

SECTION 2: Environment for children: setting the stage

The intent of this section is to situate Toronto's children and families within a context of the city and its continually changing demographic, social and economic characteristics.

2003 has not been a banner year for Toronto's children and families. Years of fiscal restraint and neglect by provincial and federal governments have taken their toll through loss of child care subsidies, elimination of programs in schools, school closures, reductions in library services and reduced rates of investment in programs supporting children and families, to name a few.

Toronto's children

According to the 2001 Census data, there were 433,820 children 0-14 years living in 261,905 families and they accounted for 17.5% of Toronto's population (143,510 children 0-4 years, 149,635 children 5-9 years and 140,675 children 10-14 years). (see maps 1 & 2)

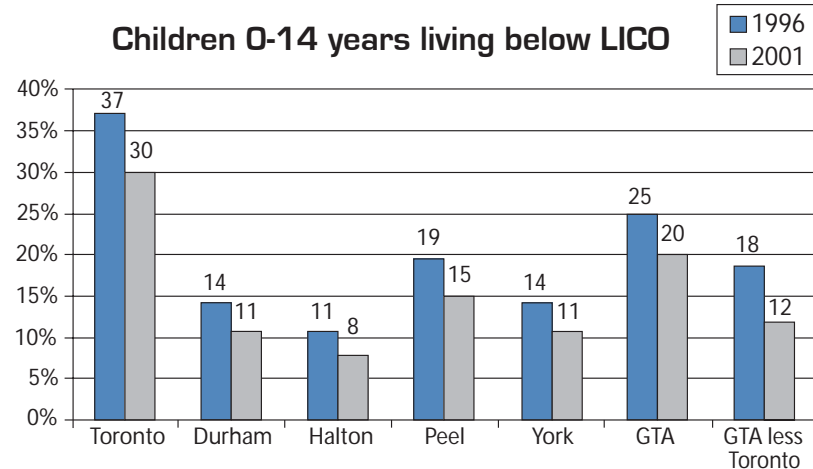
Many of these children are from recently immigrated families. In 2001, four out of every ten children in Toronto and one out of every five children in 1st grade were foreign-born. Virtually every race, religion, culture and language can be found in the children that live in our neighbourhoods. Yet, at the same time the neighbourhoods are constantly changing. In 25% of all census tracts, more than 50% of the residents moved between 1996 and 2001.

Statistics Canada low-income cut-offs: Income levels at which families or unattached individuals spend a significantly higher proportion of their income on food, shelter and clothing than an average Canadian family of comparable size and comparable community of residence. In Toronto, for example, the LICO for a family of two was \$22,964 and for a family of four it was \$34,572 in 2000.

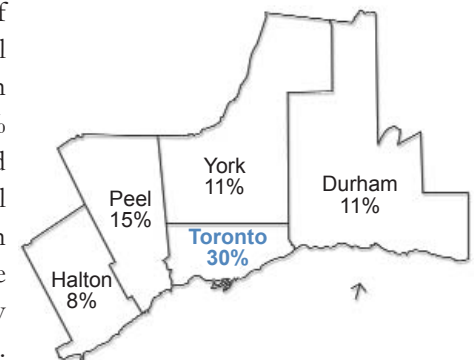
Child poverty

As in the past, Toronto continues to hold the unenviable position among its Southern Ontario neighbours as home to the largest concentration of children growing up in poverty. While according to the 2001 Census data the poverty rate has declined from 37% to 30%, this rate is still more than two times as high as the rest of the GTA (see map below) and there are still 128,755 children 0-14 years living below the low-income cut-off.

Children 0-14 years living below LICO

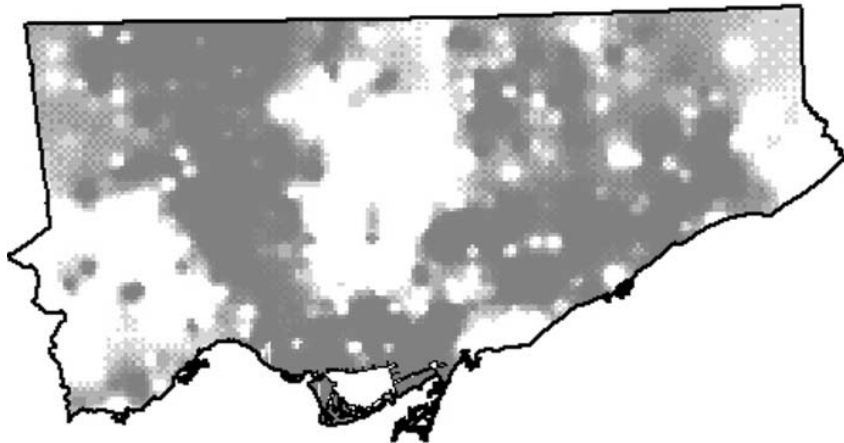


While in general, the pattern of child poverty in Toronto still follows the U-shape identified in previous report cards, the 20% reduction (from 37% to 30%) did not register uniformly across all of the city's neighbourhoods. In fact, in 21% of census tracts the rate of children living below LICO actually increased (Map 3).



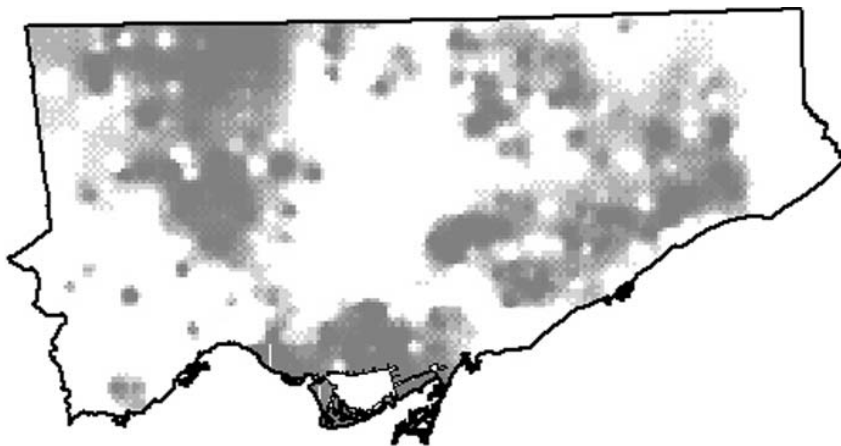
Map A

Map A represents the pattern of children living in poverty based on data from the 1996 Census. The distinct U-shape that forms across the city represents high proportions of children living below the LICO.



Map B

Map B is based on similar data from the 2001 Census. Although the U-shape can still be identified on the city map, it is less pronounced.



It is questionable whether the 2001 Census statistics on children in low-income families actually reflect the reality of 2003. The situation may possibly be worse. Incomes reported on in the latest Census are from the year 2000, reflecting the healthy economy from the late 90s and 2000. There are signs that Toronto's current economy has been affected by global events including 9/11, SARS, the war in Iraq and a general downturn in the U.S. economy. A look at current indicators reveals that the economy is not doing well and that families with children are being affected. For example:

- social assistance caseloads for families with children have increased since the spring of 2003, while the rates paid to families have not changed since 1996
- unemployment rates have increased from 7.3% in 2001 to 9% in 2003
- food bank use is increasing.

Particularly vulnerable in our city are children of:

- lone-parent families whose financial well-being is dependent on a single income
- recent immigrants who often end up in low paying entry-level jobs
- low-income earners whose minimum wage jobs keep their incomes below LICO.

Also vulnerable are children with special needs whose families are burdened financially by the extra support and services needed to care for their children.



Federal and provincial policy program initiatives

2003 has seen the provincial government's continued neglect of child care as an essential piece of the social infrastructure. Although substantial investments have been made by the provincial government through the funds received from the federal Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI), these have generally been targeted to specific populations and invested in the Ontario Early Years Centres. Also, although the Province of Ontario was a signatory in April 2003 to the Multilateral Framework on Child Care, none of the funds dedicated to this initiative had found their way into the child care service system by the end of the year.

Frozen provincial funding levels that fail to keep pace with inflation for the Healthy Babies Healthy Children and Preschool Speech and Language programs are now jeopardizing the sustainability of these programs and resulting in growing waiting lists for services.

Affordable housing

Public policy decisions, including government funding cuts and new rent regulations, have created a shortage of affordable housing in Toronto. In 1993, the federal government withdrew its funding for new social housing, followed shortly by the Ontario government in 1995. In 1998, rent controls were lifted on vacant rental units in the private sector. This has left many low-income families struggling to find and keep suitable housing. Although new housing initiatives are slowly coming to fruition, it will be several years before the actual supply significantly improves.

Education system

Insufficient provincial funding and the end of local education funding flexibility for the Toronto District School Board has meant that the basic education needs of Toronto's diverse urban population are not being met. In addition, services have been affected by the loss of funding for community use of schools.

The Government of Ontario assumed responsibility for the funding of public education in 1998 as part of its Local Services Realignment Initiative. This has resulted in realignments in Board spending that have led to declines in social programs formerly delivered by the school boards. For instance, there have been reductions in funding for programs for inner-city children. As well, boards are charging increasing fees for permits to use school facilities such as swimming pools. The City has assumed funding and operation of some of these services in partnership with the Toronto District School Board.

During the 2002-2003 school year, the board was taken over by the Province and placed under a supervisor. This action did not result in a balancing of the board's budget and a deficit remained at the end of this supervisory period. With the new provincial government in November 2003, a number of actions are being taken to resolve funding problems within the Toronto public school system. The Toronto District School Board is working with the Province to achieve a balanced budget, and has maintained a priority for its special education system.

Looking ahead

Recent developments signal changing federal and provincial attitudes towards cities and their citizens. Given a decline in the economy based on global events, this year's blackout and SARS combined with a large provincial deficit, it will be challenging to support the pressing needs of Toronto's children.