



Ontario must correct course after 50 years of stalling on poverty and human rights

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About Maytree

Maytree is a Toronto-based human rights organization dedicated to advancing systemic solutions to poverty. We examine the systems that create poverty and advocate for ways forward that are grounded in human rights.

For 50 years, Ontario has failed to uphold its human rights obligations

Fifty years ago, in 1976, Canada acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights after securing the explicit support of the provinces, including Ontario.¹ The Covenant, which is legally binding on all provincial and municipal governments in Canada, requires that Ontario use its maximum available resources to progressively realize the right to an adequate standard of living.²

The right to an adequate standard of living means that everyone has the right to the necessities required to live with dignity. This standard includes other human rights, such as the right to food, the right to adequate housing, and the right to social security. It applies to every person regardless of sex, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, or other identity status.

By committing to the Covenant, Ontario agreed to take continuous, proactive action towards helping every person in Ontario achieve an adequate standard of living. Furthermore, it agreed to do this as quickly as possible by using the maximum resources it has available across society.

Over the last five decades, Ontario has become about 50 per cent wealthier on a per-capita basis, as measured by our GDP. Yet poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity are not only still with us – they are worsening at an alarming rate.

The implication is clear: Ontario has failed, and continues to fail, in its obligation to ensure that no one is left behind.

1 For a detailed discussion of the provinces' role in ratification of international human rights covenants, see: P. LeBlanc. (1994). Canada's Experience with United Nations Human Rights Treaties. *The Agendas for Change Series: Perspectives on UN Reform* No. 3.

2 United Nations. (n.d.). *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

Ontario must change course. It cannot continue to break this international commitment and fail to protect its people from poverty. In 2026, we are again recommending that Ontario focus its budget on progressing towards an adequate standard of living for all Ontarians. Given the urgency of the situation, we ask that the provincial government use all the tools at its disposal to fulfill its human rights obligations, including its fiscal, legislative, and regulatory means.

Summary of Maytree's recommendations

1. To uphold the right to an adequate standard of living: Invest in income supports that will prevent poverty or help people escape poverty.

- Commit to a multi-year plan to raise Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits to adequate levels.
- Provide the maximum shelter benefit to every social assistance recipient, without requiring them to provide proof of shelter costs.

2. To uphold the right to adequate housing: Prevent evictions, protect renters, and invest in affordable housing.

- Protect security of tenure for renters by extending rent control to all rental units, ending vacancy decontrol, and restoring fair hearings and appeal rights at the Landlord and Tenant Board.
- Make sustained, multi-year investments in deeply affordable and supportive housing.
- Increase funding for the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) to support more people who need help to rent in the private market.

More Ontarians are experiencing poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness

Many people are struggling to keep up with the high cost of living. The pressure of rising costs, combined with inadequate incomes, is resulting in more Ontarians struggling to meet their basic needs.

- **Poverty is rising:** During the period of the 2020-2025 Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, poverty rose from the pre-pandemic rate of 10.9 per

cent in 2019 to 11.1 per cent in 2023 (the latest data available).³ In contrast, for the rest of Canada, the poverty rate decreased from 9.9 to 9.5 per cent over the same period. This widening gap between Ontario and the rest of Canada suggests that provincial policy choices are playing an increasingly important role in shaping poverty outcomes.

- **Food insecurity is rising:** Since 2019, food insecurity among Ontarians has grown significantly, with elevated rates of moderate to severe food insecurity experienced by Indigenous and Black people, and low-income households.⁴ In 2024-2025, more than one million Ontarians accessed food banks.⁵
- **Homelessness is rising:** Homelessness in Ontario has reached unprecedented levels, driven by the combined pressures of inadequate incomes and high rents. In 2025, an estimated 85,000 people in Ontario experienced homelessness – an increase of 7.8 per cent from the previous year.⁶ Nationally coordinated Point-in-Time Counts of Homelessness find that having insufficient income is the most reported reason that a person loses their housing.^{7,8}

The Ontario government’s solution to these challenges has almost exclusively centred on boosting employment, though largely without success. Furthermore, employment alone is not enough to prevent poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness. As housing and living costs continue to outpace incomes, more working households are being pushed into financial precarity. This underscores

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- 3 White, A. (2025). *Poverty rising: How Ontario’s strategy failed and what must come next*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-rising-How-Ontarios-strategy-failed-and-what-must-come-next.pdf>
 - 4 Orr, S., Weerasinghe, A., Kennedy, L., King, B., Prange, M. E., & Reyce, E. (2025). Food insecurity & food affordability in Ontario. *Public Health Ontario*. King’s Printer for Ontario. https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/Documents/F/25/food-insecurity-food-affordability.pdf?rev=44f83bfaac294df28af279dd38c86df9&sc_lang=en&hash=9BC8B8D46B4779F714F9D3BB4F90D166
 - 5 Feed Ontario. (2025). *Hunger Report 2025*. https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/FEED_HungerReport25_Digital.pdf
 - 6 Donaldson, J., Kandyba, L., Wang, D. (2026). *Municipalities Under Pressure One Year Later: An Update on the Human and Financial Cost of Ontario’s Homelessness Crisis*. HelpSeeker. <https://www.helpseeker.org/reports/municipalities-under-pressure-one-year-later>
 - 7 Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. (2024). *Everyone Counts 2020-2022 – Results from the Third Nationally Coordinated Point-in-Time Counts of Homelessness in Canada*. <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/pit-counts-dp-2020-2022-results-resultats-eng.html>
 - 8 Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. (2025). *Everyone Counts 2024 – Highlights Report Part 1 – Enumeration of Homelessness*. <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/pit-counts-dp-2024-highlights-p1-eng.html>

how poverty is driven by structural conditions – not a lack of individual effort – and cannot be addressed through employment-focused strategies alone.

In Budget 2026, Maytree urges the government to significantly increase social assistance and other income supports so that lower-income Ontarians can keep up with rising living costs. The budget should also strengthen protections for renters, invest in affordable housing, and better support people experiencing homelessness. And to ensure that people with the greatest needs are prioritized, a human rights-based approach must guide how income and housing policies are designed and funded.

1. Invest in income supports that will prevent poverty or help people escape poverty.

For years, the Ontario government has asserted that the only path forward for people with low incomes is employment, yet its efforts to increase the number of exits from social assistance to employment have yet to bear fruit. This is because the employment-first framing does not reflect reality. Ongoing economic pressures – including trade disruption, tariffs, global instability, and rising living costs – are increasing financial insecurity across Ontario.⁹ Furthermore, we know that the largest share of people living in poverty in Canada are already working or live in working households, exceeding the number in social assistance-reliant or senior-led households.¹⁰ Poverty today is driven by many structural conditions, only one of which is labour market participation.

While employment supports are one of many ingredients necessary to reduce poverty, evaluations of Ontario’s Integrated Employment Services (IES) system show that social assistance recipients are being left behind in a precarious labour market.¹¹ Unfortunately, the government has failed to act on what its own data shows: Without adequate housing, income support, and other stabilizing services, employment remains out of reach for many people accessing social assistance.¹²

9 Donaldson, J., Kandyba, L., Wang, D. (2026).

10 Petit, G. (2025). *Poverty segmentation: The challenge of the “working poor.”* Maytree. <https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-segmentation-The-challenge-of-the-working-poor.pdf>

11 Caballero, M. & White, A. (2025). *Learning from our mistakes: Ontario needs more than an employment strategy to address rising poverty.* Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/learning-from-our-mistakes-ontario-needs-more-than-an-employment-strategy-to-address-rising-poverty/>

12 Caballero, M. & White, A. (2025). *Underserved: Ontario’s employment services are failing those in greatest need.* Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/underserved-ontarios-employment-services-are-failing-those-in-greatest-need/>

Rather than strengthening income supports to reflect these realities, since 2018, the government has moved in the opposite direction. Even as Ontario grows wealthier, relative spending on OW and ODSP has declined.¹³ Maytree’s analysis of Ontario welfare incomes in 2024 found that all households examined had incomes below both the poverty and deep poverty lines – a pattern that has persisted for decades.¹⁴ Even though the provincial government increased ODSP benefits in 2022 and indexed them to inflation thereafter, benefits are still far below what people with disabilities need to live a life with dignity.

Perhaps the most visible impact of ignoring income supports is the growing homelessness crisis. The government continues to set OW and ODSP rates at levels that are insufficient to secure housing in today’s market. Rents have risen sharply in recent years, leaving recipients structurally priced out of housing and unable to meet their basic needs.¹⁵

When benefits are not enough to cover rent, people losing their homes is a predictable outcome, regardless of whether those people are employed.¹⁶ In August 2025, the government’s own internal documents estimated that about 31,105 social assistance beneficiaries were unhoused, up from 18,286 in August 2019.¹⁷ What’s more, outdated shelter rules reduce benefits for people who are unhoused, further undermining their ability to secure housing.¹⁸

Taken together, the evidence shows that Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy has not met its stated goal because it has ignored the role that the income security system plays in addressing poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness. Starting in Budget 2026, the provincial government must commit to a new human rights-based

13 White, A. & Caballero, M. (2025). *Ontario government’s 2025 budget fails to meet the moment*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/ontario-governments-2025-budget-fails-to-meet-the-moment/>

14 Laidley, J. & Oliveira, T. (2025). *Welfare in Canada, 2024*. Maytree. https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Welfare_in_Canada_2024.pdf.

15 Balata, L. (2026). *Designed to fail: How Ontario’s income security policies create and perpetuate homelessness*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/designed-to-fail-how-ontarios-income-security-policies-create-and-perpetuate-homelessness/>

16 DiBellonia, S. & White, A. (2025). *Why income support is good housing policy: A new case for a permanent housing benefit in Canada*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/why-income-support-is-good-housing-policy-a-new-case-for-a-permanent-housing-benefit-in-canada/>

17 Data received from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services in November 2025 and available for download on the Maytree website. <https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Ontario-Works-and-ODSP-Beneficiaries-Experiencing-Homelessness-January-2019-August-2025.xlsx>

18 Balata, L. (2026).

approach using the maximum available resources to progressively realize the right to an adequate standard of living. Absent meaningful reform, Ontario's social assistance system will continue to drive poverty.

2. Prevent evictions, protect renters, and invest in affordable housing.

Provincial actions over the past few years have moved many people even further away from finding and maintaining adequate housing. For example, the Safer Municipalities Act, 2025, imposes punitive measures on people experiencing homelessness in an effort to evict them from encampments, rather than providing them with support for housing. As noted by the Encampment Justice Coalition, which represents community organizations across the province, this approach violates people's fundamental human rights, has been proven to cause harm, and is not supported by the public.¹⁹

More recently, the Province passed the Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, 2025 (Bill 60), which will allow landlords to speed up evictions, limit appeals from renters to the Landlord and Tenant Board, and, ultimately, weaken tenant rights.²⁰ At the same time, gaps in Ontario's rent regulations undermine affordability: Rent increase limits apply only to units first occupied before November 2018, and vacancy decontrol allows unlimited rent hikes between tenancies. These policies can result in higher and unaffordable rents for new tenants while also limiting mobility for existing renters and deepening housing instability.

Meanwhile, provincial spending on housing and homelessness is far too low to make a meaningful difference for those who need urgent support. While investments in deeply affordable and supportive housing are essential to reducing chronic homelessness, current funding is largely used to respond *after* people are already unhoused rather than to prevent people from losing their home in the first place.²¹ In 2024, nearly two-thirds of homelessness funding went to emergency shelters, treating the symptom but not the problem. Adjusted for inflation, spending has remained largely flat for a decade, with temporary pandemic-era

19 Encampment Justice Coalition. (2025). <https://womenshomelessness.ca/wp-content/uploads/Encampment-Justice-Coalition-%E2%80%94-Letter-to-the-Premier.pdf>.

20 White, A. (2025). *Ontario's poverty consultation is smoke and mirrors – we need to take back the stage*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/ontarios-poverty-consultation-is-smoke-and-mirrors-we-need-to-take-back-the-stage/>

21 White, A. (2025). *Provincial spending on housing and homelessness in Ontario*. Maytree. <https://maytree.com/publications/provincial-spending-on-housing-and-homelessness-in-ontario/>

increases in homelessness funding rolled back even as demand for these services continue to rise.

Social housing, where rents are based on a household's ability to pay, is essential to advancing the right to housing for people with low incomes, yet Ontario does not have enough supply of it. In 2025, it is estimated that more than 300,000 households were on the wait-list for social housing in Ontario, up 6.6 per cent from the previous year. The average wait time is more than five years, with some households waiting as long as 16 years. In fact, the number of households waiting for social housing is roughly 70 per cent higher than the number of social housing units reported in 2024.²² Supportive housing is also in short supply, despite its critical role in housing people with complex mental health, substance use, and physical health needs that often intensify through prolonged homelessness. To address these gaps and achieve functional zero homelessness, a report from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, and the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association estimates that Ontario would need to invest roughly \$11 billion over ten years to deliver more than 75,000 new social and supportive housing units, alongside prevention and capital funding.²³ To address the crisis in supportive housing alone, Ontario needs another 40,000 units by 2036.

While these investments are necessary, we also know that expanding the stock of social and supportive housing is a long-term policy goal. The reality is that it could take years or decades to build enough housing for the number of people who need it. In the meantime, income is the only thing that pays for rent in the private market, where rents are often much higher than what people living on fixed incomes can afford.

In addition to social assistance, the provincial government has another policy tool that it can use to address this issue: the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB). Greater investments in the COHB are needed to extend it to more people, especially those who are unhoused living in larger urban areas.²⁴ Although we recognize that Ontario shares responsibility for the COHB with the federal government,

22 Donaldson, J., Kandyba, L., Wang, D. (2026).

23 Donaldson, J., Wang, D., Escamilla, C., & Turner, A. (2025). *Municipalities Under Pressure: The Human and Financial Cost of Ontario's Homelessness Crisis*. HelpSeeker. <https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2025/2025-01-08-EndingChronicHomelessnessinOntario.pdf>.

24 Gibson, V. (2026, January 23). City expects to help two-thirds fewer homeless households with private-market rent subsidies this year. *Toronto Star*. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/city-expects-to-help-two-thirds-fewer-homeless-households-with-private-market-rent-subsidies-this/article_a50dabba-285d-4caf-a945-5da7c1c98d74.html.

the provincial government's leadership is needed. Without it, municipalities are shouldered with both the fiscal and administrative burden of unmet demand.

The 2026 Ontario budget must uphold the right to adequate housing by strengthening tenant protections and committing to a multi-year investment in deeply affordable and supportive housing. We also recommend that the Ontario government increase funding for the COHB so that more people can access the program.

The way forward

Half a century after committing to uphold the human right to an adequate standard of living, it is far past time that Ontario adopted a human right-based approach to budgeting. This should be grounded in a commitment to the progressive realization of economic and social rights; the harnessing of the maximum available resources in our society toward these ends; and the adoption of the core human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination, meaningful participation and inclusion, and transparency and accountability.

Specifically, Maytree urges the Ontario government to use the 2026 Ontario budget to immediately address rising rates of poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness through substantial new investments in income supports, as well as a plan to build the deeply affordable and supportive housing stock we desperately need.