

Adrienne Montani: One in eight B.C. children lived in poverty in 2020

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Opinion: That's a decrease of 40,600 compared to 2019 thanks to pandemic benefits, but that progress may be all but wiped out by the return to inadequate incomes and soaring costs.

The first year of the COVID pandemic was one of hardship for many families. B.C.'s latest annual Child Poverty Report Card, published by First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society, indicates that 2020 also marked a record low for child poverty rates in Canada and in B.C. The data tells us that a variety of short-term pandemic benefits, one-time financial benefits, and changes to the Canada Child Benefit, dramatically reduced the number of poor families that year.

As life was greatly disrupted for families with children, government can be credited with nimble action to ensure low- and middle-income families avoided financial ruin and deep poverty in the first year of the pandemic. Through a combination of federal and provincial benefits, B.C. saw a decrease of 40,600 children living in poverty in 2020 compared with 2019. However, there were still 116,500 children, or one in eight, who lived in poor households in 2020.

For the first time, B.C. had a slightly lower child poverty rate than Canada, and the poverty rate for children under the age of five, at 13 per cent, was also lower than Canada's early years child poverty rate of 14 per cent.

As the data in the report on child poverty on First Nations reserves shows, child poverty statistics hide the fact that some children are more at risk of living in poverty than others. The overall child poverty rate on the 59 B.C. First Nations reserves included in the data was more than twice as high as the overall child poverty rate, with rural reserves faring much worse than urban ones. The continuing legacy of colonialism is still very apparent in these numbers. Governments at all levels must meaningfully collaborate with First Nations, Métis and Inuit governments to develop and implement plans to prevent, reduce and eradicate child and family poverty.

In 2020, despite the additional pandemic benefits, children in lone-parent families continued to have one of the highest poverty rates at 38 per cent. This was a decrease from 2019, but still nearly three times the overall child poverty rate for B.C. This is mostly women's poverty, as 80 per cent of lone-parent families in 2020 were female-led.

This year, the addition of 2021 census data shows that most racialized children's poverty rates were higher than the poverty rate for non-racialized children. Arab, Korean and West Asian children in B.C. had the highest rates at 38, 25 and 21 per cent, respectively. The census data also showed more than one in five recent immigrant children lived in poverty in B.C.

The majority of poor children in B.C. live in families with parents who work in the paid labour force. Some of these parents work full time, full year, and others work part time. In 2020, the average income for families in the highest income decile was 16 times what the families in the lowest income decile made, or an average of \$326,114 more each year. Income inequality in B.C. is an important part of the child poverty story.

While it is apparent that temporary pandemic-related government benefits played a critical role in reducing child poverty in 2020, we know the story of child and family poverty does not play out over a one-year period. Progress made toward decreasing both the rate and depth of family poverty in 2020 may be all but wiped out by the return to inadequate incomes for families at or below the poverty line and soaring costs in subsequent years.

First Call's previous 25 B.C. Child Poverty Report Cards demonstrated government's too-slow approach to ending child poverty in B.C. In the 19 years from 2000 to 2019, B.C.'s child poverty rates continued to hover around 20 to 25 per cent. Over the past decades, too many children have grown up poor.

Now, more than ever, it is critical for governments at all levels to ensure that public services are robust and reach those most in need, that families can access affordable housing and that inflation is curbed.

Adrienne Montani is executive director of First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society
The 2022 Child Poverty Report Card is on the website www.firstcallbc.org

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