

Report shows many people struggling in Halton

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The second report in 2001 identified the beginning of an economic recovery in the second half of the 1990s.

This latest report analyses quality of life from 1991 to 2001.

Among the findings was the fact that most families and individuals have incomes to meet food, clothing and shelter needs, but stagnant or declining incomes, rapidly growing shelter costs, and reductions in social assistance are pushing many toward the margins of society.

Poverty remained largely unchanged between 1991 and 2001. Family poverty is marginally lower today while poverty among single, unattached individuals is marginally higher. Poverty among individuals — 35 per cent of the urban population — is three times the rate of family poverty and those aged 15 to 24 are

the most poor. In Halton, poverty increased for those aged 15 to 24 from 54 per cent in 1991 to nearly 61 per cent in 2001.

One exception is female-headed lone-parent families with young children under 12, likely thanks to changes to National Child Benefit programs, who saw poverty rates drop from 60 to 50 per cent.

In Halton, the median household income rose 3 per cent and the region's poverty rate was up to 7.1 per cent in 2001 from 6.8 per cent in 1991. Those unable to afford basic needs included those on social assistance, minimum wage earners and those sporadically employed.

In 1991, more than 40 per cent of households were in rental housing however rental construction stopped almost entirely, and low-end rents increased so that the number of renters spending 30

per cent or more of their income on shelter grew from 35 to 41 per cent. Those paying 50 per cent or more grew from 16 to 20 per cent.

In Halton, nearly 39 per cent of renters paid more than 30 per cent of household income on shelter in 2001, while nearly 16 per cent paid more than 50 per cent.

Middle and lower-income earners lost ground, and households from "minority" or "vulnerable" populations didn't share in the benefits of economic growth.

According to tax-filer data, the income gap is growing.

Only the wealthiest 30 per cent of families and 20 per cent of individuals saw an increase in inflation-adjusted income between 1990 and 2000.

The before-tax incomes of low and modest-income individuals — the bottom 30 per cent on the income scale of all unattached individuals — dropped by 10 per cent or more. Median-income families saw their before-tax inflation-adjusted income decrease by 6.2 per cent.

Again, female-headed, lone-parent families were an exception, experiencing income growth that exceeded the rate for all families.

Cities saw improved economic performance especially in the second half of the 1990s, with strong new business growth, fewer bankruptcies, more real estate investment and dropping unemployment.

The average unemployment rate fell from almost 9 per cent to 6.1 per cent between 1991 and 2001.

A concern, but not immediate threat, is that fewer people will be ready to enter the labour force than leave it with an aging population and low birth rates heightening the importance of immigration and internal migration.

Cities without an influx of new people will face problems maintaining their labour force. The report also looked at quality of the environment via air quality, transit use, water consumption, wastewater treatment and waste recycling.

Population and economic growth have taxed the environment and cities have responded by investing in public transit, wastewater treatment and solid waste management.

In Halton, commuter dependence on cars declined 9 per cent between 1996 and 2001 while transit use rose by 10 per cent, but walking and cycling dropped by 3 per cent.

Recycling and waste diversion were also bright spots with recycling rates up 11 per cent in 1991 to more than 18 per cent by 2002. Waste diversion grew from 20 per cent in 1991 to 32 per cent by 2002. All that has helped stall the need for new dumps, but the amount of garbage going to dumps increases annually, according to the report.

Most wastewater treatment levels are high and have been rising significantly and air quality is generally within the acceptable range except for ground-level ozone concentrations.

Halton fared slightly better on air quality than most cities when it came to nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide, but worse than average on ground level ozone and sulphur dioxide.

Trends for aspiring to higher education, better employment, higher income and home ownership were positive, but were concentrated among high-income earners.

Employment rates among men fell to just under 70 per cent by 2001, while they rose to nearly 59 per cent among women.

Social trends from 1991 to 2001 show civic participation declined as fewer people voted in federal elections and municipal election turnout was consistently low.

To view the 2004 Quality of Life report, visit www.fcm.ca.

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