



A New Children's Agenda?

**National Alliance of Children and Youth
Taking Stock, Toronto Think Tank
October 26, 2011**

+ Looking back 10 years

- Ten years ago, the NCA was planning a National Symposium Called Building Momentum – to be held in March 2002
- At the time, the children’s sector was actively engaged with the federal gov’t – and others – to chart a new direction for children and youth in the country
 - National Children’s Agenda (1999)
 - Early Childhood Development Initiative (2000-01)
- This was the post-SUFA era during which governments were attempting to establish new principles for federal-provincial-territorial arrangements



- 2002 was significant as it was the first year that governments were to report back on progress on ECD investments
- The Alliance was working hard to establish the importance of sector input into this process
- At the same time, the NCA was making the case for independent third party monitoring – as recognized under SUFA
- These were also the heady years of the VSI: nonprofits leaders were negotiating a new relationship with the federal gov't and lobbying hard for a new funding relationship



- There were other important accomplishments:
 - Introduction of National Child Benefit in 1998
 - Extension of paid benefit weeks for parental leave from 10 to 35 in 2000
 - Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care in 2003 and the subsequent bilateral child care agreements with the provinces and territories in 2005
- Critical work on the implementation of Convention on the Rights of the Child, work which continues as the Coalition prepares its Alternative Report due this November



- At the 2002 Symposium, NCA members were debating new strategic directions for the Alliance, including:
 - Promoting the vision of the National Children's Agenda
 - Supporting the ECDI Agreement and working to develop meaningful measures to track investments, and progress on child outcomes
 - Developing a national strategy for children 6 to 12
 - Promoting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
 - Addressing youth issue through work with the National Youth Serving Agencies

+ Window of change

- In looking at the challenges that children and youth serving agencies face today, it is instructive to look back – to see the factors that contributed to this period of innovation, this window of change
- What were the Ideas, Interests and Institutions that precipitated change? Are any of these conditions in place today?

+ Ideas

- Pioneering work by researchers such as Dan Offord (McMaster) and Fraser Mustard (CIAR) made the case for investments in early child development to the policy-making community and the importance of tracking child well-being
- Through the 1990s, there was considerable investment in research about children, especially early childhood development:
 - NLSCY and IALS
 - Demonstration projects such as Better Beginnings in ON and Human Early Learning Partnership in BC

+ Interests

- Federal and provincial gov'ts took up the issue of children:
 - Canada took a lead role in negotiating and then ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990
 - At the bureaucratic level, new departments / offices were established that brought a multi-sectoral lens to the needs of children and families (i.e., Healthy Child Manitoba)
- At the community level, organizations were lobbying for action to reduce unacceptably high rates of child and family poverty (C2000)
- Others were organizing around the needs of children with disabilities and Aboriginal children – to name a few

+ Institutions

- The labour market had finally recouped the losses of the 1991-92 recession:
 - employment levels, notably among lone-parent mothers, were rising
 - family incomes were finally rising as well
 - Relatively low interest rates fuelled consumer spending and home ownership
- Federal gov't was in a surplus position – social policy was no longer being held hostage to macroeconomic targets



- **Period of experimentation:**
 - Increased income targeting through introduction of negative style income tax policies – i.e., NCB
 - Other “make work pay” initiatives including the provision of supports such as child care and retraining and “in-work” benefits such as subsidized dental and pharmaceutical plans.

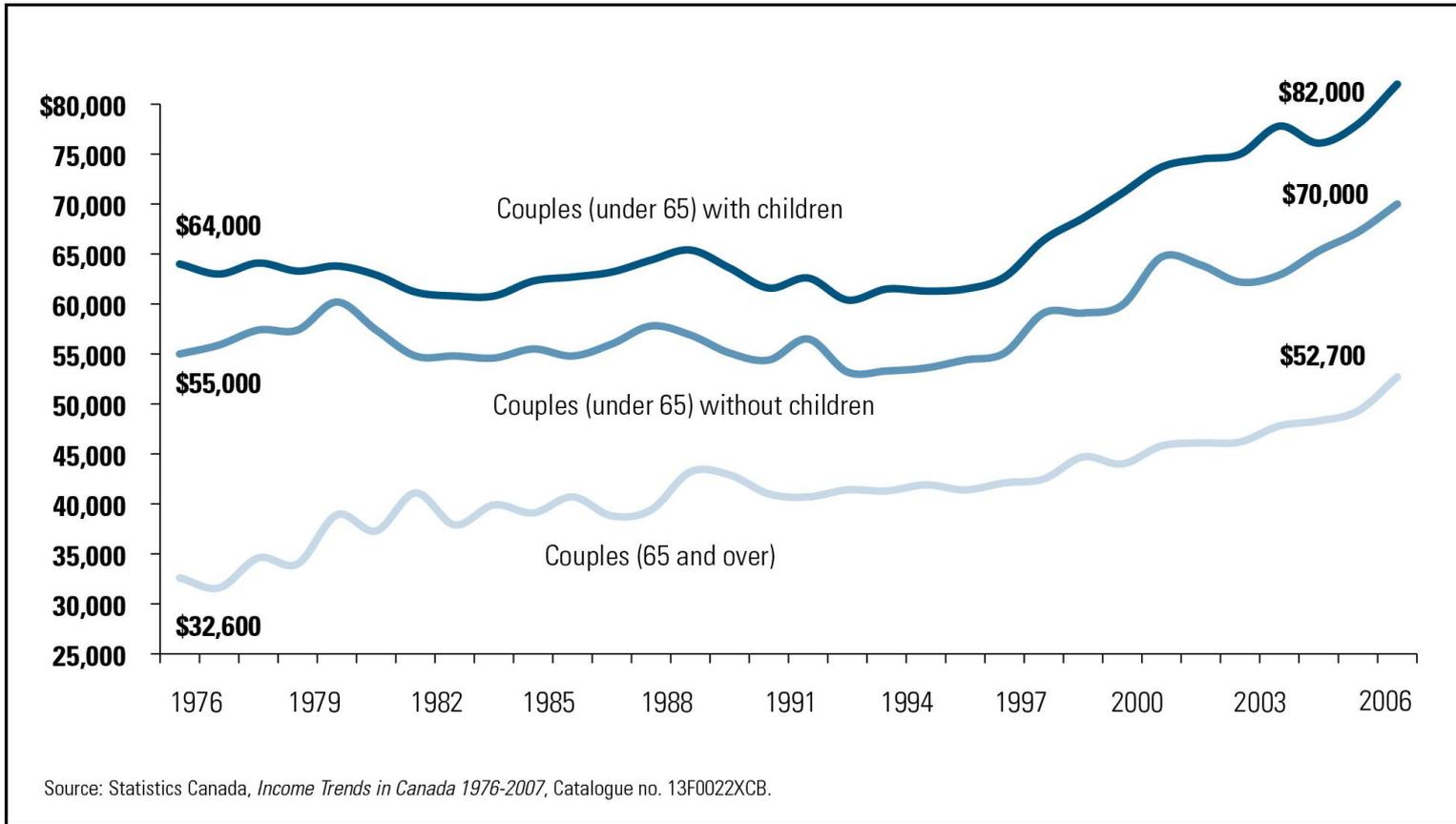
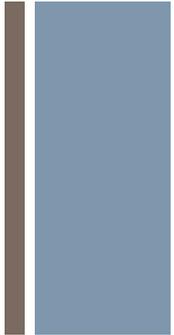
- **In Canada, children have emerged as a central focus of activity**

+ What changed?

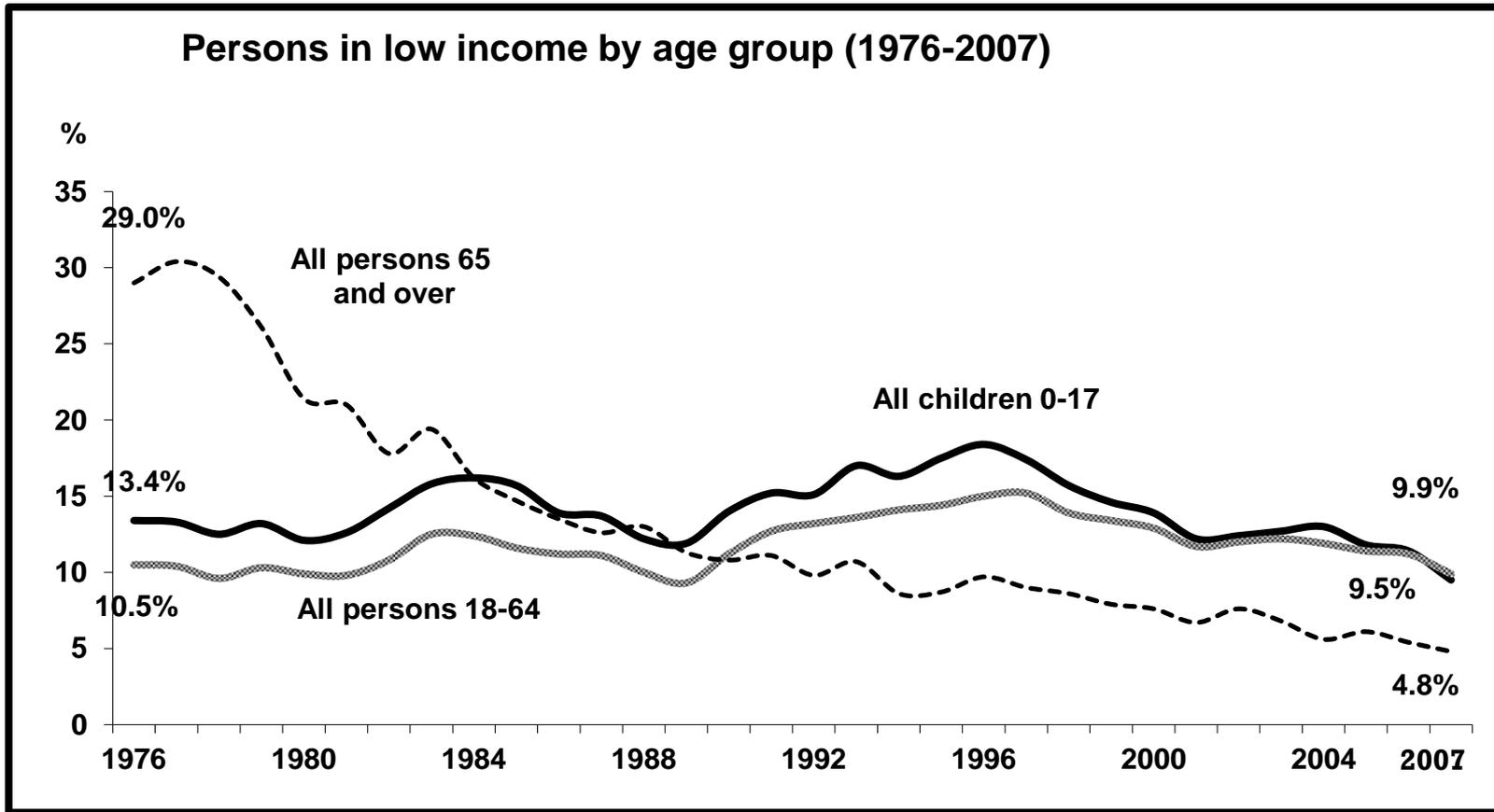
One Example: Family Economic Security



Average family incomes started to rise after a long period of stagnation



+ And poverty rates started to fall – up until the recession



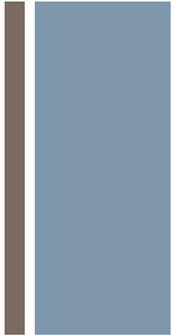
+ The NCB played an important role in reducing poverty

- According to gov't analysis, the NCB prevented over 170,000 children from living in low income (btw 1996-2005 as measured by the MBM)
- These families saw their average disposable income increase by an estimated \$2,400, or 9.5%
- For those families with children who remained in low-income situations, the NCB reduced the low-income gap by an estimated 20.4%

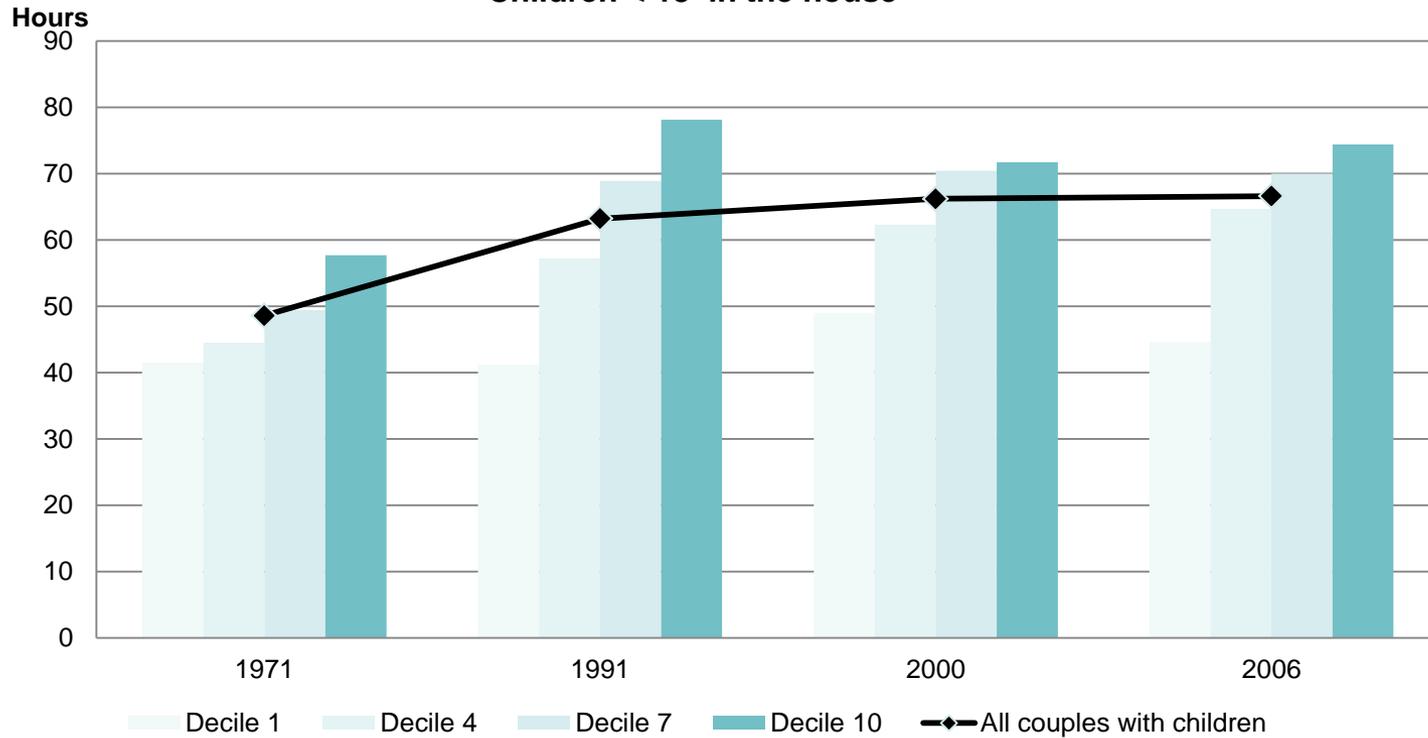
+ However ...



Income gains have been achieved mainly through increased hours of work – not wage gains

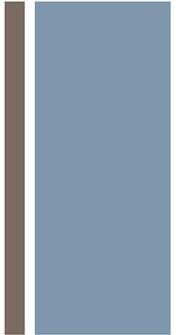


Total Weekly Paid Work Hours (Mother + Father) by Decile, Couples with Children < 18 in the house





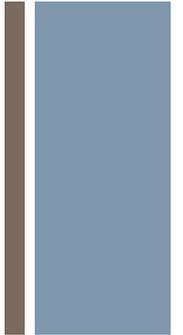
Families are working harder than ever to get ahead



- Average combined hours of employment rose from 48.6 in 1971 to 66.6 in 2006
- While higher-income families used to be more likely to have two earners, the growth of two-earner families has rippled down the income ladder.
- For example, half of all families (51%) working more than 80 hours per week were located in the bottom six deciles.



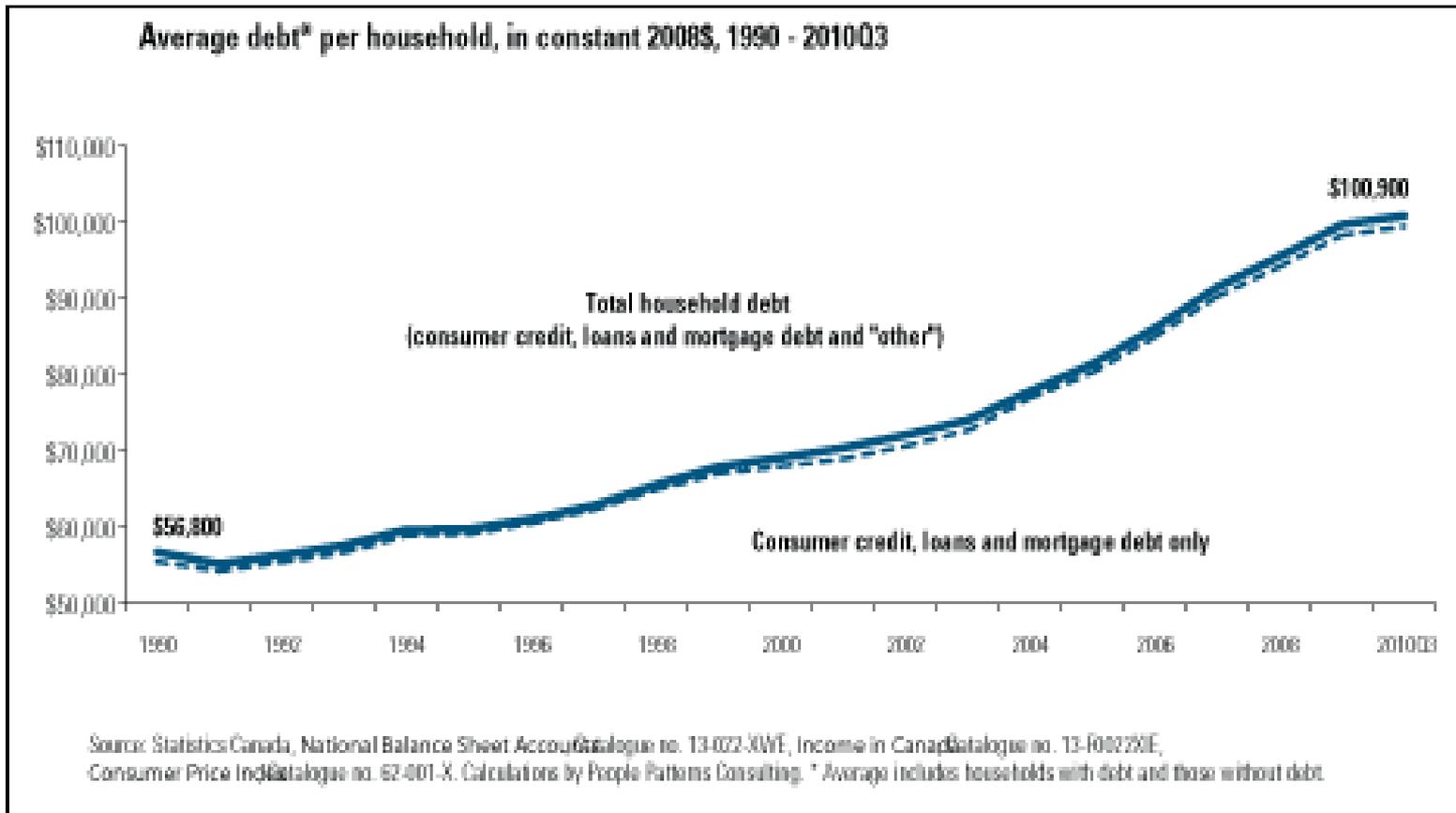
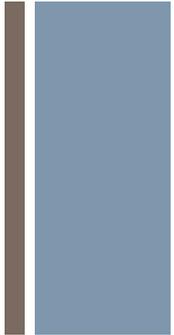
Families have also been piling up debt



- Average household debt soared to \$100,000 in 2010
- The total debt to disposable income ratio climbed to 150% – equal to the rate in the United States
- This represents a 78% advance in real terms since 1990 and a 46% hike since 2000



Average household is now six figures

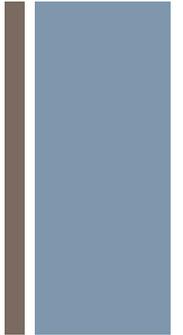


+ At the macro level ... income inequality is growing

- During the strongest period of growth in the last 30 years, a third of all income gains went to the richest 1% of Canadian tax filers
- A recent Conference Board report notes that since the mid 1990s Canada went from having a better-than-average level of inequality among OECD countries to having a worse-than-average level
- High-income families are pulling away not only from low-income families but middle-income families too: 80% of families with children earn a smaller share of income today than they did a generation ago.



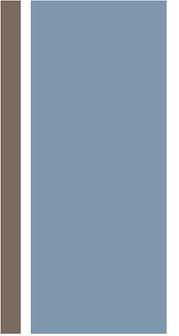
One step forward, two steps back ...



- The course of family economic security over the past decade points to the challenges we continue to face, including:
 - Growing polarization in access to – and quality of – available employment;
 - The grim economic reality for those with low levels of education;
 - Gordian knot of FPT relationships and entrenched program and policy silos;
 - The prevalence of liberal ideas about children and families where care is understood as largely a private issue.

+ A new Children's Agenda?

- Are the stars aligned for a new Children's Agenda?
- Are the conditions right to open another window of change?



+ Concluding thoughts

- At the federal level, it is fair to say that the conditions are not promising – although we may yet see a new children’s agenda of a different type – as the result of a new constellation of Ideas, Interests and Institutions:
 - Individual responsibility and family autonomy
 - Continued devolution of responsibilities to the provinces / territories
 - Predominant focus on labour force attachment and employability



- The conditions are right for community innovation: It is the community-based actors that are pioneering the collaborative approaches and social innovation necessary to achieve our vision for children
- This knowledge reinforces the importance of organizations such as NACY whose goal is to mobilize and link practice and research in support of the changing and diverse needs of children, youth and families
- It is time for another “Building Momentum” symposium

+ Thank you

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