



Turning Our Backs on Our Children: Hunger + Decrepit Housing = Unhealthy, Unsafe Children

Children account for more than one-third of the people relying on food from food relief programs in greater Toronto. The number of people at such programs has soared to 155,000 per month, up from 115,000 in 1995. Over 50,000 of those are children, representing a 15% rise in the number of kids getting food from food programs since 1995.

After paying the rent each month, households with kids relying on food banks have just \$3.65¹ per person per day for *all* living expenses, not just food. Such little income for food and other essentials places low-income families in a severe hunger crisis: 25% of kids go hungry at least one day per week and 34% go hungry at least once a month, while 44% of parents go hungry at least once a week, often to sacrifice their own food intake so their kids have something to eat.

Given such little income, not only are kids going hungry, they are forced to live in overcrowded, decrepit housing conditions. On average, food bank clients spend 65% of their income on housing, up from 55% in 1995.² Yet, 60% of households with kids rate at least one aspect of their housing³ as poor (51% rate at least two aspects as poor), up from 57% last year. Twenty-five per cent of all households with kids consisting of three or more people can afford only a bachelor or one bedroom apartment; 8% of all households with kids relying on food banks must share a kitchen while 7% do not have a private bathroom.

The situation is worse for kids whose parents rely on social assistance income. Food bank families receiving welfare or disability benefits must struggle to survive on just \$3.26⁴ per person per day once the rent has been paid; 27% of households with kids consisting of three or more people can afford only a bachelor or one bedroom apartment.

Family income levels and housing conditions are two primary determinants of children's health and security.⁵ Lack of income limits parents' ability to provide their children with

¹The average monthly income of families relying on food banks is \$1176.76, and their average monthly rent is \$743.82. Their after-rent-income, then, is \$432.94 per month, or \$14.23 a day. When this is divided by their average household size (3.9), families relying on food banks have just \$3.65 per person per day for all after-rent expenses.

²A household paying more than 50% of its income on housing is considered to be at risk of homelessness (Ontario's Non-Profit Housing Association. *Where's Home? A Picture of Housing In Ontario*. p. 21). A home is generally considered affordable if no more than 30% of household income is spent on housing. See Mayor's Homeless Action Task Force *Taking Responsibility for Homelessness: An Action Plan for Toronto* (The Golden Report). p. 137

³Survey respondents are asked to rate the following aspects of their housing on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being good and 5 being poor.

⁴The average monthly income of food bank families receiving social assistance is \$1083.03, and their average monthly rent is \$716.05. Their after-rent-income, then, is \$366.98 per month, or \$12.07 a day. When this is divided by their average household size (3.7), families relying on food banks have just \$3.26 per person per day for all after-rent expenses.

⁵The UN Special Session on Children 2002. *Putting Promises Into Action: A Report on a Decade of Family and Child Poverty in Canada*. Toronto: Campaign 2000, May. Available online at www.campaign2000.ca/rc/unsscMAY02/unintro.html

healthy, nutritious foods. A new study published in the *British Medical Journal*, for example, shows that children who grow up poor are at greater risk for obesity, heart disease and diabetes as adults.⁶ Low incomes also force families to ration food and other vital necessities: 25% of parents coming to food banks in greater Toronto say that in the last year they have had difficulty accessing health care services for themselves or their children. Typically, parents were unable to afford prescriptions and health care services for their children.

While low family incomes threaten the nutrition and health of increasing numbers of children, decrepit housing conditions result in an unsafe, insecure living environment. Studies reveal that insecure housing and poor child nutrition have severe, detrimental effects on kids' abilities to learn in school and to develop vital social skills needed throughout life.⁷

Kids relying on food banks, then, are not only facing acute hunger, but must live in overcrowded, deteriorating, often unsafe housing. The resulting threat to their physical and social health reflects changes to social assistance programs that have reduced the income many poor families rely on and changes to housing policy that have resulted in skyrocketing rents throughout greater Toronto and across the province. Decreasing incomes and increasing rents have produced a desperate struggle for low-income people to pay the rent AND feed the kids.

Why Kids Go Hungry and Face Worse Housing, Part 1: Declining Social Assistance

Fifty-three per cent of households with kids relying on food banks depend on social assistance (either welfare, called Ontario Works (OW), or disability benefits, called Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)) for their primary source of income.

Prior to 1995, the federal government gave money to all provincial governments to fund social assistance programs across the country. With this money came federal regulations, called the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), ensuring basic income-related rights to all low-income Canadians receiving social assistance benefits. Among these were the right to an adequate income; the right to income assistance when in need; and the right to welfare without forced participation in work or training programs.⁸

But in its 1995 budget, as a cost-cutting measure, the federal government replaced the CAP with the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). The CHST provided provinces with less money to pay for a number of social services, including social assistance benefits. With this reduction of federal money came the elimination of the regulations ensuring that all provinces provide quality welfare programs. Gone, too,

⁶As reported in The Toronto Star, "Poor choice or no choice?," October 11, 2002.

⁷See, for example, Rothman, Laurel 2001. *Social Investment in Families Yields Benefits to All*. Toronto: Campaign 2000. Available online at www.campaign2000.ca/res/briefs/pre_budget01.pdf.

⁸Klein, Seth and Barbara Montgomery 2001. *Depressing Wages: Why Welfare Cuts Hurt Both the Welfare and Working Poor*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives p. 7

were the income-related rights of poor people as enshrined in the CAP.⁹ In Ontario, the provincial government used this elimination of federal standards to implement a welfare program that creates severe financial hardship for welfare recipients. In 1995, the Ontario government reduced welfare rates by 21.6%, cutting the primary source of income for many low-income people by more than one-fifth. Welfare income was then frozen at the reduced level. Increases in inflation and costs of living in subsequent years mean the real value of those cuts has become more than 30% today.¹⁰

This cut to social assistance has kept the incomes of families relying on these benefits below the poverty line. Statistics Canada calculates a poverty line called the low income cut-offs (LICOs). In Ontario, in 2001 the LICO for a couple with two children was \$35,471. But welfare paid that family just \$18,330, or 52% of the poverty line. A single parent with one child received \$13,828, 59% of the \$23,561 LICO for that household size.¹¹

Even more conservative poverty lines are higher than the income provided to social assistance recipients in Ontario. As Figure 1a shows, welfare incomes are below the Sarlo/Fraser Institute poverty line calculated in 2001.

Figure 1. Social Assistance Income as a % of the Low Income Cut-Offs, Ontario, 2001

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Couple, 2 Children	67	57	56	55	55	53	52
Single Parent, 1 Child	75	63	62	61	60	60	59
Single Person with a Disability	74	73	72	71	70	64	62
Single Employable	51	42	42	41	41	37	36

Source: National Council of Welfare, 2002. *Welfare Incomes, 2000 and 2001*. Volume #116

Why Kids Go Hungry and Face Worse Housing, Part 2: Increasing Rents

Four years ago, the Government of Ontario changed rental housing laws to remove limits on rental increases. Now “landlords are allowed to charge any rent they want once a unit is vacant, which creates an incentive for landlords to evict tenants.”¹² As a result, between 2000 and 2001, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Toronto increased by about 5%, double the rate of inflation,¹³ while 24% of households with kids

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Shapcott, Michael 2001. “Made-in-Ontario Housing Crisis,” *Ontario Alternative Budget, Technical Paper #12*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The welfare system starting in 1995, called Ontario Works (OW), also requires that anyone receiving welfare benefits must participate in work training programs. Those who do not participate do not receive their meagre benefits. Two of OW’s stated objectives include providing employment assistance (i.e. job training and experience) to welfare recipients, and preventing and controlling welfare fraud (presumably resulting from recipients allegedly abusing the system). By identifying a lack of work experience or training and a lack of individual initiative (or laziness or dishonesty leading to fraud) as the reasons welfare recipients are not working, the government has targeted the individual as the ‘cause’ of unemployment. This targeting serves to stigmatize welfare recipients and garner public support for the austerity of the OWA.

¹¹Social assistance and LICOs levels are from National Council of Welfare Reports 2002. *Welfare Incomes, 2000 and 2001*. Volume #116. Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works and Government Services. p. 42.

¹² Shapcott (2001: 3).

¹³ Shapcott (2001); Food and Hunger Action Committee (2001: 8)

coming to food banks in the GTA were evicted or threatened with eviction in the last year, up from 17% in 1998.

Figure 1a. Social Assistance Income as a % of the Sarlo/Fraser Institute Poverty Line, Ontario, 2000

Family Size	Total Welfare Income*	Sarlo/Fraser Institute Poverty Line**	Total Welfare Income as a % of Poverty Line
One (one adult)	\$6,825	\$9,492	72
Two (one adult, one child)	\$13,758	\$14,895	92
Four (couple, two children)	\$18,214	\$21,029	87

*Source: National Council of Welfare, 2002. *Welfare Incomes, 2000 and 2001*. Volume #116

**Source: Sarlo, Christopher 2001. "Measuring Poverty in Canada," *Critical Perspectives Bulletin*. The Fraser Institute.

At the time, the province argued that rent controls needed to be eliminated so that the private market could set rents at their 'natural' level. But for many, especially poor families, these 'natural' levels are not affordable. An overwhelming 86% of households with kids relying on food banks who rent in the private housing market are at risk of homelessness because they must spend at least 50% of their income on housing.¹⁴ These households pay, on average, \$850 a month for rent and have an average monthly income of \$1112. This means that after paying the rent, households with kids relying on food banks renting in the private housing market have just \$2.27 a day per person in the household for *all* expenses, not just food.¹⁵

The elimination of rent controls added to the previous leverage the provincial government had given landlords when, starting in 1995, it began cutting public funding for the development of affordable housing. Between 1995 and 1999, "Ontario moved from spending more than \$1.1 billion annually on housing to spending zero."¹⁶

Just two years previous, in 1993, the federal government stopped all funding of new public housing initiatives to reduce expenditures.¹⁷ With no money flowing into social housing, affordable housing options for low-income people began to disappear. When tenants have fewer options to choose from, landlords gain the leverage to increase rents.¹⁸ For households with kids relying on food banks that rent in the private housing market, the resulting rental increases have pushed housing costs well beyond their budgets: on average, these households must spend a staggering 71% of their income on housing.

Figure 2. Welfare Income vs. Current Average Market Rent

¹⁴Housing experts agree that when households must pay at least 50% of their income on rent they are at risk of homelessness. See Ontario's Non-Profit Housing Association. *Where's Home? A Picture of Housing In Ontario*. p. 21.

¹⁵ The average household size for these families is 3.8.

¹⁶Shapcott, Michael 2002. "Profiting from a manufactured housing crisis," *Ontario Alternative Budget*, Technical Paper #5. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. p. 7

¹⁷Shapcott (2002)

¹⁸Ibid.

Family Structure	Total Monthly Welfare Income	Current Average Market Rent*
1 adult/1 child (0 - 12 years)	\$957	1 bedroom \$866 2 bedroom \$1,027
2 adults/1 child (0 - 12 years)	\$1030	2 bedroom \$1,027
2 adults/2 children (0 - 12 years)	\$1178	2 bedroom \$1,027; 3 bedroom \$1,208

*Source: Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, October 2001

While the elimination of public funding for affordable housing meant big savings to public coffers, according to the province, funding was cut because the public sector had no business in housing; government was an inefficient provider of housing services. Instead, it argued that the private sector was more capable of and efficient at meeting the demands of the housing market, and was better able to respond to needs for housing as they arose.

Figure 3. Disability Benefits vs. Current Average Market Rent

Family Structure	Total Monthly Disability Benefit	Current Average Market Rent*
disabled adult/1 child (0 - 12 years)	\$1424	1 bedroom \$866; 2 bedroom \$1,027
disabled single/2 children (0 - 12 years)	\$1588	2 bedroom \$1,027; 3 bedroom \$1,208
couple (1 disabled)/1 child (0 - 12 years)	\$1608	2 bedroom \$1,027; 3 bedroom \$1,208
couple (1 disabled)/2 children (0 - 12 years)	\$1805	3 bedroom \$1,208

*Source: Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, October 2001

But no public funding has meant that virtually no affordable housing has been built. In the last three years, the private sector in Ontario has built less than 2,000 new units per year across the province.¹⁹ If one considers the number of units that have been lost due to demolition and conversion over that period, there has been a net gain of only 300 affordable housing units since 1998.²⁰

With skyrocketing rents and no affordable housing, low-income families are forced to spend alarming proportions of income on rent. In order to do so, they are forced to go without food.

Why Kids Go Hungry and Face Worse Housing, Part 3: Another Attack on Social Assistance Recipients

Currently, the federal government provides benefits to low-income families to help with their child-rearing costs. The Canadian Child Tax Benefit is paid to families on a monthly basis, the amount varying with household size and income. In addition, families with a net annual income of less than \$22,397 are eligible for the National Child Benefit

¹⁹Shapcott (2002: 12)

²⁰Ibid.

Supplement (NCBS), an additional benefit for lower income households. Currently, the NCBS pays qualifying families \$107.75 per month for the first child, \$90.58 for the second child, and \$84.08 for each additional child.

But the Ontario government considers the NCBS to be additional income for social assistance recipients. As such, it reduces their social assistance cheque, dollar-for-dollar, by the amount they would receive through the NCBS. In other words, the province penalizes low-income families by taking away an assistance benefit they are eligible for.

While the NCBS is not enough to lift low-income families out of poverty, it would provide enough money to ensure that children could eat every month. The average number of kids in food bank families receiving social assistance is 1.9. Based on the NCBS numbers above, if the NCBS was not clawed back, these families would receive, on average, \$189.27 more a month to help meet rising living costs. These same households estimate that if they had between \$200 and \$250 more a month they would not need a food bank. While the NCBS would not meet all of this need, it would allow low-income households to purchase thrifty, nutritious food to ensure their families are better fed while significantly reducing the demand for food banks and other food relief programs.

Deteriorating Housing

Declining incomes and skyrocketing rents force low-income households to look for the cheapest, and typically the worst, housing. Indeed, increasing numbers of low-income kids must live in overcrowded, decrepit and often unsafe housing.

Since last year, the number of food bank households with kids that receive social assistance and consist of three or more people that can afford only a bachelor or one bedroom apartment has increased by 29% (from 21% in 2001 to 27% today). Similarly, since last year the number of food bank kids with parents receiving social assistance that do not have a private kitchen increased by 41% (from 7% to 9.9%) and the number who must share a bathroom increased by 44% (from 7% to 10.1%).

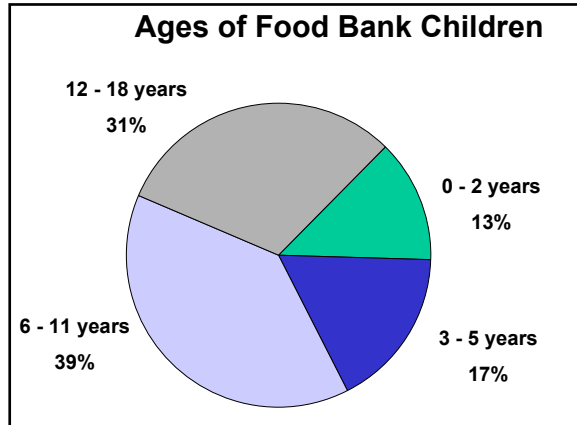
Moreover, 65% of these households rate at least one aspect of their housing²¹ as poor (up from 63% in 2001). Often, this includes unsafe electrical wiring and kitchen appliances. And usually, if one aspect is poor, so are several others: 53% of these households with kids rated at least a second aspect as poor as well (up from 51% last year).

²¹Survey respondents are asked to rate the following aspects of their housing on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being good and 5 being poor.

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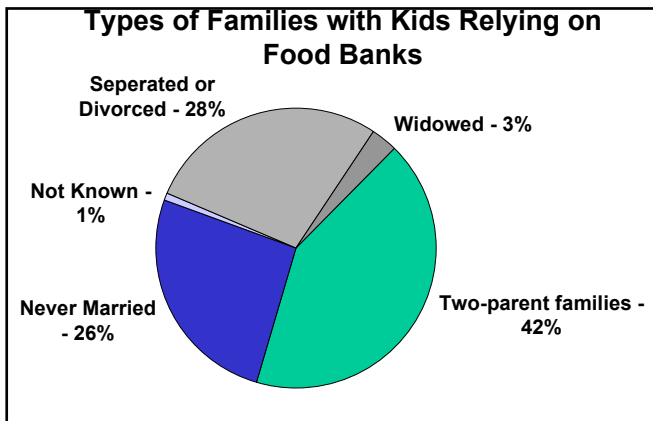
According to a report from the United Nations “stable, affordable housing in a child-friendly neighbourhood is essential for healthy child development.”²² But skyrocketing rents and inadequate social assistance rates make decent housing unattainable for many low-income families.²³ Moreover, after paying the rent each month very little is left for food and all other essentials.

As mentioned above, households with kids relying on food banks who receive social assistance have just \$3.26 a day per person after the rent has been paid. These \$3.26 are for *all* expenses, not just food. Typically, this money is spread so thinly that families must go without vital necessities. For example, 34% of the parents of these kids rate their health as just fair or poor, and 25% say that in the last year they have had difficulty accessing health care



services for themselves or their children. Most often, parents were unable to afford their kids’ prescriptions and health care services.

The lack of government support for housing programs mentioned above means there is no subsidized housing for 77% of these low-income families. Instead, they must cut corners and do without other necessities: 64%, for example, cannot afford to use public transit regularly and 13% cannot afford a telephone, while 44% borrow money from family or friends each month and another 18% receive gifts of food or money from relatives and friends every month.



Having to ration food and other basic necessities threatens kids’ long-term health. A new study published in the *British Medical Journal* reveals that women from lower income households as children and as adults were 58% more likely to show high

insulin resistance than those who lived in higher income households as children and adults (insulin resistance is a significant contributor to heart disease and to diabetes). The study also shows that women who grew up poor were more likely to have higher levels of

²²The UN Special Session on Children (2002: 8).

²³Ibid.

bad cholesterol and obesity than those who lived under better socioeconomic circumstances as children.²⁴

Decrepit housing, hunger and poor nutrition, and having to go without medications and health care services do not constitute the stable, secure environment essential for healthy child development. And in Toronto, the number of children living in these conditions each day is increasing. According to the City of Toronto, the number of children living in poverty across the city grew by 9% between 1995 and 1999²⁵ as high rents and inadequate social assistance mean increasing numbers of families and children must live in insecure social environments.

Conclusion

For parents, there should not be a choice each month; they should be able to pay the rent AND feed the kids. But abysmal social assistance rates and programs that take money from the pockets of low-income families, while rents increase uncontrolled, force this choice upon families.

As governments slash social assistance benefits and implement housing policies that push rents so high they are unaffordable to poor people, low-income families have next to no money for food and other necessities. The result is an increasing number of children relying on emergency food programs and parents sacrificing food in an attempt to ease their kids' hunger.

Since last year, the percentage of kids going hungry at least once a week has gone down (from 29% to 25%). But in order to feed the kids, more and more parents must go hungry: today, 45% of parents in food bank households receiving social assistance go hungry at least once a week, while 61% go hungry at least once a month (up from 43% and 55%, respectively, in 2001). And, telling of the increasing need, households with kids that receive social assistance will use food banks, on average, 16 times this year, up from 12.8 times last year.

Governments must ensure that the most vulnerable citizens - low-income kids and their families - have the opportunity to live healthy, productive lives. Adequate social assistance and housing programs that provide these families the chance to meet their basic nutritional needs, and alleviate exorbitant housing costs created by policy decisions, are the first step. Until then, governments rob kids and their families of such opportunity.

²⁴As reported in The Toronto Star, "Poor choice or no choice?," October 11, 2002.

²⁵As reported in The Toronto Star, "Childhood Poverty on the Rise in Toronto", October 10, 2002.