

'Poverty is here. It's right around the corner from you'

Hundreds of thousands of Canadian children are growing up in poverty.

In Ontario, more than 370,000 children (or 13.8 per cent) lived in a low-income household in 2013, only slightly better than the national average of 14.3 per cent.

Studies suggest poverty limits a child's future. It often means food insecurity, an inability to fully participate at school, a lack of positive activities and difficulty accessing services such as eye and dental care, event post-secondary education. According to UNICEF, the child poverty rate for industrial countries ranges from five per cent in Iceland to 25 per cent in Romania. Canada sits in the middle. In 1989, the federal government vowed to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000, yet little progress has been made. Many — too many — kids in Ontario are growing up poor. Why? How do we fix it?

JONATHAN ZETTEL
jzettel@walkerton.com



Growing Up Poor: Child Poverty in Ontario

Growing Up Poor: Child Poverty in Ontario is a Metroland Media Special Investigative Series, by reporters Jonathan Zettel, Reka Szekely, Todd Vandonik and Melinda Cheevers, that spotlights child poverty and to looks behind it to reveal problems and identify solutions

with a letter of residence so that she could apply for social assistance - instead he gave her an eviction notice because he didn't want "that type of people living there."

Poverty in general and child poverty in particular is higher in many 905 communities than the provincial average, according to a report from Social Planning Toronto, the Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto and its sister alliances.

While 14 per cent of Ontarians live in poverty, that number rises to 18 per cent when only children under the age of 18 are considered, the 2012 report said.

Although York had the fifth highest family income in Canada, 12.7 per cent of residents and 14.8 per cent of residents under 18 live in poverty. The numbers vary by community. In the neighbourhoods that are part of the federal riding of Markham-Unionville, for example, 17.2 per cent of the total population and 22.5 per cent of children and youth live below the poverty line. In York-Simcoe to the north, 8.3 per cent of residents live in poverty

Despite having some of the wealthiest residents in Ontario,

York has a growing number of low-income residents, a regional report found.

The report also found:

- Most low-income families are couples with children under the age of 18. However, single parents face the highest risk of becoming low income.
- Most low-income families work for a living and are homeowners.
- Many low-income families and individuals are at risk of homelessness.
- 112,165 residents, or 12.7 per cent of York Region residents, live in low-income households
- Children under 15 account for 23 per cent or 25,975 of low-income residents. Youth aged 15 to 24 make up another 16 per cent.

Lesley Mansfield, executive director of the Halton Learning Foundation, works with the Halton Board of Education, which has 60,000 students in 102 schools, 10 per cent of whom are at or below the poverty line. While Halton is among the more affluent regions in Ontario, Mansfield said poverty exists although, on many levels, remains hidden.

"Poverty is here. It's right around the corner from you. We have kids who share a pair of shoes with their parents. We have kids who the father is not around and the mother has some mental issues of her own and then you have two kids, basically taking care of themselves and coming to school with a can of Coke for lunch," she said.

About 200 kilometres north of Halton in the rural town of Hanover, Bev Gateman works out of what used to be a supply closet at the local high school.

She and an army of volunteer are responsible for feeding 12,000 students a day through 73 school breakfast programs under the pro-



vincial banner, Ontario Student Nutrition Program. The program offers nutritional meals developed to fit the needs of individual schools and receives about 14 cents per student, per day in government funding.

Over the years, Gateman said the stigma of poverty has slowly lessened.

When she first started in the late 1990s, some schools wouldn't let her in because they claimed they did not have children coming to school hungry. Likewise, some parents would not let their children into the breakfast programs.

The key, she said, was to focus on nutrition not hunger.

"We are bringing nutrition into the schools and what kid doesn't need more nutrition," she said, adding the meals include at least three of the four food groups, including whole grains, dairy, fresh fruit and vegetables.

These programs, Gateman said, have a direct impact on students' ability to learn.

"If I'm thinking about the last

thing I had to eat was last night and you are talking about literacy or about my homework, I am not paying attention. All I am thinking about is my stomach," she said.

Where to go for support

There are a number of York Region agencies offering services for families, children and youth in need, including:

Big Brothers and Big Sisters of York, 905-726-2149, www.bbbsy.ca

Blue Door Shelters, 905-898-1015, www.bluedoorsshelters.ca

Canadian Mental Health Association York Region Branch, 905-841-3977, www.cmha-yr.on.ca

Family Services York Region, 905-895-2371, www.fsyrc.ca

Jericho Youth Services (Georgina), 905-722-5540, www.jerichoyouthservices.org
360° Kids, 905-475-6694, www.360kids.ca

The York Centre for Children, Youth and Families, 905-887-5896, www.theyorkcentre.ca

York Region Food Network, 905-841-3101, www.yrfn.ca

PEPPERTREE KLASSICS

Markham's Favorite Women's Fashions, Footwear and Accessories Boutique

**DROP BY PEPPERTREE
FOR SCARY SAVINGS**

**31%
off**

**WE HAVE RECEIVED
LOTS OF FAB NEW ITEMS
AT THESE SCARY SAVINGS**

*Regular Prices *5 Days Only *Choose your times Wisely as ALL SALES are FINAL

137 Main Street North, Markham 905.294.3882 • www.peppertree.ca • Open 7 Days A Week & Holidays

**CELEBRATING
HALLOWEEN
Thur. Oct. 27th ~
Mon. Oct. 31st**

