

One in five N.B. children living in poverty: report

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Close to one in every five children in New Brunswick lives in poverty, a new report states, giving the province the fourth-highest child poverty rate in Canada.

New Brunswick's child poverty report card, released Wednesday by the Saint John-based Human Development Council, based those findings on tax filings from 2019, the most recent data available.

"We think it's quite possible that the current rate of child poverty is even higher," said Heather Atcheson, a researcher with the organization. "This is pre-pandemic data that we're working with."

People living below the poverty line have to make hard choices, she said. "A parent might decide to go without food if it means that they can continue to feed their children."

"Inequality has a huge impact on social inclusion and a sense of belonging in the community," Atcheson said. Examples include not being able to afford to enrol kids in sports or take family trips to the movies, activities many take for granted.

The report says poverty can impose "toxic stress" on children, altering the makeup of the brain and contributing to poor health outcomes including addiction.

The report calls for policy measures from the provincial government including rent control and scheduled increases in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour. A living wage in 2021 would be \$18.65 in Moncton, \$19.75 in Saint John, \$21.20 in Fredericton and \$17.50 in Bathurst, research by the organization indicates.

Recommendations for the federal government include shutting down tax havens and other policies that aim to redistribute income through taxation.



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HEATHER ATCHESON



The study defines a family as low-income if their after-tax income, adjusted for household size, is less than half of the median. Median refers to a midpoint between the higher and lower halves of a data sample.

The child poverty rate in New Brunswick reached 21.7 per cent in 2019, a decrease of 0.1 per cent compared to the previous year.

That means 30,190 children were living in poverty, the report states. The national child poverty rate was 17.7 per cent.

More people across the country are using food banks because of factors including higher food prices and housing costs, the report states, citing a report by Food Banks Canada.

"A total of 20,408 visits to food banks in New Brunswick was reported over

the last year, and 6,544 of those visits involved children," the report states.

Teachers have identified hunger as a problem among school children, according to Heather Stordy, community response coordinator with the Anglophone East School District.

Hot lunch programs exist in schools, but not on a daily basis, she said. The district and community partners are advocating for a daily program, potentially funded by the provincial or federal government and provided by local community partners.

Starting in March 2020, after COVID-19 resulted in lockdowns, the school district worked with social agencies to deliver about 700 student bag lunches to 19 locations in and around Moncton, Riverview, Salisbury and Dieppe, Stordy said.

A number of schools also launched their own food outreach programs during the recent labour conflict that resulted in two weeks of school closures, she added. "When schools close, the need doesn't go away."

The study also indicates disparity within the province.

For example, child poverty in the City of Moncton reached 26 per cent, according to 2016 census data, compared to 12 per cent in Dieppe and 15.5 per cent in Riverview, and more than 30 per cent in Campbellton, Bathurst and Saint John.

Atcheson, whose background is in social work, stressed that poverty stems from systemic factors, as opposed to personal choices, and she cautioned against blaming people struggling with poverty.

In particular, the report notes Indigenous communities have some of the highest child poverty rates in the province, including 61.1 per cent in Kingsclear First Nation, 55.3 per cent at Esogenôpetitj (Burnt Church), 50 per cent at Natoaganeg (Eel Ground), also based on 2016 census data.