



# Ontario Poverty Progress Profile

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## OVERVIEW

The Ontario government released its five year poverty action plan (PAP) in December 2008, entitled *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. The province had an overall poverty rate of 9% in 2011 (based on Low-Income Cut Off, after tax), as compared to 9.3% in 2008 when the PAP was launched.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the PAP is on child and intergenerational poverty and features a goal of reducing child poverty by 25% by the end of 2013, which has not been achieved. Ontario's child poverty rate in 2011 was 13.8%, as compared to 15.8% the year the PAP was released.<sup>2</sup> With the current PAP about to reach its end date and recent recommendations for the transformation of the social assistance system, the government has renewed its commitment to fight poverty and to develop a new poverty reduction strategy in consultation with community.

### Progress to Date

Ontario's PAP was introduced during the 2008-2009 economic recession, and was positioned as a "smart initiative" both morally and economically.<sup>3</sup> From a moral standpoint, the PAP was needed to reduce child poverty: between 2008 and 2011, 47,000 children were lifted out of poverty in the province according to the Ontario government.<sup>4</sup> From an economic standpoint, combating poverty makes financial sense: the cost of poverty in Ontario has been estimated at \$38 billion per year in health and social assistance expenditures and foregone tax revenues.<sup>5</sup> The PAP was accompanied by a budget of \$2.5 billion over five years, \$300 million of this in new investments.<sup>6</sup>

Child poverty has decreased in Ontario for three years in a row. Based on the Low-Income Measure (50% of median adjusted family income), child poverty rates dropped from 15.2% in 2008 to 13.8% in 2011.<sup>7</sup> However, adult poverty rates increased more quickly in Ontario than in any other jurisdiction. Between 2007 and 2011, the overall poverty rate according to the Low-Income Cut-Off After-Tax increased slightly from 8.8% to 9.0%. The peak was at 10.1% in 2009 following the recession.<sup>8</sup> Food bank usage in 2012 also increased, rising from 374,000 people per month in 2008 to 413,000 in 2012,<sup>9</sup> and then dropping to 375,814 in 2013.<sup>10</sup>

As part of the PAP, in November 2010 the government appointed The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario to make recommendations to improve the social assistance system. The commission released its final report in October 2012 with 108 recommendations for reform.

As the PAP requires a new poverty reduction strategy every five years, the government announced in July 2013 a renewal of their commitment to combat poverty and the launch province-wide consultations to help develop the new poverty reduction strategy.<sup>11</sup> The government also announced in July 2013 the

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appointment of an advisory panel to examine Ontario's current minimum wage, which has remained the same since 2010.<sup>12</sup>

**MEASURING PROGRESS**

**Statistical Indicators of Poverty in Ontario (unofficial measurement tools)**

|             | <b>LICO<br/>Low Income<br/>Cut-Off<br/>After-Tax<sup>13</sup></b> | <b>LIM<br/>Low-Income<br/>Measurement<sup>14</sup></b> | <b>MBM<br/>Market Basket<br/>Measure<sup>15</sup></b> | <b>Food Bank<br/>Usage<sup>16</sup></b> | <b>Welfare<br/>Caseloads<sup>17</sup></b> |
|-------------|---|--|---|---|---|
| <b>1995</b> | 1,344,000, <b>12.4%</b>   | 1,024,000, <b>9.5%</b>                                 | -   | -                                       | -   |
| <b>2000</b> | 1,253,000, <b>10.8%</b>   | 1,170,000, <b>10.1%</b>                                | 1,142,000, <b>9.9%</b>                                | 283,110, <b>2.4%</b>                    | 531,300, <b>4.5%</b>                      |
| <b>2005</b> | 1,276,000, <b>10.3%</b>   | 1,452,000, <b>11.7%</b>                                | 1,521,000, <b>12.3%</b>                               | 338,563, <b>2.7%</b>                    | 388,700, <b>3.1%</b>                      |
| <b>2007</b> | 1,111,000, <b>8.8%</b>  | 1,418,000, <b>11.2%</b>                                | 1,342,000, <b>10.6%</b>                               | -                                       | -   |
| <b>2008</b> | 1,187,000, <b>9.3%</b>  | 1,588,000, <b>13.0%</b>                                | 1,428,000, <b>11.2%</b>                               | -                                       | -   |
| <b>2009</b> | 1,306,000, <b>10.1%</b>   | 1,681,000, <b>13.0%</b>                                | 1,646,000, <b>12.7%</b>                               | 374,230, <b>2.9%</b>                    | 440,722, <b>3.4%</b>                      |
| <b>2010</b> | 1,153,000, <b>8.8%</b>  | 1,608,000, <b>12.3%</b>                                | 1,559,000, <b>12.0%</b>                               | 402,056, <b>3.0%</b>                    | 454,935, <b>3.4%</b>                      |
| <b>2011</b> | 1,182,000, <b>9.0%</b>  | 1,576,000, <b>12.0%</b>                                | 1,578,000, <b>12.0%</b>                               | 395,106, <b>3.0%</b>                    | 465,871, <b>3.5%</b>                      |
| <b>2012</b> | -   | -  | -   | 412,998, <b>3.07%</b>                   | 477,339, <b>3.6%</b>                      |

\* 2008 – PAP came into place

- data not available

**The Ontario Government's Success Indicators**

**Goal:** Child poverty reduced by 25% in five years, 2009-2013, compared to 2008.<sup>18</sup>

**1. School readiness** (measured with early development instrument)

- Baseline (2007-2009): 71.5% children showed no vulnerabilities<sup>19</sup>
- Progress (2010-2012): 72.4%<sup>20</sup>

**2. High school graduation rates**

- Baseline (2007-2009): 77% graduated<sup>21</sup>
- Progress (2011-2012):, 83% graduated<sup>22</sup>

**3. Educational progress** (measured by the Educational Quality and Accountability Office provincial standardized test scores)

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- Baseline (2008-2009): 67% of grade 3 and 6 students master reading, writing and math<sup>23</sup>
- Progress (2011-2012): 70%<sup>24</sup>

### **4. Birth weights** (newborns born at a healthy weight for their gestational age)

- Baseline (2007-2009): 80%<sup>25</sup>
- Progress (2010-2012): 80.7%<sup>26</sup>

### **5. Low Income Measure (LIM) for children**

- Baseline (2008): 15.2% (up from 14.1% in 2007, had declined from 2004-2007)<sup>27</sup>
- Progress (2011): 13.8% (down from 15.2% in 2008)<sup>28</sup>

### **6. Depth of poverty** (measured by percent of children living in families with income less than 40% of the median)

- Baseline (2008): 8.5% of children, 230,000 children<sup>29</sup>
- Progress (2010): 7.1% of children, 196 000 children<sup>30</sup>

### **7. Standard of living** (measured by the Ontario Deprivation Index)<sup>31</sup>

- Baseline (2008): 12.5% of children lacking 2 or more items<sup>32</sup>
- Progress (2010)<sup>1</sup>: 9.9% of children lacking 2 or more items (up from 8.6% in 2009)<sup>33</sup>

### **8. Ontario housing measure** (measured by the percent of households with children that have incomes below 40% of the median household income level and spend more than 40% of their income on housing)

- Baseline (2008): 5.4%<sup>34</sup>
- Progress (2010): 4.2%<sup>35</sup>

## **Social Assistance Review**

As part of the PAP, the Social Assistance Review Council was established and commissioners appointed in 2010 to recommend how to improve the province's social assistance system. The review began in January 2011 and was completed in October 2012, with 108 recommendations. The final report stressed the importance of making it an easier transition for individuals receiving social assistance to move to employment.

The report recommends key actions that should be taken immediately, including a \$100/month increase to all single adult recipients, stating that current benefit levels are inadequate to meet daily living costs. The commission also recommends developing a new "Basic Measure of Adequacy", which takes into account the cost of food, clothing, basic personal and household needs, transportation, shelter, and accounts for varying costs region to region in order to set assistance rate levels. Other immediate

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<sup>1</sup> This is the most recent information from the Ontario government

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actions recommended are to allow individuals up to \$60,000 in long-term savings and to appoint a Provincial Commissioner of Social Assistance.

The longer-term recommendations call for a complete structural overhaul of the province's assistance system, with a significant recommendation being to merge the Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program delivered at the municipal level. One of the recommendations would involve a complete transformation of the system by taking the current 240 existing and combination rates and replacing them with a standard rate for all adults, with supplements for people with disabilities and families. A major theme of the report and driver of the recommendations is employment as a "key route to escaping poverty," and giving Ontarians more effective support to become employed.<sup>36</sup>

**Notes on Critical Thematic Areas**

- 1. Human Rights:** Neither the PAP nor the Act situate poverty elimination clearly within a human rights framework.
- 2. Income Support:** The province has seen an increase in the number of Ontarians receiving social assistance since the 2008 recession, with July 2013 seeing 8,500 cases as compared to the average monthly caseload in 2008 of 6,300. Following the 2013 social assistance rates for single adults on Ontario Works (OW) increased 3% (a total of \$20 extra per month). Single parents and couples on OW will get a 1% increase. Also, single adults are now allowed to have \$2,500 in liquid assets instead of \$626, while couples can hold \$5,000 instead of \$1,054. For recipients of First Nations and Northern communities, if assets can be shown to be useful in either participating in cultural activities or work, the value of the assets may not be counted. New changes also include an exemption from deduction from benefits on the first \$200 in net income recipients receive from a job their own business or from a training program. Previously all earnings received a 50% deduction.<sup>37</sup> This change will immediately benefit 58,000 people on assistance with part-time jobs.<sup>38</sup> For those with children, the promised increase to Ontario Child Benefit to \$1310/year by July 2013 in the PAP has been pushed back to July 2014, with current OCB at \$1210.<sup>39</sup>
- 3. Housing:** Ontario eliminated the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit in 2013, which allowed people on assistance to apply once every two years for an emergency housing allowance, such as paying for their rent or moving them to safer and more secure housing. Half of the funds were transferred to municipalities under the new Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, for local housing and homelessness programs, which constitute an even larger number of low-income people.<sup>40</sup> The 2013 budget included a five-year extension on the Investment in Affordable Housing program and the budget acknowledges a 24% increase in waiting lists from 2003.<sup>41</sup>
- 4. Education:** In the fall of 2012, the government announced an introduction of a 30% reduction in university tuition; however, according to recent reports, there was a \$100 million decrease to financial assistance programs available to university students and tuition increased 5-7% in recent years.<sup>42</sup> In June 2013, the government announced the Tuition Aid for Youth Leaving Care program,

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under which the province will cover 50% of a Crown ward (those under care of the government).<sup>43</sup> The 2013 provincial budget committed \$5 million towards implementing the First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework, to respond to the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student achievement.<sup>44</sup> In March 2013, the government announced a new tuition-fee framework for the next four years, capping annual tuition-fee increases at an average of three percent, one percentage point above average inflation rate.<sup>45</sup>

- 5. Early Childhood Education and Care:** With the goal of strengthening readiness to learn and reducing inequalities among children, the government committed to providing full-day kindergarten in all schools by the fall of 2015, and in 2012, full-day kindergarten expanded to 1,700 schools and approximately 122,000 students.<sup>46</sup> The government is projecting that full day kindergarten will be available in all publicly-funded schools by September 2014 and has announced an additional \$39 million in 2015-16 to support the child care system.<sup>47</sup> The government also announced in 2013 the Ontario Early Years Policy Framework, a new funding formula for child care programs which calls for the transformation of child care system.<sup>48</sup> Specifically targeting Aboriginal children, the province has committed to developing the Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy, a multi-year plan to identify cultural-based services for Aboriginal children.<sup>49</sup>
- 6. Health Care** Building on initial PAP investments of \$80 million over three years for a Mental Health and Addictions strategy,<sup>50</sup> the 2013 budget committed an additional \$93 million for child and youth mental health. In January 2013, the government announced the launch of Ontario's Action Plan for Seniors. The 2013 budget included a \$20 million annual commitment to improving small and rural hospitals and new Community Wellness Development teams to increase access to care and community supports for First Nations groups.<sup>51</sup>
- 7. Employment Support:** The PAP committed to raising the minimum wage to \$10.25 which took effect in 2010, but has not increased since that time. Currently a Minimum Wage Review Panel is assessing the prospect of changing the minimum wage and establishing new standards.<sup>52</sup> The unemployment rate for 15-24 year olds is between 16-17%, compared to Canada's overall rate of 13.5-14.5%.<sup>53</sup> Announced in the 2013 budget, the government will be investing \$195 million over two years in the Youth Employment Fund as part of the new Youth Jobs Strategy, to help employers offer placements for young people seeking work and cover costs such as wages, training and transportation to work.<sup>54</sup> Within this strategy is a commitment to focus on areas of the population with particularly high youth unemployment rates and Aboriginal youth.<sup>55</sup>
- 8. Inequality:** Ontario's highest income earners make 12.5 times more than the lowest earners, widening a gap from 1989 when the richest made 10.5 times more than the lowest income earners.<sup>56</sup>

### **Views From Outside the Ontario Government**

In August 2012 the Ontario Common Front, a coalition of over 40 organizations, criticised the Ontario government on its overall trend towards cutting social spending and policies that leads to greater

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income inequality between the rich and the poor. Much of this criticism focused around the previous austerity budget, which only further exacerbates these already damaging trends and results in less support for families and individuals as well as more inequality across the board.<sup>57</sup>

Another area of contention has been the province's minimum wage, which has been frozen since 2010 at \$10.25/hr. It was recently announced that a greater proportion of Ontarians are working for minimum wage in 2013 than in 2003, with over 40% of Ontarians over 25 making minimum wage.<sup>58</sup> The establishment of an advisory panel to examine the minimum wage is seen as a very weak commitment, with activists calling for an immediate increase to \$14/hr.<sup>59</sup>

The province's renewed commitment to another poverty reduction plan has received mixed reviews. Some poverty reduction activists have chosen not to participate in consultations for the new PAP as it is seen as another way for the government to drag its feet on meaningful poverty reduction, as what needs to be done to reduce poverty in Ontario in their view has already been determined.<sup>60</sup> In March 2013, more than 100 Poverty Free Ontario partners representing more than 20 communities across the province framed a six-point plan for a "social justice budget" which summarizes these needed actions:

1. Increase the Basic Needs Allowance by \$100/month for OW and ODSP recipients
2. Index OW and ODSP rates to reflect inflation rates.
3. Ensure that all increases to social assistance rates or changes arising from integration of programs do not lead to any reductions in basic needs and housing allowances for current OW and ODSP recipients, or cuts in benefits like the Special Diet Allowance or Disability Worker's Benefit
4. Introduce an earnings exemption for social assistance recipients with working hours on at least the first \$200/month earnings
5. Commit to the principle that the minimum wage should ensure a full time, full year worker earns an annual income 10% above the Ontario Income Poverty Line
6. Index the minimum wage to keep up with inflation rate<sup>61</sup>

The 2013 budget did adopt the fourth point of the social justice budget, along with other changes to social assistance such as increases to rates and asset exemptions, which poverty reduction activists acknowledged as positive steps forward. However, there is consensus that these remain modest changes that do not go far enough to improve the lives of impoverished Ontarians.<sup>62</sup>

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Ontario's PAP has been seen as a positive step towards addressing poverty and has demonstrated initial results in reducing child poverty. However, the plan has met criticism for its lack of action to address poverty among adults, including people with disabilities and seniors. The results of the Social Assistance Review found in the report, *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*, speak to the need to transform the current welfare system with 108 recommendations to improve social assistance.

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Commitment to implementing recommendations from both the Social Assistance Review and Minimum Wage Panel will be an important step to not only end poverty, but demonstrate that government promises are not meaningless. Without such interventions it is hard to understand how the poverty reduction goals set out in the plan will be achieved. Now is the time to invest in Ontarians through bold action.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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**Appendix A: Original Plan Components and Highlights**

The goal of Ontario's PAP is to reduce the number of children living in poverty by 25 percent over the next five years, i.e., 2009-2013.<sup>63</sup> There are four areas of action in support of this goal:

**1. Stronger, healthier kids and families**

- Increase the Ontario Child Benefit<sup>64</sup>
- Introduce more family literacy centers
- Establish full-day kindergarten in all schools by 2015
- Increase funding for a number of school-based initiatives, including the Student Nutrition Program and after school programs
- Increase funding for the Youth Opportunities Strategy
- Develop a Crown Ward Strategy
- Draft a Mental Health and Addictions strategy<sup>65</sup>

**2. Stronger, healthier communities**

- Introduce Community Use of Schools
- Establish Community Hubs as a central location for service provision<sup>66</sup>
- Invest \$5 million in a Community Opportunities Fund for local neighbourhood revitalization<sup>67</sup>

**3. Opportunity for all**

- Raise the minimum wage to \$10.25 by 2010
- Enforce employment standards by introducing enforcement officers and amending the Employment Standards Act to protect temporary workers
- Draft a long-term affordable housing strategy
- Invest in affordable housing
- Expand employment training programs<sup>68</sup>

**4. Smarter government**

- Change three social assistance rules to benefit low-income people (earnings exempt for post-secondary students on assistance, up-front child-care support to people transitioning to work, and extended internal review period)<sup>69</sup>
- Review social assistance with a person-centered approach<sup>70</sup>
- Create an independent Social Policy Institute
- Pursue social procurement
- Study social ventures and set up the Task Force on Social Finance<sup>71</sup>

**Appendix B: Community Engagement in Plan Development and Implementation**

In 2007, the [25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction](#) called on the Ontario government to develop a PAP to reduce poverty by 25% in five years. The government in 2007 set up a Cabinet committee on poverty reduction and in 2008 put out a public call for input on options to reduce poverty in Ontario. People responded through a number of channels e.g., online, phone calls, letters and meetings held by community non-profit organizations and Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs). The government held 14 roundtable sessions with stakeholders, including people in low income. The government committed to re-engage people at the half-way point of the plan (~2011) and every five years when drafting a new plan. The Cabinet committee and the government secretariat implementing the PAP are responsible for consulting with key stakeholders on an ongoing basis.<sup>72</sup>

**Appendix C: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Act**

**Ontario's Poverty Reduction Act (enacted May 2009)**

[http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills/bills-files/39\\_Parliament/Session1/b152ra.pdf](http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills/bills-files/39_Parliament/Session1/b152ra.pdf)

**Purpose**

To make poverty a priority in Ontario in the future, and “to establish mechanisms to support a sustained long-term reduction of poverty in Ontario”

**Key Provisions**

- Calls for Ontario to maintain a PAP towards the vision of “A province where every person has the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential, and contribute to and participate in a prosperous and healthy Ontario”
- Stipulates that the PAP shall have a specific poverty reduction target, supporting initiatives, and indicators to measure success: indicators are to be reported on annually
- Outlines that the PAP must be assessed every five years, and that the public must be made aware of the assessment
- States that a new poverty target and/ or PAP must be developed every five years in consultation with community members, including those living in poverty and representatives of people at heightened risk of poverty (including immigrants, single mothers, people with disabilities, women, Aboriginal peoples, and racialized groups)

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**ENDNOTES**

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- <sup>4</sup> Government of Ontario, “Breaking the Cycle: Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy” Retrieved from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/index.aspx>
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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Food Banks Canada, “Hunger Count 2012”, 24, <http://foodbanksCanada.ca/getmedia/3b946e67-fbe2-490e-90dc-4a313dfb97e5/HungerCount2012.pdf.aspx>
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