

Poverty report shows both progress and worsening conditions in Hamilton

Senior poverty rate is down, while child poverty rate is increasing

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The Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and the United Way of Burlington and Greater Hamilton released an updated *Incomes and Poverty in Hamilton* report based on 2006 census data. It features a comprehensive study of poverty today and provides both reasons for hope and reasons for concerns for Hamiltonians.

The report shows that the general poverty rate in the city decreased between the last two census periods, from 19.8% in 2000 to 18.1% in 2005. The main factor explaining this decrease is a large drop in the senior poverty rate (from 24.4% to 16.6%). More seniors applied for the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) program and more female seniors received CPP benefits as an increasing number of older women spent at least part of their working lives in the paid labour force. Both are important contributors to the decreasing poverty rate among seniors.

“Canada has made significant changes to its social safety net over the last 50 years to improve the lives of low income seniors, now we can apply those lessons to improve poverty rates for other groups as well,” explained Mark Abradjian, President of the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.

Local efforts by community groups have increased awareness of the GIS system and helped many Hamilton seniors leave poverty. “I attended a tax clinic in 2003 organized by the SPRC and they helped me with the GIS application forms. Because of that my income doubled the next year,” said Hamilton senior Georgette Meshki. Community agencies such as the Hamilton Council on Aging currently run tax clinics for seniors that have helped many other seniors to access their entitlements.

In contrast to the senior poverty rate, the poverty rate among children in Hamilton has not decreased, and in fact the poverty rate for young children (under 6) has increased from 25.2% to 26.4% between 2000 and 2005. “The increase in child poverty is a sign of concern, and makes the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction’s goal of making Hamilton the best place to raise a child all the more relevant and urgent,” said Liz Weaver, Director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

“The findings of this report are valuable to us as they help to inform the decisions United Way has to make in its community investments that support critical needs in our community. In addition, we believe it will allow government decision makers at all levels to be more informed as they endeavour to establish sound socio-economic policies, while also supporting effective community planning,” said Darrel Skidmore, CEO of the United Way of Burlington & Greater Hamilton.

The census snapshot presented in this report was taken during a time of relative prosperity, but as the economic recession has hit Hamilton in the last few months, it is clear that incomes are going down and poverty is increasing, at least for the short term. The report notes that EI recipients are up more than 36% since last year. The Ontario Works caseload is the highest it has been since 2001, with more than 11,600 families and individuals needing social assistance. There has been an increase of more than 1600 additional recipients since November 2008.

“The SPRC in collaboration with its community partners is closely monitoring changes taking place in Hamilton due to the current recession. We are working to identify indicators and data sources to keep track of community conditions on a short term basis, to help community agencies in their planning of new or expanded programs to meet the growing needs in Hamilton,” said Abradjian.

To download the Incomes and Poverty Report visit www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca

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