

# TAKING ACTION AGAINST POVERTY

Supporting Education and Building Canada  
through the Elimination of Child Poverty



Background Material for  
Parliamentarians and Staff

CTF HILL DAY 2010



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For additional information, please contact us at:

2490 Don Reid Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K1H 1E1  
Tel: 613-232-1505  
Toll Free: 1-866-283-1505  
Fax: 613-232-1886  
[info@ctf-fce.ca](mailto:info@ctf-fce.ca)  
[www.ctf-fce.ca](http://www.ctf-fce.ca)

## Introduction

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The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) speaks for approximately 200,000 teachers in Canada as their national voice on education and related social issues. CTF membership includes teacher organizations across Canada.

CTF has a long-standing interest in reducing child poverty. Our policy on children and poverty states that: All children, regardless of family income or circumstances, have the right to the full benefits of publicly funded education. We know, through research, that there is a direct relationship between poverty and how children fare in elementary and secondary schools.

CTF is an active member of various coalitions and networks working to enhance the well-being of Canadian children and youth, including the National Alliance for Children and Youth, Campaign 2000, Canada Without Poverty and the Dignity For All campaign. Among CTF's priorities is to support teachers and teachers' organizations as strong advocates for social justice, with a particular focus on issues related to child poverty.

“...BE IT RESOLVED THAT THE  
GOVERNMENT OF CANADA...  
DEVELOP AN IMMEDIATE PLAN  
TO ELIMINATE POVERTY IN  
CANADA FOR ALL...”

(House of Commons motion, Nov. 24, 2009)

## Child Poverty and Schools in the Canadian Context

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It deserves to be repeated, over and over, that child poverty is a tragic and shameful fact of life in a nation as wealthy as ours. The child poverty rate remains at 1989 levels, the year of the all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000.

On November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the House of Commons passed the following motion:

“That, with November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009 marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1989 unanimous resolution of this House to eliminate poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000, and not having achieved that goal, be it resolved that the Government of Canada, taking into consideration the Committee's work in this regard, and respecting provincial and territorial jurisdiction, develop an immediate plan to eliminate poverty in Canada for all...”

We believe that with this motion, Parliament has made a commitment to a federal plan for the elimination of poverty. Governments and civil society must now work together to determine specifics and timeframes, and to ensure that poverty reduction initiatives are grounded in a Canadian understanding of economic and social rights.

We should never forget that what led us here is the recognition of a very bleak set of statistics, particularly for vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal children, children of new immigrants, and children with disabilities:

- Canada's after-tax child poverty rate is stalled at 11.3%.
- Nearly one out of every nine Canadian children lives in poverty.
- Child poverty is persistent across Canada. Rates of child and family poverty are at double digits in five out of ten provinces.

- A startling 40% of low-income children live in families where at least one of their parents works full-time year round – they are the working poor.
- Children in new Canadian and Aboriginal families as well as children with disabilities are at greater risk of living in poverty.
- Nearly one out of every two children (49%) living in a family that recently immigrated to Canada (1996-2001) lives in poverty.
- Poverty rates are a formidable barrier in Aboriginal communities. Almost one in two Aboriginal children (49%) under the age of six (not living in First Nations communities) lives in a low-income family.
- Some families live deep in poverty. Low-income two parent families, on average, would need an additional \$7,300 per year to reach the poverty line. For lone parent mother-led families, the average depth of poverty is \$6,500.
- In 2007, 720,230 people in Canada used food banks, including 280,900 children. This is an 86% increase since the 1989 unanimous House of Commons’ resolution to end child poverty.

Given the prevalence of child poverty in Canada, its effects inevitably get played out in schools and classrooms. Poverty **negatively** shapes learning opportunities for students. Since government action can significantly reduce poverty and poverty reduction improves education attainment and economic well-being...the direction would seem obvious.

CTF’s research has found that many low-income children experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of illiteracy, and higher drop-out rates.

The strong correlation between socio-economic status and children’s academic performance is well established. The inequities that exist between affluent and poor families with respect to education were the subject of a Statistics Canada study published in November 2006. In analyzing five-year-old children’s readiness to learn on the basis of gender, level of household income, and a child’s home environment, it concluded that children from lower income families were less ready to learn than children from more affluent households.

“CTF’S RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT MANY LOW-INCOME CHILDREN EXPERIENCE REDUCED MOTIVATION TO LEARN.”

There are those who would say that the relationship between poverty and schooling must be addressed within the schools to improve the quality of schooling children receive. The **socially just** response includes the essential component of working outside the school to address the poverty that negatively shapes learning opportunities to begin with...schools cannot do it alone. Remedies must include school-based policies as well as broader social and economic policies addressing housing, healthcare, family income, labour market protection, etc. One set of policies without the other will be insufficient, and this has probably contributed greatly to Canada’s inability to reduce its poverty rate over the past couple of decades.

## Federal Government Responsibilities

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According to Campaign 2000, government programs including the GST credit, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the Universal Child Care Benefit, and Employment Insurance make a significant difference in reducing Canada's poverty rate for low income families with children – in 2006 child and family poverty would have been 10% higher without public investment.

There is a growing momentum supporting the view that poverty must be tackled **now**. Opinion polls show that most Canadians believe concrete government action can drastically reduce poverty. Several provinces have taken or are planning to take steps to address poverty. **Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Manitoba** have adopted poverty reduction strategies. Other jurisdictions are considering taking similar action.

There are also important lessons to be learned from other countries in reducing child poverty. The fact that poverty reduction makes sound economic sense, is demonstrated by **Denmark, Sweden and Finland**, among the most economically competitive nations in the world – these countries have the lowest child poverty rates along with strong social safety nets. Sweden, which has very low poverty rates compared to Canada, “has set itself the objective of becoming the world’s best country in which to grow old.”

The **European Union** has put in place a framework that views poverty, not as an isolated problem, but rather one to be tackled within a broad economic, social and political context...The **UK** plans to cut child poverty in half in **Britain** by 2010, eliminate it by 2020, and create affordable childcare spaces for all children aged 3-14 by 2010... **Ireland** adopted a 10-year National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997 that has since resulted in significant declines in poverty including child poverty...**New Zealand**, a country similar to Canada in that it has large Aboriginal and immigrant populations, has taken an approach to social development which emphasizes both social protection and social investment and the need to focus more on its disadvantaged populations.

“OPINION POLLS SHOW THAT MOST CANADIANS BELIEVE CONCRETE GOVERNMENT ACTION CAN DRASTICALLY REDUCE POVERTY. SEVERAL PROVINCES HAVE TAKEN OR ARE PLANNING TO TAKE STEPS TO ADDRESS POVERTY.”

One of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, halving by 2015 the proportion of people worldwide whose income is less than \$1 a day, and achieve universal primary education for both boys and girls by 2015.

## Recent Events

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In the final weeks of 2009, some federal government activity in the area of addressing poverty has given positive reinforcement to the work many are trying to do to improve economic conditions and learning opportunities for Canadian children.

The **Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science & Technology** tabled a report titled *“In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness”*. The Committee had the huge task of studying social conditions in Canadian cities and making recommendations to the federal government that would address a wide range of questions and concerns. Among them being how parents of low income families are able to provide for their children’s needs, including their readiness for and completion of school. CTF submitted a brief to the Committee and appeared as a witness during Committee hearings.

“PROGRAMS DEALING WITH  
POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS  
SHOULD BE DESIGNED TO **LIFT**  
CANADIANS OUT OF POVERTY  
RATHER THAN MAKE LIVING WITHIN  
POVERTY MORE **MANAGEABLE.**”

(Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science  
& Technology)

The CTF brief is cited in the report as one that “pointed to the importance of early childhood services and supports in ensuring that all children benefit from school.” In addition, the CTF President is quoted in the text from comments during the hearings on the association between education achievement and low socio-economic status...

Strategies and policy recommendations that could have a positive impact on inadequate educational opportunities linked to families’ low social economic status include an increased minimum wage, a restoration of broad eligibility for Employment Insurance, a major investment in social housing and improved accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and training.

It was very interesting to note that the Committee’s first recommendation was to stress that programs dealing with poverty and homelessness should be designed to **lift** Canadians out of poverty rather than make living within poverty more **manageable**.

Among the specific recommendations are those that address increases to the minimum wage, significant improvement to the Employment Insurance program, increases to the National Child Benefit, affordable housing initiatives, assistance for First Nations, immigrant and refugee children and their families, additional support for access to post-secondary education, and a national federal/provincial initiative on early childhood learning.

A second report worth noting is *“A Prosperous and Sustainable Future for Canada: Needed Federal Action”*, from the **House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance**. This Committee report makes direct reference to witnesses’ views on child care, particularly a national child care strategy, and the importance of providing funds directly to public and not-for-profit child care centres.

The Committee's recommendation on national child care states...

“The federal government, recognizing the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories as well as the need to compensate those provinces and territories that decide not to participate in a country-wide measure, implement a national child care plan providing high-quality, affordable and inclusive child care services...”

The recommendations also included a wide range of significant improvements to the Employment Insurance program, and a recommendation that programs for Aboriginal Canadians be “designed and delivered in a manner that addresses their health, education, housing, infrastructure, early childhood development and care...”

One other item is worthy of particular reference. During the 40<sup>th</sup> session of Parliament, **Bill C-304, the *Secure, Adequate, Accessible and Affordable Housing Act***, was amended and adopted by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA), and was to be referred to Parliament for third reading. The Bill calls for the federal government to work with provincial, municipal and Aboriginal counterparts to establish a national housing strategy, and commits to:

- targets and timelines for the elimination of homelessness;
- provision of financial assistance to those who cannot otherwise afford adequate housing;
- priority for groups most vulnerable to homelessness and discrimination or for those at risk of violence, recognising different needs of people with disabilities and families with children;
- independent review and addressing of complaints about possible violations of the right to adequate housing;

## A Call for Action

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A recent national poll on perceptions of poverty found that a strong majority of Canadians believe our political leaders at the federal and provincial level need to set concrete targets and timelines for poverty reduction, and that **taking action on poverty is especially important in a recession**.

Momentum has been building to make the elimination of poverty a top priority for Parliament. There has been much study and input from Canadians in all parts of the country. All of the recommendations are similar and focus on the three broad, key areas of **family income, housing and educational opportunity**. It is extremely important that this momentum continues and that the Committee reports and other good work referenced in this brief, along with the ongoing work of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) achieve positive outcomes.

“THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT...  
IMPLEMENT A NATIONAL CHILD CARE  
PLAN PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY,  
AFFORDABLE AND INCLUSIVE CHILD  
CARE SERVICES...”

(Recommendation from 2009 House of  
Commons Standing Committee on Finance)

At the beginning of this document reference was made to a House of Commons motion of November 24th, 2009. It is a commitment to a national strategy for the elimination of poverty. The Senate Committee report, "In From the Margins..." does not make a recommendation for a national strategy, but provides the pieces on which that strategy can be built. We now need a "road map" for how we can achieve the objectives inherent in the recommendations that are consistently made as ways to reduce and eliminate poverty. We know what needs to be done. We now need to determine how those recommendations fit in a national strategy, how they are connected and how we can best focus our energies to make them "happen".

## Recommendations

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**The Canadian Teachers' Federation urges all Parliamentarians to support a coordinated effort to reduce and eliminate child poverty in Canada.**

This coordinated effort should be focussed along three main areas of action:

- **Family Income**
- **Housing**
- **Educational Opportunity**

Strategies and policy recommendations that could have a positive impact on inequitable educational opportunities linked to family socio-economic status and ensure that all children are better provided for, should include but not be limited to:

- **Increased minimum wage;**
- **Expansion of eligibility for Employment Insurance;**
- **Major investment in social housing;**
- **Improved accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and training;**
- **Inclusion of child and youth services as part of federal/provincial/territorial agreements concerning immigrants and refugees;**
- **Funding for First Nations child welfare agencies to deliver in-home support and prevention services to First Nations children and their families;**
- **A universal child care system providing dedicated funding for high quality care and early intervention and school-readiness initiatives for all children;**