

Fewer and fewer young children are living in Toronto and the GTA. That could affect us all

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FULL TEXT



Though Midhat Rizwan had grown up in Mississauga, and felt deeply connected to the community and culture of

one of the largest cities in Canada, it's not where she could afford to raise her three young children.

"We wanted them to have ... just a room," she said. "And then a play area and a backyard. And we weren't able to find anything like that in the GTA at all, on our income. And it's a decent income, I wouldn't say we're poor."

So Rizwan and her husband, Absan Abdulhafedh, said goodbye to Mississauga and purchased a townhouse in Thorold, Ont., south of St. Catharines, last summer. She said now the family can be homeowners while being able to afford gas, groceries and clothes.

"We are a visible minority so we were kind of worried about our kids not fitting in, but people here are super welcoming," she said, adding her children, aged seven, five and three, "have a backyard, they have their own room. They are happy."

Toronto and the GTA have seen a steady decline in the population of young children in the area over the last two decades, a trend that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. And experts say that could have adverse effects for the city as a whole.

New data released by Statistics Canada earlier this month showed the population of children age four and under in Toronto specifically had declined by close to 16,000 people between 2002 and 2021, which is an 10.85 per cent drop. Meanwhile, the city increased its population by about 12 per cent, close to 372,000.

As well, the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA), which encompasses Toronto, Peel, York and Halton, saw a slight drop per year (less than a 10th of a percentage) in its under-five population, with a more stark drop in 2021 of 2.5 per cent. The overall CMA population rose by 23 per cent since 2002.

Meanwhile, surrounding CMAs are gaining children aged four and under, including Kitchener-Waterloo-Barrie (39 per cent increase in 2021 compared to the previous year), Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula (33.5 per cent), London (44 per cent), Kingston-Pembroke (close to 47.8 per cent) and Muskoka-Kawartha (47.7 per cent).

Experts point to the increasing cost of living in Toronto and the surrounding area and stagnant wages as one reason for the decline in children, with some young families choosing to migrate elsewhere in the province. A lack of housing and the lower fertility rate that Toronto has experienced over the last decade could also be contributing to the declining population of very young children, they said.

It's a trend they say could impact the social fabric of cities that no longer cater to families, as a temporary population may not want to invest in improving the city and ensuring it remains vibrant. Only the very wealthy will be able to make a city like Toronto a permanent home, demographers and social policy experts told the Star.

"Families are poorer, the cost of living is higher, and families are being priced out. And the sorts of places they want to live are becoming more scarce," said Kwame McKenzie, CEO of the Wellesley Institute, a health equity policy group.

The overall income for a family of four to live well in the GTA, meaning they can maintain good physical, mental and socio-economic health, is between \$103,032 and \$136,428 after tax, according to a 2021 report from the Wellesley Institute.

But the median family income in Toronto is about \$85,000, said McKenzie.

"And therefore the price for their particular type of three-bedroom apartment or family house, those things are very, very expensive," he said. "And at the same time the amount of money they have has been decreasing. So why would a family move into Toronto?" said McKenzie.

Rizwan and her husband, who both work in IT, had tried to make it work in the GTA. They were rejected from rentals as landlords wanted to see a full dual income, and Rizwan was working part time to care for her kids, and they had been living in a basement apartment.

Then the couple thought they'd saved enough to buy. They searched for two years, but bidding wars made it difficult to find a place in the GTA, she said.

However, if the family could afford to move back to the Toronto-area they'd jump at it, she said. They are already driving back fairly frequently to see family and friends.

"I definitely miss the stores we went to, the mosque we went to. I definitely miss everything, the whole culture," said Rizwan.

Ontario's population is growing and will continue to grow due to immigration, said McKenzie. Toronto is also expanding —but it's getting older, he explained, as boomers age.

Kate Choi, a family demographer and sociology professor at the University of Western Ontario, said a decrease in fertility rates should also be considered when understanding why the child population has dropped.

"This of course is part of a general trend in developed countries, where we are seeing delays in marriages and delays in fertility, which often translates to fewer children. And fewer babies five years ago means fewer children between the ages of zero to four," said Choi.

Canada's fertility rate has been in decline for several years, and fell to its lowest at 1.47 births per woman in 2019. In Toronto, the 2019 rate was 1.31. Increased education of women and availability of adequate sex-education is a factor, and families may be planning to have fewer children.

Canada's population will continue to grow due to immigration, both Choi and McKenzie noted. However, a drop in immigration early in the pandemic may have also contributed to a lower under-four population as new immigrants tend to wait until they feel settled to have children, Choi said.

But Choi added it's possible some people are having fewer children due to the high economic costs associated with kids, including child care costs, rather than simply wanting a smaller family.

For those choosing to move from the city, Choi said, "In terms of the timing of when this move happens, it may very well be the case that they choose to move before their child starts preschool or kindergarten, so they can have a more stable environment."

For Heather Hawthorne, increased affordability challenges made worse by the pandemic led her and her husband to move from Scarborough with their two daughters under age five to more affordable housing in Kingston. Hawthorne, who has multiple sclerosis, has faced a deterioration of her health and can no longer work. Her husband was laid off due to COVID-19 in spring 2020 from his job in aviation and has not been able to find employment since.

"It was very inconvenient for me because all my doctors appointments are in Toronto. So every time I have an appointment, which is often, we have to drive all the way back," she said, adding that both she and her husband were born and raised in Toronto.

"It's been extremely overwhelming, I've had huge ups and downs," she said.

She identifies as Métis, and the Métis Nation of Ontario has provided the family with temporary funding for housing while her husband looks for work.

"For my three-year-old, (the move) was very hard for her. She kept saying she wanted to go back, she misses her friends from her daycare that she was in before," said Hawthorne.

With their loss of income, they were no longer able to afford their Toronto apartment. But if their finances become more stable, she's fears moving back, and uprooting the family again, would be tougher on her kids than staying in their new city.

"This is very common in (Kingston). A lot of young families are coming here," she said. "But it's kind of hard to make meetups with COVID."

McKenzie said Toronto needs to change, or it'll be at risk of becoming a city made up of too many office buildings and one-bedroom condos that serve a rotating population or investors outside of Canada.

The city currently appeals to young adults who are working and can enjoy the bar and restaurant scene while living in a small space, McKenzie explained.

"Unless we start making sure that developers are building family accommodation, unless the governments start working out how they can change the culture so families actually want to live in apartments ... unless we change and make rent more affordable ... it's going to be very difficult to attract families," he explained.

The city is currently a conveyor belt, where young people stay until they want to have a family and then leave, he said.

"It becomes a sort of waiting room. The problem is, it's fairly difficult to run a city that way because a lot of the things we do in cities, we do for the society of a city," he said. "If people are not investing permanently in a place ...

they see it as a very different thing.”

Residents will not be committed to paying taxes and investing in making a city a better place to be, to ensure it’s vibrant, if their time there is only temporary, said McKenzie.

“The social fabric that keeps us all together ... that makes a place more wealthy, where people support the society, that erodes fairly quickly,” he said.

For cities to survive, and thrive, and not become empty working districts, they cannot only be housing a transient population, he said.

“I think more and more people are going to move out of Toronto, unless Toronto significantly changes,” he said.

Olivia Bowden is a Toronto-based staff reporter for the Star. Reach her via email: obowden@thestar.ca

CAPTION: Midhat Rizwan (back) and Absan Abdulhafedh with their children, Safa (centre), Aya (left) and Dina. They moved to Thorold, Ont., from Mississauga in July last year to find something more affordable.

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