

CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

# 'An exodus of families': Toronto's decline in children should be an election issue

We are all familiar with dystopian narratives of societies where children are scarce. Toronto is in danger of becoming such a place.

By **Josh Fullan** Contributor

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Here is a civic trend that should jolt you awake, whether or not you're plugged into Toronto's sleepy election season: the city is losing children. Last year's census was the fifth in a row that recorded growth in Toronto's population while its [youngest cohort declined](#), both as a total and a percentage of everyone. In round numbers, the city has nearly 313,000 more people than it did in 2001, yet 50,000 fewer children under age 15.

Behind this decline are broader demographic patterns and specific policy failures. As Ontario's population ages and relies on immigration for expansion, children represent a shrinking percentage of the overall total. Some critics have summed up the failures in a single word: housing. As in there simply isn't enough for families, neither in suitable forms nor at attainable prices. Economist [Mike Moffatt's analysis](#) shows how young families have scattered with a whiff of grape juice from the GTA to other parts of Ontario in search of homes, driving up their cost in markets you wouldn't expect.

Speaking of markets, though they can find creative ways to provide opportunities for families with children to locate or stay in competitive urban centres like Toronto, they have no moral responsibility to do so. Governments, on the other hand, do. We can see by peering beyond the Toronto navel that other jurisdictions take this responsibility seriously. After being labelled as the worst city in the Netherlands to raise a child, officials in [Rotterdam initiated a phased plan](#) over a dozen years to reverse its family flight through a combination of initiatives, including more child-friendly streets, housing, parks, public spaces and ways to get around.

The Rotterdam plan speaks to the fact that an exodus of families from a city is a complex problem with more than a single cause; it thus requires strategic, linked solutions sustained over decades. Toronto's current housing crisis certainly looms large, but there are a multitude of other quality-of-life questions, swirling in vortexes of emotion, that push and pull at families about where to locate. Can I get my kids to school without a car? Can they play outside safely? Is there a park within walking distance of our apartment? Do my kids feel welcome there?

A stinging irony is that many children actually prefer compact, urban places compared to suburbs or exurbs. Based on our work at [Maximum City with children evaluating their neighbourhoods](#), kids consistently rank dense, walkable places with lots of stuff — like Toronto's core — highest. But if you zero in on Toronto's two downtown districts, children represent less than eight per cent of people who live there.

Some global projections anticipate that 60 per cent of urban dwellers in developing countries will be under 18 by the end of this decade, presenting both an enormous opportunity and staggering challenge for places that don't have the infrastructure and wealth

— however enclaved it is becoming — of Toronto. But imagine the social and economic potential of a majority of your city’s residents having a long civic future to work for, and bringing the vitality of youth to the job. Toronto is largely run by a ripening establishment with a foot in the grave and a fist clenched around the status quo. They’re not interested in change because the city has been working well for them and their coterie for half a century or more.

We are all familiar with dystopian narratives of societies where children are scarce. Toronto is in danger of becoming such a place. Yet children’s issues continue to get no play in municipal elections. Children can’t vote, they don’t pay taxes, and unfortunately they’re not invited to public meetings about new housing on their block.

Here is a direct values-based question for campaigners to ask themselves and residents before election day: do you want to live in a city that is consistently and increasingly hostile to children thriving?

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*Josh Fullan is director of [Maximum City](#).*

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