

Raising Expectations: Children deserve more than ‘good enough’

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March 7th 2017

Community Symposium on the Cost of Raising Children in Canada

Welcome – it seems fitting that here in our nation’s capital as we celebrate 150 years of confederation our attention is once again focused squarely on Canada’s children and how we might contribute to raising our expectations for them in the future.

(Some of you may recall that) **Canada has been an international leader on children’s rights.** Then PM Brian Mulroney co-chaired the 1990 World Summit for Children which set goals for the world’s children and urged countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the spirit of the times, co-founders Marvyn Novick and Rosemarie Popham, may they rest in peace, gathered coalition partners (CCSD, CPAG, CWLC, Can Council for Children and Youth) and founded Campaign 2000 in 1991.

The founding declaration committed to promoting and securing the full implementation of the unanimous House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by 2000. The founding partners were “equally resolute in their determination that the federal, provincial and territorial governments firmly adhere to the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child subsequent to the full ratification of the convention.

Campaign 2000 partners asserted that children are a shared responsibility – a concept that was widely and often debated throughout the 1990’s. I suggest that there is more acceptance of that concept now.

Campaign 2000 pledged that:

“We believe that every child living in Canada must be endowed from birth with public assurances of the essential living requirements necessary to secure his/her basic well-being and to support the realization of his/her inherent worth as a person and as a member of Canadian society.”

To achieve this goal, the national will must be directed toward:

Creating a full employment economy with living wages

Adopting comprehensive family security policies

Establishing and sustaining community services (that enhance the economic stability and social resources of the family thereby promoting the healthy development of children).

Campaign 2000 aimed to:

We must **improve the life chances of all children in Canada to fulfil their potential and nurture their talent and to become responsible and contributing members of Canadian society.**

Fast forward about 27 years and where have we come? – a few observations

All jurisdictions (fed and prov/terr) have ratified CRC – continues to be an important safeguard for children's rights

Had a brief National Children's Agenda at the end of the 1990's,

the introduction of several income security policies

(NCBS, Child Disability Benefit??, UCCB),

several modest initiatives directed at young children (CAP-C, two agreements on early childhood development and child care services, Aboriginal Headstart to name a few)

Increasing role of the provinces and territories in social policy

NGO's that have survived despite significant shrinkage in funding and periodic curtailment of independence

HOWEVER

Sadly, 1.3 million children in poverty – about 18.5% - nearly 1 in 5.

Shockingly high rates in FN communities

Public spending on family benefitsⁱ (at 1.18% of GDP, according to the OECD), is below the OECD average support for families at 2.14% of GDP.

Most recent census figures confirm that fertility rates continue to decrease and immigration accounts for about 2/3 of our population growth

YET, after a decade of very limited political leadership on enhancing the life chances of all children, there is renewed optimism as we participate in and monitor progress on:

A poverty reduction strategy for Canada

Commitment to develop a framework for early childhood education and care with some commitment of funding

A national housing strategy

A transformed relationship with indigenous peoples that should result in improved life chances for children

I would add that the stated appreciation for “evidence-based” policy is also a hopeful development.

IN THIS CONTEXT we focus on developing ways to estimate accurately the cost of raising children in Canada - an important corollary to creating the conditions for every child to thrive.

Let’s talk about why this matters

Understanding the true cost of raising a child in Canada has application for prospective parents, for families and for public policies.

For individual families, the cost of raising children has direct implications for budgeting and planning their futures

For public policies there are also significant implications;

Consider the Canada Child Benefit, a multi-billion dollar annual expenditure: how do we know how much the CCB is helping families to cover child-related costs?

With regard to the well-being of children in separation and divorce, how do we know that child maintenance guidelines are adequate?

With regard to children living with foster parents, how do we know if compensation is sufficient?

As the PRS is developed, how do we know if the poverty line accurately accounts for the cost of raising children?

Well-developed estimates of the cost of raising children are also critical as a basis for determining what affordability means for
childcare services
and housing, both areas of social policy under current development.

Because the cost of raising children matters to so many public and private decisions, the accuracy of the cost estimate is very important. (State-of-the-art scientific and professional knowledge is critical in this process.)

This report we are discussing today results from concerns about an implausibly low estimate of the cost of raising children in Canada that was released in a 2013 report by the Fraser Institute.

That estimate minimized the cost of transportation and excluded the costs of childcare and shelter.

In realizing the potential harm that evidence based on poorly-derived figures can have on policies for families, Campaign 2000 and the Childcare Resource and Research Unit with colleagues at U. of Manitoba (Dept of Family Social Sciences and Faculty of Social Work) collaborated on this report detailing the best available methodological approaches.

ⁱ Family benefits include child related cash transfers, family services such as childcare and financial support available for families through the tax system. For more detail visit: <https://data.oecd.org/socialexp/family-benefits-public-spending.htm>