

A quarter of New Zealand children live in poverty

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A new report on child poverty in New Zealand, released on December 9, confirmed previous estimates that a quarter of the country's children, some 265,000, are living in poverty.

The Child Poverty Monitor report by Children's Commissioner Russell Wills, a practicing paediatrician, was undertaken after the National government rejected earlier recommendations that it should start a comprehensive measure of poverty. Wills obtained private funding from a Wellington charity to support the research.

The report assessed the level of poverty on the basis of children living in households with less than 60 percent of the median income after housing costs. According to the 2013 Census, the individual median income is \$NZ28,500.

The figures are damning. One out of every six children does not receive basic necessities such as healthcare and clothing. One in ten suffers from "severe poverty"—often going without essential items like fruit and vegetables and warm housing. Three out of five poor children will be entrenched in poverty for much of their childhood.

The figures for Maori and Pacific Islander children are a particular indictment, with one in three living in poverty. Altogether, sole parent families make up 51 percent of those in poverty and families dependent on welfare represent about 60 percent. However, child poverty is reaching far beyond welfare beneficiaries, with about two out of five impoverished kids living in working families.

Poverty-related illnesses have risen 12 percent since the global crash began in 2008 and reached record highs last year. The biggest increases are in acute bronchiolitis, gastroenteritis, asthma, acute upper respiratory infections and skin infections. Tens of

thousands of children are admitted to hospital every year for respiratory and infectious diseases associated with living in damp, overcrowded homes.

"Most New Zealanders will find the numbers of children affected by disease shocking," Wills told the *Herald on Sunday*, "but for those of us working clinically with families in poverty it is not surprising." He said hospital wards were full of poor, sick children every month of the year, not just in winter. There was no longer a "summer lull" in diseases. Wills added: "You don't get 10 to 12 people living in a two-bedroom house because they want to."

Wills said there remained widespread ignorance about the extent of child poverty and how badly it had deteriorated in the past 30 years. "Child poverty has at least doubled by any measure since I was a kid," Wills said, saying the government lacked "a plan" to reduce child poverty.

In fact, ruthless government measures are exacerbating the crisis. Since July, following the most far-reaching attack on welfare in 50 years, aimed at slashing \$1.6 billion from benefits, more than 2,700 parents had seen their payments halved for failing "work obligations." This could be anything from missing a work seminar to not giving the authorities a CV. More than 8,600 other beneficiaries had their payments cut or cancelled, which could be for failing to enrol children in education and healthcare, refusing to undergo a work drug test, or ignoring a warrant for arrest.

The Child Poverty Monitor report was the second in less than a week to point to the extent of child poverty. The United Nations agency UNICEF found significant increases in infectious diseases, high rates of child maltreatment, children hurt while working, children detained in police cells and tried in the adult justice

system, and significant levels of inequality.

The plight of impoverished children is part of the wider onslaught by governments of all stripes over the past three decades, and in particular the austerity measures implemented since the 2008 global financial crisis. Welfare measures are being dismantled in order to slash government spending, cut corporate taxes and drive down wages, so that profit rates can be boosted.

Census data released last month showed the gap between rich and poor has sharply increased since 2006. While median income increased in dollar terms from \$24,400 to \$28,500, it failed to keep up with inflation. Incomes in working class South Auckland plummeted by up to 17 percent. Nearly 40 percent of adults had an income of \$20,000 or less. Home ownership rates dropped to 65 percent of households, compared with 70 percent in 2006.

Meanwhile, a narrow privileged layer improved its financial position significantly, with more than 181,000 people—5 percent of the population—earning above \$100,000, compared with 105,525 individuals six years ago, an increase of nearly 75 percent.

The yawning social gulf is impacting every area of life. In the OECD's international educational tests, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), published last month, New Zealand's 15-year-olds slipped from seventh to 13th in reading, seventh to 18th in science and 13th to 23rd in mathematics. In 2003, New Zealand had one of the biggest gaps between high and low achievement. By 2012, the gap had worsened.

Fiona Ell from Auckland University wrote in the *New Zealand Herald* on December 5 that New Zealand has bigger differences in mathematics performance between rich and poor students than many other countries, and there is a stronger than average relationship between test scores and socio-economic status. "It is harder to do well in New Zealand if you are poor, than other places," she concluded.

Government ministers flatly dismissed the Child Poverty Monitor report. Social Development Minister Paula Bennett remained adamant that child poverty had got "no worse." Prime Minister John Key simply claimed that after the global financial crisis "more people went onto the unemployment benefit for a period of time."

The main "opposition" parties, Labour, the Greens

and Mana, while making minor criticisms of National, offer no alternative to the relentless growth of mass poverty caused by the global crisis of capitalism. It is an economic system they all defend, backing the drive to make New Zealand companies "competitive" by matching the cuts in working class conditions being imposed in Europe and America.

In government from 1999-2008, Labour and its allies never restored National's devastating welfare cuts of the early 1990s. They are now preparing to implement even more sweeping austerity measures should they win the 2014 election. Last week, Labour confirmed it would join the international assault on workers' pensions by lifting the retirement age from 65 to 67 and means-testing superannuation payments.



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