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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

December 4, 2009

Defining necessities

From Friday's Globe and Mail

Like the underlying condition itself, measuring poverty has never been easy or simple. Yet an intriguing innovation from the government of Ontario this week breaks new ground on the topic. It may not be perfect, but it's a perfectly good way to start a debate on improving poverty measurement in Canada.

The accepted national gauge of poverty is Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off. Yet LICO suffers from many serious flaws. It is cumbersome to explain, it's solely a relative measure of poverty that ignores absolute needs, and Statscan actually discourages its use as a poverty indicator. Lacking any suitable replacement, many Canadians simply disregard this injunction and use LICO anyway.

On Wednesday, Ontario unveiled a new way to measure poverty. The Ontario Deprivation Index, as calculated by two social-policy groups, involves a list of 10 items considered necessary to an acceptable Canadian standard of living. It includes the wherewithal to eat fresh fruit and vegetables daily, a home free from cockroaches, a working toaster, access to transportation and the ability to buy small gifts for family members once a year. If a household cannot afford at least two entries, they are considered poor.

Such a definition of poverty, based on a similar list in Ireland, has much to recommend it. It focuses on the practical necessities of life, but is not so Spartan that it ignores the necessity of social interaction.

While it is possible to quibble with some inclusions on the new list - access to a hobby, for instance - this merely highlights the need for a national discussion on the meaning of poverty.

And with such a debate in mind, there is one crucial aspect to the Irish model that Ontario has overlooked. In addition to its own deprivation index, Ireland goes further and combines it with a relative income measure for a comprehensive view of poverty. Those who cannot afford at least two items on the Irish deprivation list and fall below 60 per cent of median income are considered to be in consistent poverty. The most recent national figures show a deprivation rate of 13.8 per cent and consistent poverty of 4.2 per cent.

While Ontario's initial deprivation study finds 12.5 per cent of Ontario children to be poor, combining this with figures on relative income would provide a more revealing picture of young Canadians trapped in poverty. Nonetheless, it is a good start on an important issue.

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