

**25 in 5: Network for
Poverty Reduction**



Meeting the Poverty Reduction Target

Strong Leadership and Good Policy Required

Fourth Annual Progress Report on Poverty Reduction in Ontario

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The 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction is a multi-sectoral network comprised of more than 100 provincial and Toronto-based organizations and individuals working on eliminating poverty in Ontario.

**25 in 5: Network for
Poverty Reduction** 

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The recent emphasis on austerity threatens to erode the strategy's early progress.

Will we pull together to face the challenge?

Or will we pull apart?

Now is the time to choose.



Meeting the Poverty Reduction Target

Strong Leadership and Good Policy Required

2013 marks the final year of Ontario's first five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Child poverty rates dropped in the first two years of the strategy as a result of strong leadership and government action. But the recent emphasis on austerity threatens to erode the strategy's early progress.

The 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction challenges Ontario's aspiring political leaders to commit to providing the strong leadership and good policy required to meet Ontario's target of cutting child poverty by 25% by December 2013, and prepare the next five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Early Momentum Delivered Progress

The data show that child poverty fell by close to 6.6% in the first two years of the Strategy¹ – reflecting both a significant increase in the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB), as well as continued increases in the minimum wage.

In fact, raising the OCB to a maximum \$1,310 by July of 2013 was intended as the main lever to lift 90,000 children and their families out of poverty by 2013. As the government has confirmed on many occasions,

The Ontario Child Benefit is the cornerstone of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, which aims to break the cycle of poverty by giving families and children the support they need to reach their full potential.²

Can Ontario Still Meet its 25 in 5 Target by 2013?

The government made the unfortunate choice to freeze the OCB in 2012, and to delay for another year its commitment to raise the benefit to a maximum \$1,310 per child annually by 2013.

The minimum wage has been frozen since 2010. Social assistance incomes have also fallen behind, with rate adjustments that fall short of the rise in the cost of living and absolute cuts to supports that serve to keep people from becoming homeless.

Those decisions make it highly unlikely that the government can achieve the goal of reducing child poverty by 25% between 2008 and 2013 – unless there is strong leadership to take action in Budget 2013.

It is Time to Choose

With the Liberal party leadership contest underway and a spring provincial election likely, will we pull together to face this challenge? Or will we pull apart? Now is the time to choose.

Ontario's aspiring political leaders need to commit to meeting the existing poverty reduction target and creating the province's second five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy, which the Poverty Reduction Act requires be released by the end of 2013.

It is our choice. We can choose to let the gap between the rich and the rest of us grow and undermine the vitality of our communities.

Or we can make a decisive choice to strengthen the ties that create strong, vibrant, inclusive communities.

We can choose to watch more of our neighbours plunge into poverty and hunger, only to scramble to fill more and more food hampers.

Or we can ensure that everyone has the means to live with dignity.

It is our responsibility. It is our choice.

Ontario Must Decide. Will We Pull Together or Will We Pull Apart?

In 2007, at the peak of economic growth, the McGuinty government, to its credit, chose to pull together, committing to create Ontario's first Poverty Reduction Strategy.

In December 2008, just as the economic recession broke out across the world, the government re-affirmed the decision to pull together with the release of *Breaking the Cycle*, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

In the midst of a brutal recession, Budget 2009 held firm to that commitment with accelerated increases to the Ontario Child Benefit, increases to the minimum wage, and infrastructure investments to ward off the worst impact of recession. The introduction of full day kindergarten in 2010 built upon those commitments.

In May 2009, all parties in the legislature – Liberals, Progressive Conservatives, and New Democrats alike – affirmed their commitment that Ontario pull together when they unanimously ratified Bill 152, the *Poverty Reduction Act*. All parties have therefore committed themselves to legally mandated, accountable action on poverty.

We are now at a critical juncture.

Early initiatives in the Poverty Reduction Strategy proved effective in bringing down child poverty in 2009 and 2010.

While economic uncertainty remains, the worst point of the economic crisis has now passed. But the choice to postpone full implementation of the OCB in Budget 2012 virtually guarantees that Ontario will not reach the modest target of reducing child poverty by 25% by 2013.

Freezing the minimum wage, allowing social assistance rates to fall behind the real cost of living, and cutting back vital programs that protect people from homelessness all tend toward pulling Ontario apart – driving more people deep into hardship and allowing the inequality gap to grow.

Poverty and inequality are not inevitable. They are the result of choices we make in public policy. They are the result of business choices about paying people enough for the work they do. They are the result of choices we make about whether we build inclusive communities or allow division to grow.

The 25 in 5 target – reducing poverty in Ontario by 25% in 5 years – was a step in the right direction, but never the end goal for the 25 in 5 Network.

The Network's Founding Declaration proclaims "We believe in a poverty-free Ontario. A place where everyone can live in dignity and enjoy a good standard of living."

The goal is to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. It is to create strong, healthy and inclusive communities.

Job one is to meet the current 25 in 5 target. That means making investments in three key areas: ensuring livable incomes, promoting sustaining employment, and building strong and inclusive communities.

The next step will be to create a poverty reduction strategy for the next five years, with a new specific target, initiatives to improve the economic and social conditions of those living in poverty, and clear, evidence-based indicators to measure the success of the strategy.

Job One: Meeting the Target

The Government of Ontario must make good on its commitment to lift 90,000 children out of poverty by 2013, the end of the first five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy.

This is not just a question of credibility for the government. It is about basic fairness. Ontario children did not cause the global financial crisis that plunged the world into recession in 2008. It is unjust – shameful in fact – to have children living in poverty shoulder the burden of balancing the provincial budget. Inaction on poverty reduction today will cost us tomorrow. We will reap what we sow.

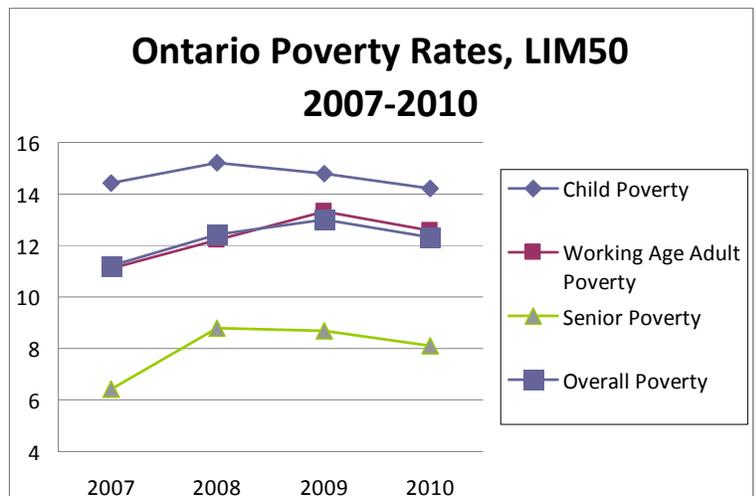
The Difference Good Policy Makes

Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy was launched just as the global economic recession hit. Ontario's unemployment rate jumped from 6.5% in the third quarter of 2008 to 9.2% in the same quarter in 2009 before coming down to 8.7% in 2010.

Normally, the poverty rate climbs as the unemployment rate increases, and that is precisely what happened – for working-age adults, poverty rates rose from 12.2%³ in 2008 to 13.3% in 2009, dropping to 12.6% in 2010. This trend is also mirrored in the overall poverty rate for all Ontarians, which rose from 12.4% in 2008 to 13% in 2009, and then fell to 12.3% in 2010.

What is remarkable, then, is that Ontario's child poverty rate during the recession actually defied this

trend. Child poverty fell from 15.2% in 2008 to 14.8% in 2009, with a further reduction to 14.2% in 2010.



Source: Statistics Canada, CANSIM Table 202-0802

This means 29,000 fewer children were living in families with low income in 2010 than in 2008.

The implications are clear. For the group targeted by Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy – children and their families – poverty rates declined, despite the recession and high unemployment. Good policy choices make a significant difference.

This doesn't mean that Ontario can rest on its laurels. It demonstrates instead that reducing poverty is possible – and that much more can be done.

Key Investments: Ensuring Livable Incomes

Ensuring that all low-income families in Ontario have the financial resources they need is the most important lever government can use to meet its poverty reduction target. That's why government must take action right away.

- Ontario must fully implement the Ontario Child Benefit in 2013:** Government must raise the maximum Ontario Child Benefit to \$1,310 by July 2013 as originally scheduled. To do otherwise would be to renege on the commitment to Ontario's children.

Increasing the incomes of people receiving social assistance is another critical investment that must be made.

Incomes are demonstrably inadequate; broad-based agreement has been reached that these incomes are nowhere near the amounts necessary for people to be able to pay the rent, feed the kids, and live with a sufficient degree of dignity or health.

This is particularly the case for single adults who rely on Ontario Works, whose base income from the program is currently \$606 per month. In fact, 2013 marks the twentieth anniversary of the point at which the rate of benefits for single adults on “general welfare” began to erode in real dollars. That is, it would now take a 55% increase to bring assistance levels back to where they were in 1993.

The government’s 2008 commitment to review Ontario’s social assistance system came to fruition with the October 2012 release of the final report of the Commission for the Reform of Social Assistance in Ontario. That report, *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*, includes 108 recommendations – many of which the 25 in 5 Network supports. These include:

- **\$100 increase for single adults on Ontario Works:**

The Commissioners recommend raising the basic rate for single adults receiving OW by \$100 a month, recognizing that the current rate keeps people living deep in poverty. The 25 in 5 Network recommends that government act immediately on this recommendation – but not at the expense of people who require the Special Diet Allowance. Cancelling that vital program would simply make people sicker. Rather than saving the government money, it would result in higher health care costs.

At a cost of approximately \$188 million, this would be money well spent. Investments that strengthen

income security, that reduce poverty and inequality, will deliver savings across government and foster economic activity that will generate public revenue. The government must recognize this and avoid trade-offs within the social assistance system – such as cutting the Special Diet Allowance to pay for the \$100 a month increase – that limit the potential positive impacts of reforming Ontario’s income security programs.

- **Changing “stupid rules”:** The Commissioners also recommend a number of other changes that can be made to social assistance in the near term: increasing the amount of child support payments that single parents are allowed to keep, increasing asset limits, increasing the amount of income people can keep when they work at paid employment, and aligning the definition of spouse with that in the *Income Tax Act*.

The 25 in 5 Network urges government to make these changes immediately, to improve economic security for people right away.

- **Improving employment supports:** The focus in the Commissioners’ mandate on improving employment outcomes for people on social assistance resulted in a number of important recommendations to improve both the quality of and access to employment supports. Making the investments now to help people achieve their potential is simply the smart thing to do.
- **Ensuring accountability for reform:** In order to ensure that reform of the social assistance system remains a priority, government must embed reform into internal processes by appointing a Social Assistance Reform Commissioner and creating the community-based stakeholder advisory groups that the Social Assistance Review report recommends.

Restore the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit

We also urge the government in the strongest possible terms to reconsider its plan to cancel the Community Start-up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) in January 2013. This program is essential to help prevent people from becoming homeless and to help those who are experiencing homelessness to move into stable housing. In the rush to cut expenditures, Budget 2012 mistakenly identified the cancellation of the CSUMB as a source of savings. In fact, cancelling the program would be a false economy. It costs up to ten times more to leave someone homeless than it does to help them find and maintain stable housing.⁴

Ensure People at Disproportional Risk of Poverty are Not Negatively Impacted

We must also raise concern that the recommendations in *Brighter Prospects* actually offer little prospect for people with disabilities in the near term. They also pay scant attention to the specific ways in which equity must be ensured for the number of groups who are disproportionately impacted by poverty.

As an integral part of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, the transformation of social assistance needs to improve the life circumstances of "persons who face discrimination on the grounds of their race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability."⁵ Any and all reforms to social assistance must be undertaken using an equity lens, as the Commission recommends.

Key Investments: Sustaining Employment

People across Ontario hold to the basic value that if you work full-time, full-year you should earn enough not just to lift you out of poverty but also to get

ahead. After several years of progress in raising the minimum wage, the government has frozen the minimum wage at \$10.25 an hour since February 2010. This hourly wage is not enough for paid work to be a pathway out of poverty.

In 2011, the government announced it would create a minimum wage advisory group to recommend increases to the minimum wage. To date, we have had no news on the status of that group.

- **Updating Ontario's Minimum Wage:** In 2009, the 25 in 5 Network recommended raising the minimum wage to \$11 an hour in 2011 and indexing the rate to inflation. The 25 in 5 Network now joins other advocates in calling for the minimum wage to reach 10% above the poverty line by 2015 and be adjusted yearly for the cost of living thereafter.

Ensuring sustainable employment also means making sure that all Ontarians have good quality, stable working conditions, free of discrimination and harassment, and predicated on the understanding that some groups face systemic barriers in the labour market that must be overcome.

- **Updating and enforcing employment standards for all:** The Poverty Reduction Strategy committed to improving Employment Standards enforcement through an additional \$10 million annual investment. This commitment has not yet been met.

Investments were made in Budget 2009 and 2010 to hire more Employment Standards Officers, and a temporary Task Force in the Ministry of Labour was set up to address the backlog of Employment Standards complaints and violations claims. In November 2011, the Minister of Labour announced that the backlog had been eliminated. In September 2012, the Ministry announced another one-time allocation of \$3 million to enhance enforcement and proactive inspections.

While progress has been made, the government is only half way toward meeting its commitment to a permanent annual investment of \$10 million to help ensure all Ontario workers are protected.

- **Legislation related to temporary help agencies:** Bill 139, the *Employment Standards Amendment Act (Temporary Help Agencies)* was passed on May 4, 2009 and came into effect in November of that year, providing new protections to workers.

While this is welcome legislation, advocates report that there have not been sufficient resources allocated to ensure strong enforcement.

In some cases, temp agencies have restructured their hiring practices in order to avoid paying severance or termination to workers. At the lower wage scale, there continue to be reports of agencies paying less than the minimum wage.

- **Employment Equity:** Ontario's *Poverty Reduction Act* clearly identifies the need for "building and establishing supports for, and eliminating barriers to, full participation by all people in Ontario's economy and society and, in particular, persons who face discrimination on the grounds of their race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability."⁶

A serious effort to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality must include a strategy for employment equity. Employment equity aims to eliminate employment barriers, build more transparent and accountable hiring plans and structures, improve access and distribution of opportunities for all groups and create a culture of equity and inclusion in the workplace.

That is why Ontario needs an employment equity strategy now.

Key Investments: Strong and Supportive Communities - Making Life Affordable for Everyone

The amount of money you need to get by is also affected by the price of everyday goods and services. Good public policy plays a critical role in making life more affordable. Public investment in services such as education, health care, child care, public pensions, employment insurance, and family benefits have been found to result in an average benefit to Canadians of \$17,000 annually.⁷

By pooling our resources through the taxes we pay and investing them in good public services, we improve everyone's living standards.

- **Affordable Housing:** Homelessness and housing insecurity are set to worsen as Ontario enters year five of its current Poverty Reduction Strategy. This is not simply the result of a prolonged economic slump; provincial operating investments in affordable housing have actually eroded substantially since 2000. As the Wellesley Institute reports, this means that "municipal, non-profit and co-op housing providers face ever tightening financial restraints even as the need for affordable homes grows across the province."⁸

Provincial capital spending on new affordable housing rose in 2009-10 but has dropped dramatically with the termination of federal housing funds.

The provincial plan to eliminate the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) removes a crucial tool that has helped prevent people from becoming homeless and other people to move from homelessness to stable housing. The transfer of half the CSUMB funds to municipalities as part of the new block funding package in the

consolidated Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) has left local municipalities struggling to make up sometimes massive reductions in funding. As municipalities respond to the new regime of housing and homelessness funding administration, which has arisen out of Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy, an uneven patchwork of homelessness prevention benefits for people on social assistance is developing across the province; some municipalities are creating replacements for CSUMB, with stricter eligibility rules and lower benefit rates, while others are not.

Homelessness and housing instability carry huge costs – for individuals, for communities and for provincial systems like health care. It is crucial that the government take steps to make more affordable housing available. A first step is to reverse the decision to cancel the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit. And there is an urgent need for Ontario to negotiate a new housing framework with the federal government that provides long-term federal and provincial funding to build and maintain affordable housing. The government should also move forward on implementing an Ontario Housing Benefit to help keep housing costs affordable for renters with low incomes.

- **Early Learning and Child Care:** Provincial investments both to implement full day junior and senior kindergarten across the province and to ensure a vibrant child care sector simply make sense. Affordable, high quality early learning and child care benefits children, enables parents to pursue education and paid work, and lays the foundation for lifelong learning. In all of these ways, investments in early learning and child care pay dividends.

Government's commitment to full day kindergarten is laudable, and its \$1.5 billion investment will ensure that all four- and five-year olds in Ontario – 270,000 children – will have access to a full day learning program by September 2014.

The move to full day kindergarten and long-term underfunding of child care has, however, destabilized the child care system in Ontario, with some centres facing financial collapse. While negotiations over Budget 2012 did result in a deal to allocate \$242 million over the next three years to stabilize child care in Ontario, the funding is one-third of what is needed to stabilize existing programs. In addition, with 4 out of 5 children lacking access to a licensed child care program and long child care subsidy waiting lists, the government must develop a plan and funding to create more licensed child care spaces and make child care more affordable for families.

In the immediate term, government must take several critical steps. A consensus plan among child care operators was recently produced that would stabilize the child care sector in Ontario. The *Solutions* report⁹ identifies four immediate priorities that government must address to ensure a child care system in which all Ontario's children have access to affordable, accessible and high-quality non-profit child care.

- **Expand access to dental, drug and vision coverage:** One of the expenses that many low-paid workers cannot afford is basic dental, prescription drug and vision care. That is why developing a public dental care, prescription care and vision care program for all low-income households must be a priority.

On June 20, 2011 the government announced the Eye See...Eye Learn program with the Ontario Association of Optometrists and industry partners to provide free glasses for junior kindergarten

students with vision problems. The program was piloted in four school boards during 2011/2012 and is intended to be rolled out to all school boards by 2015. To date, twenty school boards are included in the program.

In January 2009, the Children in Need of Treatment (CINOT) program was expanded to include children up to age 18 and funding was increased to \$10.3 million annually. The Healthy Smiles Ontario program was launched in 2010 to deliver free preventive dental health services to low-income children whose families are not eligible for any other form of dental coverage. Annual funding of \$30 million was allocated. The 36 local Public Health Units across Ontario are leading the program and working with local partners such as Community Health Centres (CHCs), dentists, dental hygienists and schools to deliver it. The target was to reach 130,000 children by year three.

Healthy Smiles Ontario has allowed participating CHCs to install dental suites and provide oral health services and has allowed both CHCs and public health units to provide improved services and community education. However, the program reached only 12,000 children and was underspent by \$4.2 million in 2011/12.¹⁰ CINOT funding has since been cut from \$10.3 million to \$3.3 million with no explanation.

The most significant challenge is that the income threshold for Healthy Smiles is too low – the program is not reaching as many low-income children as it should. And there are no oral health public programs for low-income adults who are not receiving social assistance.

Ontario's patchwork of public oral health programs has been criticized in three recent reports. The Chief Medical Officer of Health's 2012 report, *Oral Health - More Than Just Cavities*, calls for a review

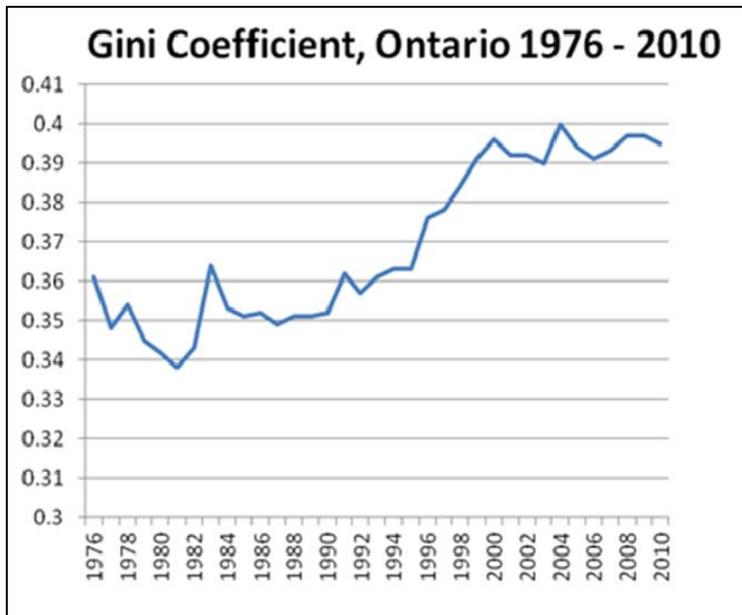
of low-income dental programs in order to improve their effectiveness, efficiency and reach.¹¹ A report released in October 2012 by the University of Toronto Faculty of Dentistry calls for a unified public oral health care program in Ontario managed by one ministry.¹² And among its 108 recommendations, the 2012 report of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance calls for harmonization of all dental and other health-related programs available to people on social assistance to ensure the same access no matter where people live in Ontario. It also calls on government to examine ways to make prescription drugs, dental and other health benefits available to all low-income Ontarians. Other important recommendations can be found in the *Putting Our Money Where Our Mouth Is* report from 2011.¹³

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care should increase the income eligibility criteria so that any family receiving the Ontario Child Benefit is eligible for Healthy Smiles Ontario. The province's five fragmented oral health programs should be unified into one quality program managed by one ministry. A logical first step would be to combine Healthy Smiles, CINOT and Ontario Works / Ontario Disability Support Program dental programs for children. And the province needs to extend publicly funded emergency dental services to low income adults, among whom there is a huge need.

Moving Forward: The Challenge Ahead

This progress report has focused on tracking policy decisions made since Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy was launched in December 2008, and making recommendations on areas in which further action is needed. And as we have seen, the early initiatives of the Poverty Reduction Strategy have had a positive impact, reducing child poverty during a period of hard economic times.

But it is also important to take a longer view. *Falling Behind*¹⁴, a report from the Ontario Common Front, has documented the long-term rise in poverty and inequality in Ontario since the early 1980s. As illustrated in the chart below, inequality has risen dramatically over the past 35 years.



The Gini Coefficient is a measure of income inequality. A coefficient of zero (0) denotes a situation where everyone has an equal income. A coefficient of one (1) would be where one person has all of the income in society. A higher coefficient, therefore, indicates greater inequality. Source: Statistics Canada, Cansim Table 202-0705

But poverty and inequality do not just happen. Instead, they are the result of public and private decisions.

Since the 1980s, public policy has been driven by the belief that tax cuts were necessary for economic growth. But the dramatic cuts made to personal income tax rates for the wealthiest and successive rounds of corporate income tax cuts have done very little to stimulate growth – instead, coupled with soaring executive pay and stagnating wages for people at the low end of the labour market, they have proven incredibly effective at driving up inequality in Ontario.

Tackling Inequality

The fact is that inequality results in greater social unrest, less trust in each other and in public

institutions, higher levels of crime, greater incidence of depression and anxiety, and deteriorating health conditions. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, which fostered policies that increased inequality, have recently realized that inequality actually undermines economic vitality.¹⁵ In fact, growing global income inequality was one of the root factors in the global financial crisis that threw the world into recession in 2008.¹⁶

This compelling reality underscores the urgency for Ontario to take substantial measures to begin closing the gap of disparity.

Budget 2012 negotiations between the New Democratic Party and the governing Liberals to raise income taxes on those earning more than \$500,000 a year and to postpone another round of corporate income tax cuts respond to the need for those who benefited most by the decade of economic growth to do their fair share in helping to tackle Ontario’s deficit. They also help to begin closing the gap in inequality.

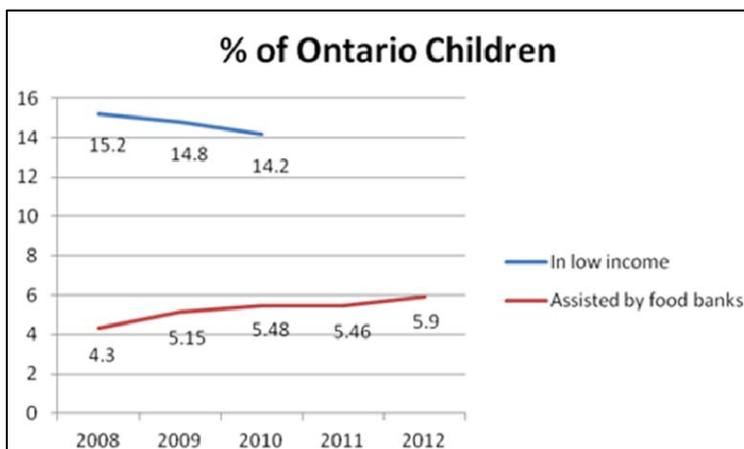
The combined federal and Ontario corporate income tax rate was cut from 44.6% in 1999 to 28% by 2011. The aim was to get corporations to boost investments to stimulate growth and productivity. What has happened instead is that corporate investment as a proportion of GDP has fallen from 8.3% in 1999 to 6% in 2011.¹⁷

Corporations are sitting on historically high cash reserves that Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney has referred to as “dead money”. This clearly suggests that further corporate tax cuts make little economic sense. Rather there is a strong case for restoring corporate income tax rates to put that dead money to positive use by investing in public infrastructure and public services that will make life more enjoyable and affordable for everyone while creating decent jobs.

Tackling the problem of growing inequality in Ontario must be a central focus of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Low Income and Food Bank Assistance: Lifting Everyone Out of Deep Poverty

While the rate of child poverty has fallen, the number of children in households that rely on food banks has been on the rise throughout the first four years of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy. Currently, more than 400,000 people in Ontario must rely on food banks each month to ward off hunger; of those, nearly 40% – 165,199 – are children.¹⁸



Sources: Statistics Canada, CANSIM Tables 051-0001 and 202-0802; HungerCount 2012.

This suggests that while fewer Ontario children and their families are living in low income, those who are living in poverty are actually experiencing deep poverty.

This grim reality demonstrates that Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy must include a plan not just to reduce the overall poverty rate, but to lift people out of deep poverty.

The Next Challenge: A new Poverty Reduction Strategy - A Test for Ontario's Political Parties

Ontario's Poverty Reduction Act was passed unanimously by the Ontario legislature on May 6, 2009. The Act requires a new Poverty Reduction

Strategy be developed at least every five years.

The law requires:

Every new or modified Poverty Reduction Strategy is to include the following:

- 1. A specific poverty reduction target.*
- 2. Initiatives designed to improve the economic and social conditions of persons and families living in poverty.*
- 3. Indicators to measure the success of the strategy that are linked to the determinants of poverty, including but not limited to income, education, health, housing and standard of living.*

As noted above, those who were left out of Ontario's first Poverty Reduction Strategy are still struggling to deal with the recession and lacklustre economic recovery.

More working age adults were living in poverty in 2010 than in 2008. The rate of poverty among seniors decreased, from 8.8% in 2008 to 8.1% by 2010, but remains well above the 6.1% seen in 2006. Growing poverty and inequality still threaten individuals, communities, and Ontario as a whole.

The new Poverty Reduction Strategy must set a target for all people in Ontario – adults as well as children, and those at highest risk of poverty. The legislation requires specifically that poverty reduction strategies "must recognize the heightened risk among groups such as immigrants, women, single mothers, people with disabilities, aboriginal peoples and racialized groups."

The second test for all Ontario's political parties – beyond ensuring the first 25 in 5 target is met – will be their willingness to ensure the creation of the province's second Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Conclusion: Decisive Leadership Required

The three political parties in the provincial legislature voted unanimously for the Poverty Reduction Act. This was an act of bold leadership and demonstrated their understanding of the ability of good public policy to make a difference in the lives of Ontarians.

With the Liberal leadership campaign underway and another provincial election a real possibility in the spring, Ontario's aspiring leaders need to tell Ontario voters how they will make good on their commitment to reducing poverty and inequality in Ontario.

The commitment to reducing poverty is at an important crossroads. We've seen that strong leadership and good policy can make a difference. But we've also seen that governments can lose their resolve.

With one year and one final budget remaining in Ontario's historic first Poverty Reduction Strategy, we call on all Ontario's political parties to commit to fulfilling the first poverty reduction target. And we call on them to articulate their vision and plan for Ontario's second Poverty Reduction Strategy.

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