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Ontario off track for child poverty reduction, annual report card says



Sabrina Garrido and her 7-year-old daughter, Gabriella Hernandez-Garrido, play dress up in their Etobicoke apartment. Garrido is single and subsists on Ontario Works and child benefit money.

Campaign 2000 report warns frozen minimum wage and delayed hike for Ontario Child Benefit could put targeted 25 per cent child poverty reduction in “jeopardy”

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At 18, Sabrina Garrido was already a single mom, struggling to make ends meet with her new baby girl, Gabriella. Seven years later, it’s still tough to live on the \$1,000 to \$1,100 they gather each month, if they’re lucky. And that includes funds from Ontario Works and a monthly child benefit.

“It’s almost impossible to make a living with what they give you,” said Garrido. “With a child, it’s just that much harder.”

Gabriella is one of 383,000 Ontario kids living in poverty. In 2008, the province pledged to reduce their numbers by 25 per cent by the end of 2013.

But a new report released Thursday says the Liberal government has “derailed” reduction efforts as it focuses on trimming the deficit. It warns that failure to raise the minimum wage and improve “dismal” social assistance rates will imperil the commitment to help kids like Gabriella.

“What’s needed is leadership,” said the report’s author, Anita Khanna, co-ordinator of the Campaign 2000 anti-poverty coalition. “The 2013 budget is a good place where they can get back on track.”

The report comes on the heels of a study released Saturday that found almost half of workers in the GTA and Hamilton have jobs that are either insecure, part-time or without benefits like dental coverage. One-third of the 383,000 children in poverty in 2010 — the most recent year for which figures are available — still had one parent with a full-time job, according to the Campaign 2000 report.

“If people who work full time can’t bring their families out of poverty, there’s something wrong,” said Khanna.

In a statement, Minister of Children and Youth Services Teresa Piruzza said she’s “proud” that 40,000 Ontario children have been lifted out of poverty between 2008 and 2010, according to government calculations.

“There’s always more to do and we will continue to work together with our partners to find lasting solutions to break the cycle of poverty,” she said. “We remain optimistic that we can continue to build on this number so that every child in Ontario has the opportunity to reach their full potential.”

According to the Campaign 2000 report, the Ontario child poverty rate in 2010 was 14.2 per cent, or roughly one in seven, down from 15.2 per cent in 2008. That’s a 6.6 per cent reduction.

Khanna credited the progress to the 2010 minimum wage hike, as well as the 2009 increase in annual Ontario Child Benefit payments, from \$600 to \$1,100 per child.

“Those are two policies that put more money into hard-working families’ pockets, and they led to the decrease in child poverty,” said Khanna.

But the minimum wage has been frozen at \$10.25 per hour for more than two years, while last year’s budget delayed part of another \$210 annual increase in child benefit payments to July 2014. This, the report cautions, could put the province’s poverty reduction goal in jeopardy.

“Instead of delaying the increase in the Ontario child benefit, they need to implement it,” said Khanna.

The report also proposes to freeze tuition, raise low-income and disability payments, bump up the minimum wage to \$14 an hour, offer monthly housing benefits to the least well-off and “accessible” child care for kids under 6.

Highlights from the child poverty report card

- In 1989, 240,000 Ontario kids lived in poverty, when the child poverty rate was 9.9 per cent. The rate in 2010 was 14.2 per cent, representing 383,000 kids.

- One in 10 Ontario children in 2010 lived in households that couldn't afford things like dental care, daily fruit and vegetables and "appropriate clothes for job interviews," up 15 per cent from 2009.

- 35.6 per cent of kids in a household with a single mom lived in poverty in 2010.

- 92,500 Ontario kids living in poverty still have one parent who works full time, year-round.

- In 2010, 7.1 per cent of children in the province lived in "deep poverty," where household earnings amounted to less than Ontario's median family income.