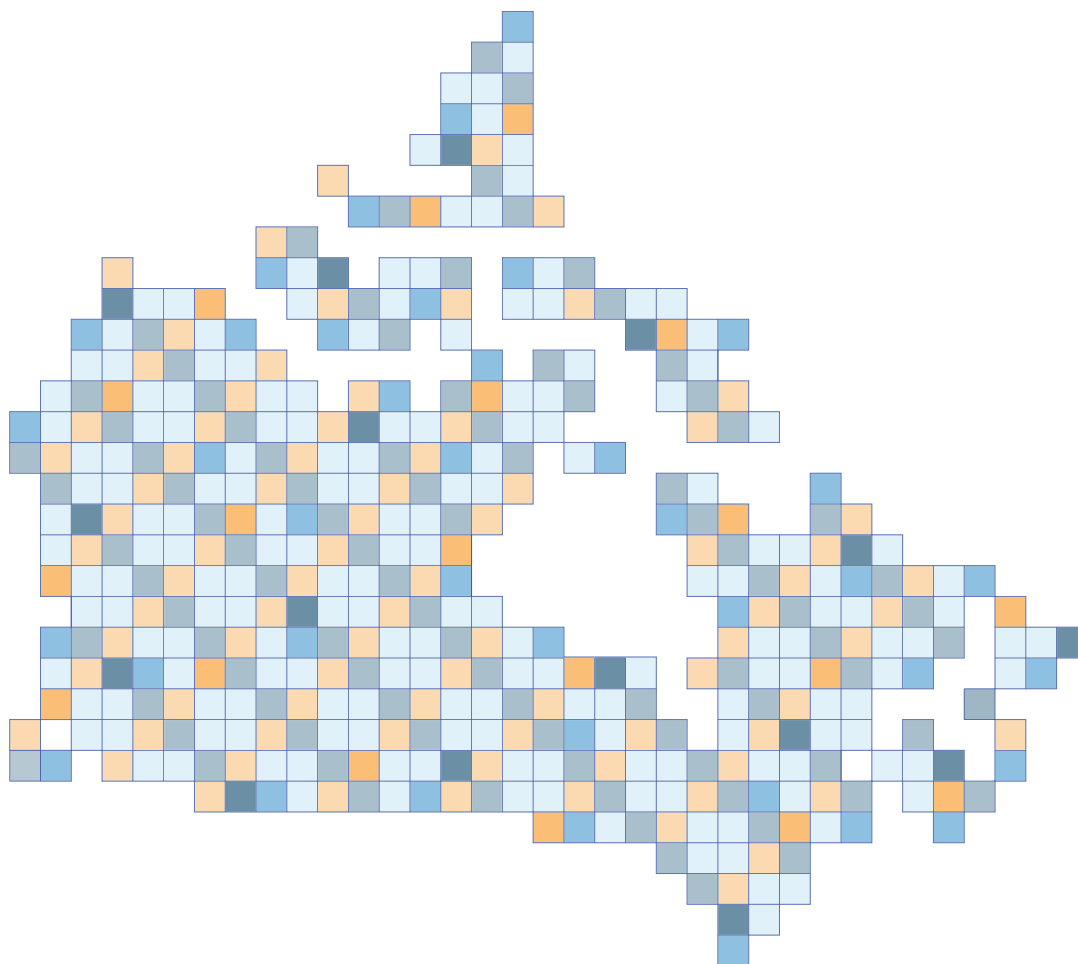


Ontario Poverty Progress Profile



2016



CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY
CANADA SANS PAUVRETÉ

Poverty is a violation of human rights.

OVERVIEW

With the largest population in Canada, the province of Ontario is host to a significant number of residents who live in poverty. The cost of poverty is high – calculated at \$38 billion per year in health and social assistance expenditures and foregone tax revenues.¹

In 2008, the Government of Ontario released its first poverty reduction strategy entitled *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*.² In August 2014, the Ontario Government published its second poverty strategy entitled *Realizing Our Potential*.³ In the 2014 report, the government recommitted to its prior goal of reducing child poverty by 25%. *Realizing Our Potential* presents some important hallmarks in recognizing that human rights have a place within efforts to address poverty. Although specific targets are not named, the plan commits to the overall goal of ending homelessness in the province.

Plan Components and Highlights

There are four areas of action outlined in *Realizing our Potential*:⁴

Breaking the cycle of poverty for children and youth

- An increase in the Ontario Child Benefit (as indexed to inflation)
- Increased health benefits for children and youth in low-income families
- Improving access to full-day kindergarten

Moving towards employment and income security, particularly for vulnerable groups

- Creation of jobs and skills programs for young people
- Improvements in access to employment and skills training for vulnerable populations, including Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities
- A raise in minimum wage

A long-term goal of ending homelessness in Ontario

- Improvements in supports for people with mental health and addiction issues, including new investments
- Increased investments in affordable housing and homelessness prevention
- Improvements in support for off-reserve Indigenous housing

Using evidence-based social policy to measure progress

Community Engagement in Plan Development and Implementation

Ontario's first poverty strategy used a system of community engagement to solicit feedback from key stakeholders. The government held 14 roundtable sessions with stakeholders, including people living in poverty. The government committed to re-engage people at the halfway point of the plan in 2011 and every five years when drafting a new plan. The Cabinet committee and the government secretariat

implementing the plan are responsible for consulting with key stakeholders on an ongoing basis.⁵ In 2013, preparation for the release of *Realizing Our Potential* the following year, the province conducted consultations with over 800 individuals receiving over 65 formal submissions and 2,000 responses through an online survey and market research.⁶

MEASURING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

Statistical Indicators of Poverty (unofficial measurement tools)[†]

	LICO Low-Income Cut-off After-tax ⁷	LIM Low-Income Measure After Tax ⁸ ***	MBM Market Basket Measure ⁹	Food Bank Usage ¹⁰	Social Assistance** Recipients ¹¹	Minimum Wage ¹²
2000	1,253,000, 10.8%	*	1,142,000, 9.9%	283,110, 2.4%	845,906	\$6.85
2005	1,276,000, 10.3%	1,826,480	1,521,000, 12.3%	338,563, 2.7%	740,638	\$7.45
2007	1,111,000, 8.8%	1,879,780	1,342,000, 10.6%	315,540, 2.5%	679,423	\$8.00
2008 ****	1,187,000, 9.3%	1,949,520	1,428,000, 11.2%	314,258, 2.4%	697,428	\$8.75
2009	1,306,000, 10.1%	2,001,030	1,646,000, 12.7%	374,230, 2.9%	650,591	\$9.50
2010	1,153,000, 8.8%	1,914,700	1,559,000, 12.0%	402,056, 3.1%	798,315	\$10.25
2011	1,182,000, 9.0%	1,923,260	1,578,000, 12.0%	395,106, 3.0%	841,115	\$10.25
2012	1,510,000, 11.3%	1,973,280	1,925,000, 14.4%	412,998, 3.1%	877,498	\$10.25
2013	*	2,016,150	*	375,814, 2.8%	888,202	\$10.25
2014 *****	*	1,963,230	*	374,698, 2.7%	889,572	\$11.00
2015	*	*	*	358,963, 2.6%	894,954	\$11.25
2016	*	*	*	335,944, 2.4%	*	\$11.40

† The LICO, LIM and MBM rates in this chart should be compared vertically to understand trends in poverty from year-to-year. As there is no official low-income threshold, and data is calculated differently based on a variety of factors, these rates are not comparable horizontally.

* Data not available.

** "Social Assistance" refers to the total number of people assisted by all Social Assistance programs in the province. The Social Assistance rates do not include individuals receiving support who are also living on a First Nations Reserve. This lowers the rates significantly.¹³

*** *Realizing Our Potential* uses the Low-Income Measure as its statistical indicator of poverty in the province.

**** *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* was released in 2008.

***** *Realizing Our Potential* was released in 2014.

Progress to Date

The first goal of the 2008 strategy, to reduce child poverty by 25% in five years was not met. In the 2014 poverty plan, the Ontario Government reported that child poverty has decreased in Ontario. Based on its calculation of the LIM, child poverty rates dropped from 15.2% in 2008¹⁴ to 13.8% in 2011.¹⁵ The 2015 annual report for *Realizing Our Potential* notes the following success indicators and progress

updates as of March 2016:

Child poverty target – Progress
Depth of poverty - Progress
Birth weight - Steady
School readiness - Steady
Educational progress - Progress
High school graduation rates - Progress
Ontario housing measure - Steady
Youth not in education, employment or training - Decline
Long-term unemployment - Progress
Poverty rates of vulnerable populations - Steady
Homelessness indicator - In development¹⁶

Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

Human Rights: Neither the 2008 nor 2014 strategy situates poverty elimination clearly within a human rights framework. For example, missing from both strategies are explicit references to international human rights covenants ratified by Canada for which Ontario is also responsible. However, there are some elements of the strategy that fit within a human rights approach. For example, appointing a Minister to be in charge of the strategy could make the plan more accountable to Ontarians.¹⁷

The *Ontario Poverty Act*, which provides a legislative framework for the strategy, also does not use a human rights framework.¹⁸

Income and Employment Support: In addressing recommendations from the Commission for The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario (CRSAO), the government has announced an increase to Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates. As of the 2015 budget, adult recipients will see a 1% increase in supports.¹⁹ The government also announced a top up for single adults without children who receive Ontario Works benefits. This amounts to an increase of \$30 per month for persons who receive both the increase and top up.²⁰

In March 2015, the government announced a transfer to electronic reloadable debit cards for persons to receive monthly social assistance benefits.²¹ Some critics have suggested that the change is the result of problems with the province's new computer system, which resulted in overpayments and underpayments to 17,000 individuals in December 2014.²²

In October 2016, minimum wage was increased to \$11.40 per hour.²³ This raise is inconsistent with living wage, which in Toronto, for example, could be as much as \$18.52 per hour.²⁴

In June 2016, it was announced that effective January 1, 2017 child support payments will no longer be deducted from social assistance payments. Ontario has also withdrawn the requirement to pursue child support as a requirement for assistance. These changes will mean an average increase of \$3,380 annually for

those eligible for income support. It also increases the eligibility and security of women and families fleeing domestic violence.²⁵

A basic income pilot discussion paper released by the Honourable Hugh Segal as a special advisor to Government of Ontario was released in June 2016.²⁶ The paper reviews potential criteria, delivery models, and evaluation of a basic income program for Ontario, and a pilot for basic income is currently underway. At the same time, an income security reform working group tasked with developing a multi-year “roadmap for an income security system that is based on fairness, adequacy and simplicity”, which includes reforms to the social assistance system, was created.²⁷

Housing: In 2014, the government promised an enhancement of the annual funding for the Community Homelessness Preventative Initiative (CHPI) by \$42 million. The CHPI allows assistance recipients to apply once every two years for an emergency housing allowance to pay for rent or move to safer and/or more secure housing.

The provincial government also established an Expert Advisory Panel on homelessness in the hopes of developing measurement tools.²⁸ The panel helped to inform an updated affordable housing strategy including vision, which will now centre on “decreasing the number of people who are homeless [and] increasing the number of families and individuals achieving housing stability.”²⁹

At the end of 2015, Ontario released an updated Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy.³⁰ Beginning in the 2016-2017 year, Ontario plans to invest \$17 million over a 3-year pilot program to offering portable housing allowances to survivors of domestic violence.³¹

Education: The 2016 budget is highly focused on improving access to affordable post-secondary education for those in low- to middle-income. Starting in the 2017-2018 academic year, tuition will be free for students coming from families that make less than \$50,000 per year. There will also be an increase of non-repayable grants for individuals attending post-secondary education with families that make under \$83,000 per year. This strategy will also include interest-free and low-cost loans for middle- and high-income family students.³²

Early Childhood Education and Care: Poverty and lack of access to affordable childcare are interconnected, especially for single mothers living in poverty in Ontario. As Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care stated in a recent Toronto Star article: “[y]ou can’t get a job if you don’t have child care, and you can’t get child care if you don’t have a job.”³³ In the 2015 budget, the government announced \$33.6 million in additional funding over the next three years to support ongoing operations and modernization of the childcare system.³⁴ The 2015 budget has also allocated \$120 million over three years to provide thousands of new childcare spaces in schools.³⁵

Full-day kindergarten was implemented in publicly funded schools for children aged 4 and 5 in September 2014. According to the government, more than 470,000

children have benefitted from this service over the course of the 2014-2015 school year.³⁶ There is still much to do for accessible and affordable childcare in Ontario. According to the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare, there are still only childcare spaces for 1 in 5 children in Ontario.³⁷

Healthcare: An investment of \$65 million was made in the 2014 budget to provide better access to quality services for addictions strategies and mental health programs.³⁸ Through the 2014 poverty strategy, the province also committed \$93 million in new annual funding and launched the Tele-Mental Health Service to provide these services to 35 remote rural communities.³⁹

In 2014, the government merged six oral health programs into one cohesive dental-plan initiative designed to benefit low-income children. Healthy Smiles Ontario is reported to have benefitted 45,000 children. This includes 6,700 new children made eligible for free dental care due to expanded financial eligibility criteria.⁴⁰

Inequality: Ontario's highest decile income earners make 12.5 times more than the lowest decile earners, widening the gap from 1989 when the rate was 10.5 times.⁴¹ Equal pay is still very much an issue in Ontario. In 2015, it was estimated that the gender wage gap ranged from 12% to 31.5%.⁴² A 2013 study from the Wellesley Institute found that almost half of the people earning minimum wage are racialized employees.⁴³

Food insecurity: Food bank usage has been decreasing slightly since 2012, falling from 412,998 people per month in 2012, to 335,944 in 2016.⁴⁴ However, there has been a 6.9% increase in usage overall since 2008. The latest study estimates that the rate of household food insecurity in Ontario has remained relatively high at 11.9%. This is low when compared to some other provinces, although in such a populated region this equates to 594,900 people living with food insecurity – 141,800 of which were classified as “severely” food insecure.⁴⁵

Views From Outside the Ontario Government

Commentary on *Realizing Our Potential* has been diverse. While many groups are encouraged by the province's commitment to visionary goals, such as ending homelessness, others are concerned that the plan did not commit to enough change.⁴⁶

A common concern among organizations – such as the 25 in 5 Network and the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition⁴⁸ – is that while Ontario's goals are commendable, the strategy lacks concrete targets and timelines as well as an investment strategy. The concern is that without action and measurable targets these goals cannot be reached. Campaign 2000 noted that the 2014 strategy lacked “timelines, a concrete action plan, and some of the investments called for by people living in poverty during consultation.”⁴⁹ Campaign 2000's 2014 Report Card noted that since the promise to end child poverty in 1989, child poverty has gone up from 12.4% in the province to 19.9% (according to Taxfiler data collected for 2014 by Statistics Canada's T1 Family File).⁵⁰

There has also been significant dissent about the efficacy of the new 2016 budget in striving towards the goals highlighted in the 2014 reduction strategy. This includes the view of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO). The Ontario Government clearly stated that “[h]igh-quality child care and a world-class primary and secondary education enrich the lives of children and their families. They also foster communities of engaged and caring participants.” The AECEO agree with statement wholeheartedly; however, it does not see any formal mechanisms in place within the budget to achieve this “world class care.”⁵¹

Along with other groups assessing social policy involved in a social assistance review for the province, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has identified social assistance as one of the key areas needing amendment. Since 1989, the poverty gap for a single individual has increased to 59%. The Low-Income Measure for a single person with no children is \$20,811 – bearing in mind that social assistance is a meager \$8,510. The trend is similar for couples and families as well.⁵²

THE BOTTOM LINE

There are clear areas for improvement in Ontario’s poverty plan. Social assistance rates remain woefully insufficient, affordable childcare is out of reach for many families, and minimum wage is well below a living wage. Amidst the 2014 strategy there are periodic hints of something bigger and deeper: a vision in keeping with Canada’s and Ontario’s human rights obligations. *Realizing Our Potential* recognizes that poverty affects human dignity and that everyone is entitled to a place to call home. The plan commits to the eventual goal of ending homelessness. It recognizes the valuable role that communities play in developing creative local strategies to address poverty. It commits to holding someone accountable, by appointing a Minister to be responsible for poverty reduction, who has control over government spending. It is a starting point, but more work needs to be done.

FOR MORE INFORMATION



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