



Who is minding the children?

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York Region is now part of Ontario's child poverty capital and we continue to be severely shortchanged by social service funding, confirm two separate reports released this week.

More than one in 10 York Region children live in poverty, York Children's Aid Society executive director Patrick Lake said at Tuesday's unveiling of a new report, confirming the Greater Toronto Area is Ontario's child poverty capital.

Greater Trouble in Greater Toronto, Child Poverty in the GTA, prepared in partnership with the Social Planning Network, reports that half of all children in Ontario who live in poverty — more than 141,000 — live in the GTA, up from 44 per cent in 1997.

In the same period, the percentage of impoverished children in York Region increased from 10 per cent to 12 per cent.

The other report, prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers, examined health care and social service funding in the suburbs.

Its key finding: provincial funding for social services in the high growth areas, such as York Region, is woefully low.

In 2006-07, social services in the GTA/905 received \$193 less provincial funding per resident services compared to the rest of Ontario.

This translated into a total annual operating funding gap of \$641.9 million.

Issued by the Strong Communities Coalition, the survey said four million Ontarians in high-growth communities, including those living in the GTA/905, are still well behind other Ontarians when it comes to provincial funding for local hospital services, community-based health care services and social services.

The dual reports inter-relate, regional social service professionals agree.

"Absolutely," said Mr. Lake, part of a panel of poverty and child welfare experts detailing alarming trends in child poverty.

“They play very well together. We’ve got a situation with significant growth and no matching social service and health infrastructure. The investment has not kept up with the growth in population. It’s startling to see it in black and white.”

The findings, focused on children from birth to 17, highlight the fact poverty is being driven out of Toronto’s downtown core and inner suburbs, into neighbouring regions.

“There’s continued up-migration from the city as people search for opportunity and affordable housing,” he said.

“Ironically, they find less affordable housing and fewer supports like food banks, educational resources and public transportation.

“Poverty is not as visible in this region because, rather than living in social housing, poor families are forced to crowd into single family homes.”

Most disconcerting is rising child poverty took place during a time of economic growth, he said.

“But it isn’t booming anymore,” Mr. Lake said.

“It’ll only get worse. Now that we are facing much tougher economic times, how much worse will it be for those families already in poverty and for those bordering on poverty?”

Mr. Lake is all too familiar with the social service funding gap.

“About 8 per cent of Ontario’s children live in York and we get 3 per cent of total child welfare funding,” he said.

“We’re getting 40 cents on the dollar.”

The reports’ findings are shocking, United Way of York Region CEO Daniele Zanotti said Tuesday.

“History has shown when you have huge numbers of people moving into areas without safety nets, health and social service challenges emerge,” he said.

“Rates of child poverty as social services fail to keep up is shocking. For most driving north of Steeles (Avenue), they see social services issues in the rearview mirror. Well, now it’s at the front bumper.”

Educators, too, are seeing the effects of tough economic times, York Region District School Board spokesperson Ross Virgo said.

“As a school district, we’re very aware of increasing poverty in York Region not only in incidence, but by demographics,” he said.

“Certainly, in some areas, including southeast Markham, southwest York

Region, Georgina and Richmond Hill, we're seeing a growing number of students and families who are struggling."

The public board, with 115,000 students and growing, is taking a pro-active stance to help marginalized students. Performance Plus, a districtwide initiative, targets school communities with socio-economic challenges, Mr. Virgo said.

The program applies additional resources, ranging from teachers, community youth workers, enhanced transportation and breakfast plans to schools in need. Another initiative, Breakfast for Learning, provides students with morning meals.

The child poverty report also said a disproportionate number of visible minority children, whether Canadian born or newcomers, live in poverty.

In 2000, in the Metropolitan Toronto census area, which includes York Region, the number of low-income children was one child in 10 among global European groups, one child in five for East Asian groups and one child in four for aboriginal, South Asian, Caribbean, South and Central American groups.

The study also said 33 per cent of children of Arab and West Asian groups and 50 per cent of African group children live below the poverty line.

"At York CAS, we recognize and are addressing the challenges of the increasing diversity of our region, not just on our own but with our partners," Mr Lake said.

"It's the only way this issue can be meaningfully addressed."

The region suffers from a basic provincial disparity when it comes to funding for social services, he said.

"Social services funding shouldn't end at Steeles Avenue," he said, adding the province should invest in early learning and child care, affordable housing and extended drug and dental care.

Mr. Zanotti, in the midst of United Way's most ambitious fundraising campaign, which is 73 per cent toward the \$9.5-million goal, said part of the regional solution requires revisiting distribution of funds.

"When you look at the pie, we're not asking for the pie to grow, but how it's distributed," he said.

The report recommends federal action, including a child benefit supplement, work tax credits, a basic income system for persons with disabilities and major investments in housing, early learning and child care.

"Among these, the single greatest need is for affordable housing," Mr. Lake said.

“Children in low income families live marginalized lives within their communities because families must pay rent with money needed for food, clothing, transportation and other necessities for their children.”

The Strong Communities Coalition is recommending the province:

- Establish a task force to complement Places to Grow to recommend how best to support growth by investing in hospital care, community-based health care and social services in addition to physical infrastructure.
- Better distribute hospital, health care and social services funding using a population needs-based funding formula.
- Safeguard the \$100 million hospital growth funding commitment for hospitals and build on it by providing growth funding for social services and community-based healthcare & long-term care.

Learn more

- The Greater Trouble in the Greater Toronto Area report is available at www.oacas.org
- Assessing the Gap report can be downloaded at www.strongcommunitiescoalition.org

By the numbers

- 15 per cent of children live in one-parent families.
- 42 per cent of children in one-parent families live in poverty.
- Between 1990 and 2005, the percentage of child poverty rates in York Region’s large urban communities increased.
- In Markham, from 8 per cent to 20 per cent and in Richmond Hill, from 9 per cent to 18 per cent.