

New measure for the pain of poverty



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One in eight Ontario children live in families that can't afford fresh fruits and vegetables every day, or can't afford to replace a broken appliance or share the occasional meal with friends or family.

These are a few of the 10 indicators listed in a new provincial poverty measure called the Ontario Deprivation Index, introduced Wednesday by Children's Minister Laurel Broten as part of the government's first annual report on the province's poverty reduction plan.

The 10 "deprivation indicators" are not intended to be a comprehensive list. Instead, they are a sample of items and activities common to most Ontarians but out of reach for poor households, the report says.

"Fighting poverty means looking beyond income and examining the realities of life for our most disadvantaged families and children," it says. "The Ontario Deprivation Index is a new measure that tells us how the Poverty Reduction Strategy is ensuring more families can afford a standard of living that many Ontarians take for granted."

Families not able to afford two or more items from the list are considered to have a "poverty level standard of living," the government says. This year, 12.5 per cent of Ontario children – or 337,000 kids – were lacking at least two items.

That's slightly higher than the 11.7 per cent of children in families living below the 2007 Low Income Measure (LIM), which is 50 per cent of the median provincial income after tax. The LIM for a single parent with one child in 2007 was \$22,435. Ontario adopted the after-tax LIM last year as one of several poverty measures it will use to mark progress on its pledge to cut provincial child poverty by 25 per cent by 2013.

Ireland, the U.K. and Australia have been using deprivation indexes along with income measures to track poverty for several years. Ontario is believed to be the first jurisdiction in North America to adopt a deprivation index.

Ontario's list of indicators was developed by the Daily Bread Food Bank and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy through surveys and focus groups with low-income people. Data was collected in March and April by Statistics Canada through the Labour Force Survey. As with income indicators, the next deprivation index

data for Ontario will be 18 to 24 months behind.

Instead of equating poverty to an income level, the deprivation index actually measures people's standard of living, said Michael Oliphant of the Daily Bread Food Bank, who helped develop the measure by asking food bank users what they consider basic necessities.

It includes both basic necessities and activities that promote social inclusion, such as being able to afford to buy modest gifts for family or friends once a year or being able to afford a vehicle or public transit fare, he said.

"Poverty is not just about meeting people's needs but also about being able to participate in society," he said. Although most of the same people who would be considered poor under the LIM are also captured by the deprivation index, some are not.

"The deprivation index identifies a different group of people," Oliphant said. "It adds to our knowledge of poverty by giving us a different dimension."

For example, someone could have an income above the LIM, but still live in poverty due to a disability. Likewise, someone with a very low income may enjoy a good standard of living because they own their home and have strong support from family and friends, he said.

The Liberals trumpeted progress this year on their poverty plan, including an acceleration of the Ontario Child Benefit to \$1,100 per child annually, a commitment to implement full-day learning for 4- and 5-year-olds next fall, and tax relief that will take 90,000 families off the tax rolls. Ottawa has stepped up with \$600 million in stimulus money for social housing, which the province is matching, she said. But there is still no progress on child care or employment insurance reform, she said.

Critics called the annual report "just words and little action."

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said it is disconcerting the government is not on target to reduce poverty in Ontario and "everyone knows it."

The province needs more affordable housing, child-care spots and welfare reform, not more committees or reports, she said.

Anti-poverty activists warned that the recession means more people are falling into poverty than ever before. "We want the government to move further and faster," said Jacquie Maund of Campaign 2000, one of more than 100 groups and individuals monitoring progress on the provincial plan.

Although the new deprivation index is good, action on affordable housing, child care, the minimum wage and the Ontario Child Benefit are what is really needed, she said.