

the complexity of the root causes of poverty. We need to understand what keeps Canadians on welfare, and we have to help them to break the cycle of poverty.

Let us first look more closely at the nature of child poverty in Canada. The problem is founded on a range of issues including lone parenthood, welfare dependency, family breakdown, poor education, and the health status of the family, to name just a few. Over the last couple of decades, the proportion of low income families fell gradually throughout the 1970s, shot up dramatically in the beginning of the 1980s, and has declined substantially since. The proportion of Canadians on low income has declined from about 23 per cent in 1969 to about 12 per cent in 1989, a significant change. However, low income still affects 3.1 million people annually in Canada, including 444,000 elderly and 837,000 children. Only now are rates as low as before the recession of the early eighties appearing.

For example, for two-parent families with children, the incidence of low income stood at 9 per cent in 1980, peaked at 12.4 per cent in 1984, and dropped to 8 per cent in 1989. For lone-parent families it stood at about 50 per cent in 1980, rose to about 56 per cent in 1984, and dropped to about 47.4 per cent in 1989. In broad terms, the data show important trends concerning child poverty, particularly since the mid-eighties. Rates have been falling steadily and, on the whole, have dropped considerably.

Let us look at these trends more closely with respect to children. In 1984, more than 1.1 million children lived in low income families. By 1989, that number had dropped to 837,000. In 1989, 300,000 fewer children lived in low income families than in 1984. The proportion of low income among children has declined from one child in five in 1984 to one child in seven in 1989. While this is still too many, it does represent an improvement of more than 25 per cent, and this is significant progress.

Those who say that the incidence of low incomes is increasing during the mandate of this government should check their facts. I am also encouraged by the heightened public interest and attention to issues relating to children. Of course many of the references are not good news items, including child abuse, child poverty, and unmet child care needs, but this interest has sparked a wide variety of individuals, voluntary agencies and businesses as well as governments to concentrate anew on the needs of children.

Supply

The recent World Summit for Children has ignited some of this interest. The summit served as a source of reflection on the plight of children, not just inside Canada but outside our country as well. Around the world, we have learned how pervasive a problem child poverty remains. Moreover, in Canada poverty has many associated dimensions, all of which serve to complicate the response. Child poverty tends to reflect family circumstances and parents' abilities to provide for their children. Single parent families headed by women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, with almost one-half of these families living below the low income measures. Lone parents are disadvantaged by having the double burden of raising their children on their own, as well as having to provide the basic economic supports, essentially one parent performing the responsibilities of two.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, I am also concerned about the large number of single-parent families that depend on provincial welfare systems. The economic and social costs are considerable when a person cannot participate fully in society. It also worries me how children will grow up in this kind of situation. It is clear we must give serious thought to ways of breaking the vicious circle that prevents Canadians from being self-sufficient and forces them to depend on welfare, and we must speak very frankly about this.

[English]

I would like to move from the statistical examination of the child poverty problem to the root causes of poverty: illiteracy, disability, lack of education, corrosive family conditions, and family break-up.

These conditions can put in train a cycle of poverty which continues through generations of families. I am talking about problems faced by children from lower income families such as higher rates of high school drop out.

Studies have shown that poorer kids tend to do substantially worse in a number of measures of school performance, like failed grades, conduct problems, hyperactivity and learning disorders. Probably as a result of this weak performance, poor kids are twice as likely to drop out of high school as other kids are.

As a consequence, many children who have grown up in poverty find themselves without sufficient education and engaged in a life-long struggle to get and to keep a