Poor Housing Threatens Children's Agenda: Report

March 1, 2001 – A lack of decent and affordable housing threatens the goals of the National Children's Agenda.

That's one conclusion of a new discussion paper from CPRN's Family Network. ***Housing Affordability: A Children's Issue***, by social policy researcher, Merrill Cooper, examines the gap between children's policy and housing policy. Cooper documents the many ways the quality of housing affects the health and well-being of children and demonstrates the human costs of our failure to supply enough affordable housing in Canada.

More than half a million Canadian households with children suffer from a lack of affordable or adequate housing today. Thousands more children are homeless. These conditions, if not addressed, will limit the success of important initiatives under the National Children's Agenda (NCA).

Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments launched the NCA in 1997. Its four goals are to promote children's health, safety and security, success at learning, and social engagement and responsibility.

The quality of housing, in spite of its impact on all four goals, has not been a part of NCA deliberations to date.

"It's a serious weakness," says Jane Jenson, Director of CPRN's Family Network.

CPRN research identifies three enabling conditions that lead to positive outcomes for children:

- adequate income
- effective parenting, and
- supportive communities

"A lack of adequate, affordable housing undermines all three," says Jenson.

"It means low-income families are forced into sub-quality housing, or have less income to devote to other essentials of healthy child development, including food. Families in these situations experience acute stress. Parenting suffers and children are frequently the victims. As for supportive communities, poor housing almost certainly means problem neighbourhoods."

Inadequate housing is also associated with poorer health, lower educational attainment, a more hazardous environment, and negative social behaviour in children.

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In spite of the evidence, the federal and most provincial governments have drastically cut their support for subsidized housing over the past decade or so. Contrary to some predictions, the private sector has not filled the void.

The construction of publicly subsidized housing in Canada fell from almost 10,000 units in 1989 to only 1,500 in 1998. (See Table 1, attached) At the same time, the number of households lacking adequate housing increased from 1.16 million in 1991 to 1.4 million in 1996.

“Families and children have paid the price,” says Jenson. “The connection between adequate, reasonably priced housing and children’s well-being is clear. Children’s housing issues must be addressed if we are to achieve the goals of the NCA.”

Jenson argues that the NCA framework provides a unique opportunity for governments to develop a cross-jurisdictional strategy to redress the housing problems of families with children.

Part of the solution will involve new policies and incentives to encourage private sector investment. But private investment will not be enough. Significant new public investment will also be required to ensure a supply of affordable and good quality housing.

Still, housing is only one of many tools to ensure good outcomes for children. Investments in community supports and programs designed to address income problems are also essential.

“Nevertheless, what this research shows,” says CPRN’s President, Judith Maxwell, “is that progress on some indicator of “housing need” will be an essential measure of our success in achieving positive outcomes for all of Canada’s children.”

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