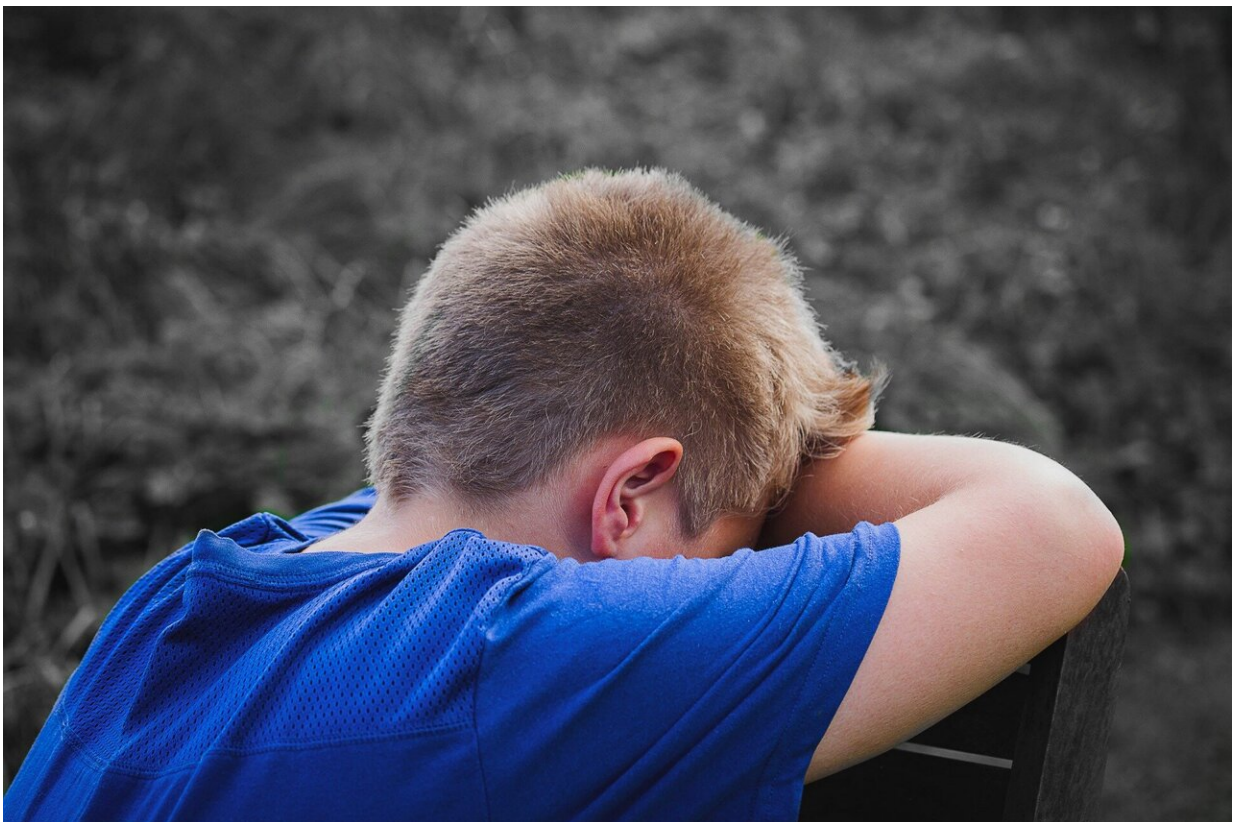


Child poverty is on the rise in Canada, putting over 1 million kids at risk of life-long negative effects

January 30 2024, by Nicole Racine and Shainur Premji



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

At first glance, Canada ranks among the top third of countries for its work in addressing child poverty. But that isn't the whole story.

Based on current rates of and overall progress in reducing child poverty, the latest [UNICEF report card](#) ranks Canada 11th out of 39 of the world's wealthiest countries. Initially, it seems Canada is doing well; between 2012 and 2021, child poverty fell by 23 percent.

In reality, since 2021, the number of children living in [monetary poverty](#) has [sharply risen from 15.2 percent in 2020 to 17.8 percent in 2021](#), and more than [one million Canadian children](#) live in poverty today.

This means that one in five children live in persistent fear and stress, face barriers to having their [basic needs](#) met, such as stable housing and [nutritious food](#), and experience a lack of opportunity, including access to quality early childhood experiences. As a [child psychologist](#) and a [health economist](#), we know that the consequences of child poverty are lifelong and are worth prioritizing.

We know that [poverty persists](#), generation by generation. This is why, although Canada ranks in the top third of countries, we shouldn't lose sight of our reality. Canada is presently experiencing rising inflation and interest rates, both driving the cost of living crisis and the increase in child poverty rates. And while the economy continues to place constraints on all Canadians, it has a magnifying effect on those most vulnerable, including children.

Building a solid foundation for the future

Child poverty is a pernicious childhood adversity that has detrimental long-term impacts on children's health, development and well-being throughout life. Children living in poverty have lower [academic outcomes](#), including school readiness and academic achievement, than financially better-off children. Poverty is also a risk factor for behavioral and emotional difficulties.

These educational and social gaps are associated with chronic stress that persists over time, leading to lower earning potential, poorer health and [poorer well-being](#). Poverty, including income loss, housing insecurity and material hardship, is also [strongly associated](#) with abuse and neglect, which are known toxic stressors for children and youth.

Poverty reduction has the potential to initiate a beneficial cascade that would improve the lives of children and youth. Taken together, addressing child poverty has the potential to put children on a more optimal developmental course and reduce their risk for poor outcomes.

Balancing today's needs with tomorrow's

Between 2012 and 2021, Canada made great strides in addressing child poverty. In 2016, the [Canada Child Benefit \(CCB\)](#) was introduced as a monthly tax-free supplement for eligible families to support the cost of raising children. Families in low to middle-income households benefited the most; the [CCB reduced poverty](#) by 11 percent in single-parent families and 17 percent in two-parent families.

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program provided additional temporary relief for eligible individuals during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). And, in recent years, the [minimum wage](#) has also increased for Canadians.

Although there is evidence that [monetary interventions](#), such as cash transfers, help reduce mental health symptoms among youth experiencing poverty, there remains [debate](#) on whether these increases have helped families overcome challenges to the cost of living.

Furthermore, the CERB, provided during the pandemic, has now been discontinued, increasing the hardship among Canadian families. Until families are provided with adequate support, the reality is Canada may

continue experiencing a rise in rates of child poverty with significant cascading effects.

Long-term payoffs of addressing child poverty

Addressing child poverty has long-term payoffs. [Child benefit programs](#) in Canada have been shown to positively affect children's educational attainment and improve mothers' health and mental health. These improvements can subsequently lead to improved health and mental health among children, which reduces long-term public costs.

In addition to being a [human rights issue](#), addressing child poverty makes [economic sense](#). This is why addressing child poverty needs to remain a priority for all Canadians. Governments, employers and communities must partner to reduce the risk of poverty. They can do this by:

1. Adopting a national [living wage](#) policy, where the hourly minimum wage supports the cost of living in Canadian communities.
2. Reducing [food insecurity](#) by enhancing access to nutritional food through nationally available school food programs.
3. Increasing school readiness by providing universal access to [quality early childhood development](#) programs across Canada.

Some are more at risk than others

In its [report card](#), UNICEF identified single-parent families, families living in Indigenous communities, and families with racialized or disabled children as being at higher risk of poverty. These risks come with cascading health, social and justice [consequences](#). Further multidimensional and targeted approaches are needed to support families that are more severely affected.

The Government of Canada has a legislated target to [reduce poverty by at least 50 percent](#) relative to 2015 levels by 2030 in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

As we saw before the pandemic, it is possible to reduce child poverty in Canada. However, unless the impact of the current economic climate on families is considered and suitably responded to, Canada may continue experiencing a rise in rates of [child poverty](#), putting our collective future at risk. Canada can do better, and we should do better for our kids.

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