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## Montreal groups react to startling findings on child poverty

MONTREAL - A report by the Canadian Council on Social Development shows the gap between rich and poor is growing at a startling rate in Canada and children are feeling the impact.

The number of children going hungry is on the rise, as is the number of families seeking emergency shelter.

Social action groups in Montreal say the findings of the national survey are right on the mark.

Tommy Kulczyk, the director of emergency services at Sun Youth, says seven weeks before Christmas, there are 1,000 more families signed up for hampers than this time last year.

A full 65 per cent have children under the age of 12.

"That shows a lot more people know already they'll need help for Christmas," Kulczyk says.

The CCSD calls it "persistent poverty."

Although the number of children without enough to eat has decreased slightly, the new study says families in need are having more trouble escaping from poverty.

The council's sixth annual Progress of Canada's Children suggests child poverty is deeper and more entrenched in Canadian society.

The report says children in families described as "persistently poor" tend not to be as healthy as other children. Children in poor families do not do as well in school as other children.

Sun Youth has seen it all in Montreal.

"We became an emergency ward for those who are less fortunate," Kulczyk says. "We are helping them to go through a crisis, to keep their heads above water."

In 1989 Ottawa promised to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000. Kulczyk says like so many other studies, this progress report shows what a "sad joke" that commitment was.

Other points:

- Children living in poverty are three times more likely to have a parent suffering from depression.
- Some 300,000 children in Canada rely on food banks every month.
- Children in poor families are much more likely to become runaways.
- Children growing up in poverty are more likely to become foster children.
- Between 1984 and 1999, the average net wealth of the top 20 per cent of couples with children increased by 43 per cent. For families at the bottom of the income scale, net wealth fell by more than 51 per cent.
- Children living in persistent poverty are twice as likely to live in dysfunctional families and twice as likely to live with violence.

"When we look at the depth of poverty... those numbers aren't going down in a significant way, so kids are really poor," said Louise Hanvey, who wrote the report.

The report says children who live in communities with plentiful resources – parks, libraries – score better on tests of physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

In the case of poor children, the opposite is the case. The report cites a study in Edmonton that says poor children worry more about the safety of their neighbourhoods than about lack of food.

"Despite the economic boom of the mid- to late-1990s, too many Canadian families and their children are barely scraping by and are just one problem away from economic disaster," Hanvey said.

"The fact that so many kids are heading off to school on empty stomachs is not the reality one expects to see in a G-7 country like Canada, which is consistently ranked among the best places in the world in which to live."

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