

Study tracks rising poverty

10 per cent of area families called poor

By Sonja Puzic, The Windsor Star August 24, 2010



Researcher Jessica Sartori of United Way/Centraide Windsor-Essex County unveiled the 2009 Well-Being Report at a Rotary Club of Windsor (1918) meeting Monday. Sartori's daughter, Katherine, 10, left, waits patiently while her mother speaks with the media following her address.

Photograph by: Nick Brancaccio, The Windsor Star, The Windsor Star

One in 10 Windsor-Essex families lives in poverty, causing a big jump in demand at local food banks and lineups for social assistance, according to a new United Way report.

The 2009 community well-being report, which looked at a range of socio-economic and health indicators, found that 10 per cent of local families and 16 per cent of children live below the poverty line, defined as an annual income of \$28,091 per family of four. Food bank use has soared 242 per cent between 2006 and 2009 and over the last decade, the average weekly paycheque has shrunk by \$200.

The number of people on social assistance has increased 30 per cent to 9,291 from 7,200 between 2005 and 2009, the study found.

"Two hundred dollars a week may not seem like that much ... but it's a significant change for many families," said Jessica Sartori, manager of community impact and learning at United Way, who presented the report at a Rotary Club of Windsor meeting Monday.

Sartori told attendees that many people have decided to move out of the area in search of jobs and better opportunities, leaving behind empty homes and storefronts and decreasing the municipal tax revenue.

Those who prepared the extensive report say the findings were not surprising in light of the global recession and the collapse of the local manufacturing and automotive sectors. Windsor holds the country's highest unemployment rate and the economic outlook has been anything but rosy.

But "on some of the indicators, we really were surprised by how much had changed in a short period of time," said Lorraine Goddard, senior director of community impact at United Way and one of the editors of the report.

June Muir, acting executive director of the Unemployed Help Centre and chairwoman of the Windsor and Essex County Food Bank Association, said food banks are struggling to help the working poor -- people who are trying to feed their kids while working at low-paying jobs. Many people who once donated generously are now on the receiving end, she said.

The well-being report was based on the latest available data from Statistics Canada and local organizations, such as school boards and food banks. It also noted that rent is often unaffordable for low-income households and immigrants, many of whom spend 30 per cent or more of their income on housing.

The report also looked at a number of health trends, confirming higher-than-average rates of certain diseases and illnesses in Windsor-Essex, such as asthma and diabetes. A worrying trend among local youth emerged: a 50 per cent jump in child mental health cases, including anxiety and depression, was recorded between September 2006 and June 2008.

In 2009, more high school students reported using drugs and alcohol. Young people are also less physically active and at a bigger risk of obesity and related health problems, the report said.

"When families are struggling to meet their basic needs, it's understandable that stressors increase," Goddard said. "Their parenting skills may be affected, which can result in the increase of children's mental health cases and increasing drug and alcohol use."

On the other hand, the report said, Windsor-Essex's youth crime rate is low compared to London, Hamilton and Toronto.

Despite the bleak numbers, there is hope for Windsor, Goddard said.

The report notes that one in three area residents volunteers for charitable causes and many feel a strong sense of community.

"We see the community working together more than ever and we have some unique initiatives here. So we do have hope," Goddard said. "I feel very positive that things are going to improve."

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

- More than 22 per cent of us are newcomers or recent immigrants -- higher than the provincial average.

- Youth (up to age 19) make up 26 per cent of the population -- higher than the provincial average.
- The senior population is steadily growing.
- In 2006, 16 per cent of Windsor-Essex families were led by one parent, mostly female.

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