

Wealth and Well-Being Among Canada's Children

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In July 2013, the Canadian Medical Association released a report entitled *Health Care in Canada: What Makes Us Sick?* based on a series of town hall meetings held across the country and an online consultation that received input from more than 1,000 participants. In the meetings, which gathered input on Canadians' views on the social determinants of health, the need to address poverty was a major expressed concern. Factors such as housing, education, employment and nutrition were seen as playing a fundamental role in determining the health and well-being of Canadians.¹

Child poverty is a critical component of any discussion of a nation's well-being: how we decide to approach child poverty not only shapes today's society, but tomorrow's as well. Since children are dependent on their families, *family poverty* becomes the broader issue of relevance – and social determinants of health have an impact on families as much as they affect individuals.

According to Statistics Canada, 13.3% of Canadian children under the age of 18 lived in low-income families in 2011.² While this proportion has shrunk slightly since the beginning of the 2008 recession (the low-income rate was 14% in 2008), this still represents nearly 900,000 children in Canada living in poverty.

Of those living in low-income families, the proportion of children is higher (at 13.3%) than the proportion of the general population (at 12.9%) nationally.³ Furthermore, particular subgroups of children are at even higher risk. According to Statistics Canada, nearly half (49%) of First Nations children living off-reserve under the age of 6 live in low income families.⁴ This disproportionate experience of poverty results in poorer lifelong outcomes for the health and well-being of Canada's youngest generation.

Child poverty has significant impacts on the health and well-being of children. Those who experience poverty are more likely to have health problems, developmental



"Poverty can be defined as a pregnant mother just a little less healthy, her newborn baby just a little underweight, a little less developed. A young child growing up just a little more sick a little more often – just a little behind. Poverty is every day running a 100-metre race as if all the other kids are at the starting line – and they're 10 metres behind. Poverty is 'just that little' that isn't 'just a little' at all."

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delays and behaviour disorders – and these effects are exacerbated when poverty is persistent.⁵

Child poverty and family poverty are issues of critical importance for all Canadians. A better understanding of the health-and-wealth connection can help frame future research and inform decisions related to program design and policy development. In determining which children are living in poverty, and what kinds of assistance they may need, we are also helping to secure the well-being of our neighbourhoods, our communities and all of Canada. ◀

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¹ Canadian Medical Association, *Health Care in Canada: What Makes Us Sick?* Canadian Medical Association Town Hall Report (July 2013), accessed October 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1e8IAGS>.

² Using the before-tax low-income cut-off measure.

³ Statistics Canada, *Table 202-0802 – Persons in Low Income Families, Annual*, CANSIM (database), accessed October 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/18dIX33>.

⁴ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Family, Community and Child Care*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 89-634-X (October 2008), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1c4LY6o>.

⁵ Dominique Fleury, "Low-Income Children," *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 75-001-X (May 2008), accessed October 30, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1bhWCZ2>.