

Poverty's toll: 'I'm not the parent I wish I could be'

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Ronda Pigeon isn't up on the sobering statistics on the impact of child poverty.

But as she searches for a place of her own to live and tries to muster the gumption to find a job to pay for it, the Cambridge woman sees first-hand what it's doing to her son, Andrew.

"I'm just so burned out from everything else that's going on and feeling down, I don't even have the energy to take him outside and build a snowman and do the things you should do with a two-year-old," she said.

"He's really active, so I'd love to take him to the Y and put him in programs, but we don't have the money for that. I know I'm not the parent I wish I could be with him."

A single mother living with friends while on social assistance, Pigeon is feeling the effects of poverty in two key ways often cited by academics and activists.

Although she and her son have a roof over their heads, clothes to wear and food to eat, a lack of money presents a set of practical difficulties.

Pigeon, 35, has made it a top priority to get her own apartment, ending the awkwardness of sharing accommodation and providing a safe, secure base to start building a new life.

Problem 1 is that she receives only \$538 a month for shelter, while the one-bedroom apartments she has looked at go for \$600 to \$700 and there is a waiting list for subsidized units.

To make it work, Pigeon figures she will have to get off welfare and land a full-time job -- raising the challenge of finding and affording day care for her son.

"It's just a whole circle," she said. "What I want to do and what I have to do are going to be two different things."

While worrying about money and how to get more of it, meanwhile, Pigeon readily admits the pressure is souring her outlook and sapping her strength to do even simple things like play outside with Andrew.

Just a few years ago, before a relationship ended badly, she was financially independent while working both full-time and part-time jobs.

"The stress of living in poverty is well-documented," said Noreen Steinacher, administrator of social development programs for Waterloo Region. "It's not for lack of desire to have those interactions, but it takes away from many aspects of family life."

Although there are plenty of exceptions, including some shining examples of triumph, growing up poor means children are, for a series of complicated, inter-related reasons, far more likely to experience a range of serious consequences from crime to continued poverty as adults.

Peter Dunn, an associate professor of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, teaches a course on poverty.

"It affects health, it affects education, it affects safety -- it affects life on an ongoing basis," he said. "And it's not only the severity of impact, but the number of children who are impacted."

Despite an often-cited commitment by the federal government in 1989 to eliminate the problem by 2000, child poverty rates remain stubbornly high -- about 18 per cent in Canada compared to less than five per cent in several Scandinavian countries.

The rate in Ontario in 2004 -- the latest year for which figures are available -- was 17.4 per cent, with kids in Waterloo Region generally faring better at 13.5 per cent of those under 18.

Dunn said a few of the specific effects on poor kids demonstrated by research are:

Twice the rate of childhood mortality in the bottom 20 per cent of the population by income versus the top 20 per cent.

More than double the high school dropout rate.

Twice the chance of smoking and abusing drugs and alcohol.

Mary MacKeigan is well-versed on those and many other statistics showing poor children are at a serious disadvantage compared with their peers.

She worked hard to earn a university degree and a college diploma in social work, and heads a non-profit organization called Opportunities Waterloo Region that promotes innovative ways of tackling poverty.

Decades after living through circumstances she now helps others overcome, however, MacKeigan can't quite put her finger on how her own poor childhood undermined her for so long.

"It was the whole thing of not feeling good enough -- and not having any help to deal with it, not even knowing that was my problem at first," she said.

MacKeigan grew up in the 1960s in a large, working-poor family in Sudbury, where her mother held a variety of jobs and her father was a miner before dying while she was in high school.

Numerous details of scrimping to get by stand out in her memory -- how she ate ketchup sandwiches, put sugar in powdered milk to make it taste better and longed for a trendy hat she didn't get until it was out of fashion.

MacKeigan also recalls days spent in a locked room with her mother, who then worked nights, couldn't afford child care and couldn't figure out any other way to get some sleep.

"I don't remember a whole lot about that, but it couldn't have been great for either her or I to be shut up in a bedroom like that," she said.

Worst of all, perhaps, was her desperate attempt as an adolescent to hide her rotten teeth by putting chewing gum over the black marks. "I think I was just lying to myself," she said. "I don't know how good of a job it did."

MacKeigan later fit right into the pattern when she got pregnant as a teenager, became a single mother and dropped out of high school.

As she looks back on the tough times now, it isn't deprivation -- the absolute poverty of inadequate food, clothing or shelter -- she cites as the crucial factor in the course her life took.

MacKeigan said it was a lack of confidence, a deep sense of being somehow different and inferior, that held her back until she finally returned to school in her early 30s.

"Having rotten teeth because you can't afford to get them fixed affects your self-image," she said. "There's no way around that.

"It took me a lot longer to get where I wanted to go because I didn't have the tools to get there. I just did not feel like I was worth anything -- and that goes back to feeling not worth much as a child."

Luke Fusco, an associate professor and former dean of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University, said such psychological consequences are often more significant in a rich country like Canada than the physical impact of going without necessities.

"Our pure poverty in a lot of the world would be people being pretty well off, so poverty in my mind is always relative," he said. "You look around and see what others have or you look at television and see what people in the ads seem to have.

"If you're feeling inadequate and not as good and not capable and not able to measure up, that's harder to deal with, harder to change."

Michele Hamer has never actually done the math, but she doesn't think she is technically poor anymore.

For that she credits a supportive family, the Langs Farm community centre in her Cambridge neighbourhood and her own dogged persistence in putting her two children first.

Hamer sometimes went to bed hungry so her son and daughter wouldn't have to, and she tried to shield them when an impossible juggling act meant some bills had to go unpaid.

"You know what -- I did my best," she said. "I was always as honest as I felt I needed to be without throwing their lives into absolute turmoil."

A single mother since her alcoholic husband committed suicide eight years ago, Hamer lives in a rented townhouse and works full-time in food service at the Galt Country Club.

Now 18 and 20, her kids both work and willingly chip in at home, putting the family a bit above the low-income cutoffs used by Statistics Canada to define poverty.

But there were times in the lean years when their electricity and telephone were cut off, and the children learned early to keep their Christmas lists short.

Hamer, 43, taught them they had to set priorities and stick to them. She also stressed the importance of education so one day they wouldn't have to struggle as hard as she did.

Her son still quit school, but works full-time and has avoided serious trouble. Her daughter is finishing high school with plans to go to college.

"Basically, the kids and I stuck together and we made it," said Hamer. "I think my kids have come through it pretty good for all they've been through in their lives."

A big believer in the importance of families, Fusco said a particularly strong, determined parent or parents -- often a single mother -- can beat the odds stacked against their kids by all those statistical measures.

"That kind of energy, that kind of willpower, can overcome a lot," he said.

While she counts herself as an example of that, Hamer is quick to credit her own mother for dropping off bags of groceries at crucial times and the community centre for a range of practical supports, including counselling.

"It was Langs that taught me there are more important things than pride," she said, explaining how doing what was best for her kids required her to get over her shame and accept help.

Activists argue big-ticket political initiatives to put or leave more money in the hands of the working poor and welfare recipients -- narrowing the gap between the haves and the have-nots -- are essential to making a meaningful dent in child poverty rates.

Included are more subsidized housing, more day-care spaces, retraining programs, a boost to the minimum wage and higher social assistance rates.

But because money is often only part of the problem in poor families, they also stress the importance of grassroots services -- homework clubs, breakfast programs, counselling, recreation -- to support the families kids live in.

"As those children grow older, they have more personal resources to build on, to work with, so when they're raising their own children there'll be a stronger family," said Greg deGroot-Maggetti, a policy analyst for Citizens for Public Justice. "The investment pays dividends for them and for the whole society."

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WHO CAN HELP

Some of the local services and agencies helping poor children and their families:

Emergency Assistance

Waterloo Region social services department -- 519-883-2100.

Child care

Waterloo Region subsidy program -- 519-883-2200.

Housing

Waterloo Region subsidy program -- 519-575-4833.

Recreation

Kitchener (519-741-2382) and Cambridge (519-740-4681 ext. 4066) offer assistance for city-run programs.

In Waterloo, requests for help may be made while registering.

Food Hampers

House of Friendship (Kitchener-Waterloo) -- 519-742-0662.

Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank -- 519-622-6550.

Ontario Early Years Centres

Most programs are free, there are small fees for others.

Kitchener -- 519-571-1626.

Waterloo -- 519-741-8585.

Cambridge -- 519-740-8353.

Community Support

Waterloo Region outreach program at community centres can help access subsidies, assist parents and recommend other services -- 519-883-2290.

Locations of community centres and information on programs can be obtained from the Community Information Centre of Waterloo Region (519-579-3800) or Information Cambridge (519-740-3030).

Opportunities Waterloo Region will also launch a resource guide called Building on Your Strengths on April 3. Information will be available on the group's website at: <http://www.owr.ca/>

POVERTY LINES

Low-income cutoffs -- commonly known as the poverty line -- are determined by Statistics Canada.

For communities the size of Waterloo Region, this is where they fell for families of various amounts of pre-tax income for the year 2005:

single person -- \$17,895

two members -- \$22,276

three members -- \$27,386

four members -- \$33,251

five members -- \$37,711

six members -- \$42,533

seven-plus -- \$47,354

POVERTY'S EFFECTS

Research shows the effects of poverty on children are both numerous and varied. Some examples:

Health

lower birth weights

higher death rates

slower growth

Behaviour

greater anxiety

more aggression

lower self-esteem

Education

lower grades

higher dropout rates

lower incomes as adults

SOURCE: URBAN POVERTY CONSORTIUM OF WATERLOO REGION