

Homelessness and hunger in Ontario

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Several reports over the past weeks have drawn attention to the growth of hunger and homelessness across Canada, and in Ontario in particular.

One such study conducted by the Canadian Association of Food Banks, called 'Hunger Count 1998,' reveals that the number of people forced to use food banks has increased dramatically in the past several years. More than 700,000 people used one of 2,141 food banks last year in Canada, an increase of 5.4 percent over 1996. The sharpest rise was in Nova Scotia, which saw an increase of 40 percent. Food bank use in Ontario, while climbing only 2.1 percent, has recorded an increase of over 30 percent in the last three years.

The Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto is the largest of its kind in Ontario and has become a permanent necessity since its establishment nearly 20 years ago. While the food bank issues reports regularly, the approach of winter in Ontario has focused media attention on a number of its recent publications that look at the broader effects of poverty in one of the wealthiest cities in North America.

While a good deal of attention, legitimately enough, has been paid to the plight of poor children in Ontario, who account for 41.5 percent of food bank users, the poverty of their parents and other adults is often overlooked. Revealing statistics in one report from Daily Bread, 'Who goes hungry?,' show that among adults polled who use food banks, the majority were childless and a disproportionate two-thirds were in their thirties or forties--prime earning years. With incomes of between 25 to 50 percent below the government low-income cutoff or poverty line, the percentage of those counted as the poorest of the poor is increasing.

Another study reveals the connection between poor health and hunger, as well as other important features of systemic poverty in Ontario and in its largest urban center in particular. Entitled 'No Apples today ... maybe

tomorrow,' the report declares that with almost one-third of those who use food banks suffering poor health, hunger is a health issue. While it may come as no surprise that those who lack adequate nutrition are also more likely to have poor health, this report is valuable in elaborating concretely the impact of the decline in living standards in the province. However, as the study itself states: 'Food banks are not a viable option for addressing the long term problem of poor health and hunger.'

On another front the Toronto disaster relief committee issued a report last week calling homelessness a national disaster that should be treated like last winter's devastating ice storm. Ontario Premier Mike Harris responded by saying, 'I don't know whether it's a national state of emergency at this point of time. I don't know whether it's any worse than last year.'

Advocacy groups have raised the issue of homelessness in anticipation of a large shortfall in available space. Current shelters are filled to capacity. Last year in Toronto 26,000 people used emergency shelters, and that number is expected to increase over the next 12 months. It is estimated that 700 new beds will have to be found to meet the demand even if it stays at last year's level. Some 4,700 individuals are currently homeless in Toronto, with about 4,200 of them staying in emergency shelters and the rest sleeping outside. The city has set up a task force to find a long-term solution, but without adequate funding officials are pressed simply to meet immediate needs.

Responding to a task force report on homelessness commissioned by her office, Ontario Social Services Minister Janet Ecker stated that the cuts to welfare would help Ontario's homeless people to build a life off the streets. According to Ecker, the government is out of the subsidized housing business, which she declares is not the only answer to the problem. The report, while

outlining the extent of the crisis, offers no solutions and places the responsibility on municipalities.

Ecker applauded the report and went on to boast that there are 133,000 fewer children on welfare today than in 1995. The reason for this change is not that poor families have fared any better over that period, but that changes to welfare eligibility and a 21.6 cut in benefits have removed welfare as a means of support for thousands of poor families. Ecker's ministry is reportedly seeking to expand the 'workfare' program which is currently in place only for public sector and nonprofit agencies.

Opposition critics called the 22-page study pitiful, pointing out that while it calls for cities to get people off the streets and into hostels, the hostels are already full. In Toronto an advisory committee on homelessness has suggested setting up tent cities and trailer parks to solve the growing crisis. The solutions offered resemble measures taken in 1946 when the city faced a housing crisis resulting from the return of soldiers from the Second World War.

Referring to the destruction of social programs by both provincial and federal governments, Councilor Jack Layton, who heads the committee, stated, 'The hostels are full, affordable housing programs have been canceled, rents are being allowed to go up--we really are stuck here, and we've been abandoned totally by Ottawa and Queen's Park.' Ann Golden, head of Toronto's homelessness task force, said the report ignores issues of poverty and the housing market, and the shortage of supportive housing needed to keep the mentally ill off the streets.

NDP Member of the Provincial Parliament Rosario Marchese stated, 'This is a man-made crisis that can only be corrected by the provincial government taking the lead--and that means housing.' When the NDP was in power it pioneered the workfare program and quashed plans to build 20,000 nonprofit housing units, measures that contributed to the current social crisis.

Actions taken by every level of government have helped swell the ranks of the poor. The federal Liberals have cut billions from transfer payments to the provinces that finance social programs, while posting a surplus of nearly \$20 billion in employment insurance since restricting eligibility and reducing rates last year. Over the last 10 years the proportion of the unemployed who actually qualify for benefits has fallen from 83 to

42 percent.

In Ontario the provincial Conservative government has deepened its victimization of the poor since slashing welfare rates three years ago. Hospital closings and cuts to health care have thrown thousands of mentally ill people into the streets to fend for themselves. Waiting lists for subsidized housing now extend years into the future, with no new housing being built and existing shelter being privatized.

In Toronto tuition hikes and a shortage of decent paying jobs have worsened conditions for thousands of young people. In typical fashion bureaucrats at city hall last summer launched a campaign to criminalize the so-called 'squeegee kids,' youth who make money by washing car windshields.

The harsh economic reality is about to get worse. While the full impact of government cuts to welfare, social programs and subsidized housing are now making themselves felt, it is clear that the anticipated economic downturn will place whole new sections of the population in jeopardy.

The expressions of concern from the various parliamentary parties are hypocritical. The Liberals, Tories and NDP have each, over the past period, contributed to the growth of poverty in response to the demands of big business to divest government of social responsibility and leave the poor at the mercy of the market.



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