

## Raise wage floor to lower child poverty

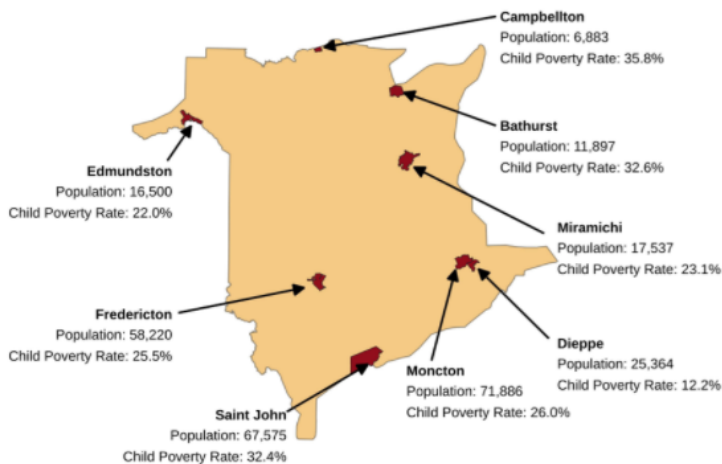
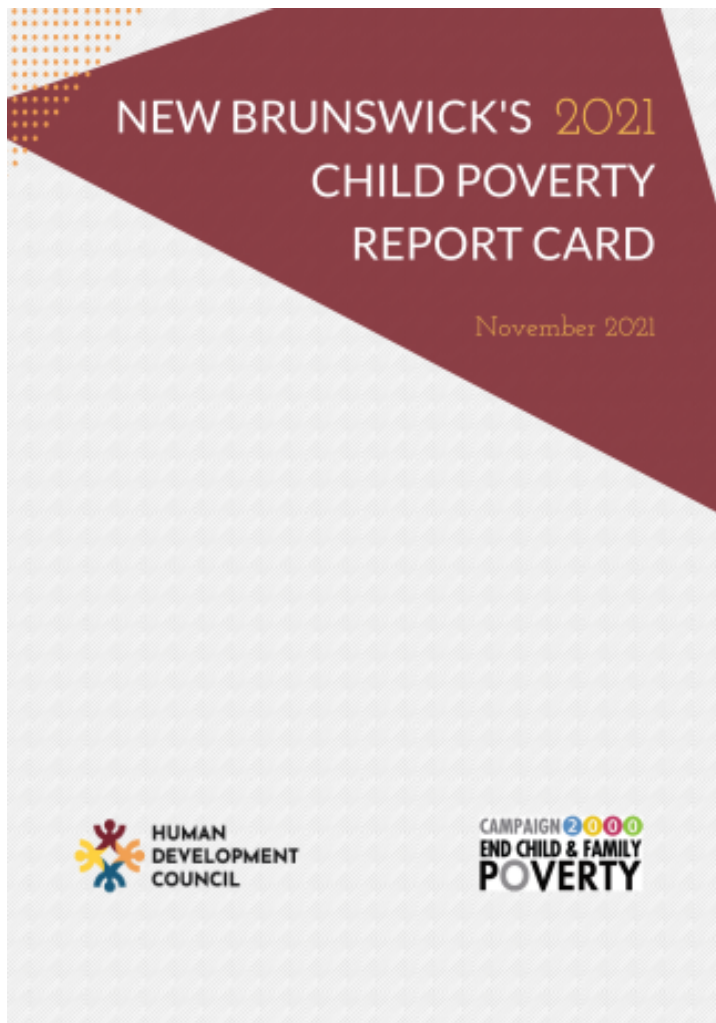


Figure shows population and child poverty rates in New Brunswick cities as collected by the Saint John-based Human Development Council.

Photo: Submitted



A startling new report by the Human Development Council found nearly one in every five children in New Brunswick is living in poverty. Given the pandemic, researchers believe that number may be even higher.

This ought to worry our government officials, given the knock-on effects of childhood poverty for health, social and economic outcomes. The council's recommendation of an increased minimum wage to help address this problem is a good one.

Coupled with targeted changes to inefficient existing social programs, an increased minimum wage could prove essential to reducing child poverty.

The data that underpins the council's report is from tax filings for 2019. The overall child poverty rate for the province, according to the organization, is 21.7 per cent, which is essentially unchanged from the previous year.

The group's definition of a "low-income family" is if their after-tax income is less than half of the median, after adjusting for household size. This may not be the perfect measurement of poverty, but it does show that wages are not keeping adequate pace with the cost of running a household. It's reasonable to assume the pandemic caused significant economic upheaval as well, though some families may have been briefly better off with the outpouring of financial support from the federal government.

In turn, however, federal spending is a contributing factor to rising costs for essentials like food and energy as winter comes. And in any case, those supports were never intended as a permanent fix to poverty. It's therefore especially important that governments take strong action to bolster wages for those at the bottom of the earnings ladder.

A substantial boost to the minimum wage is clearly needed. The province should move on this quickly to ensure projected cost increases do not sink more households into poverty. The Human Development Council calls for a minimum wage of \$15 an hour, but their research also has suggested a "living wage" would be more than that: \$18.65 in Moncton, \$19.75 in Saint John, \$21.20 in Fredericton and \$17.50 in Bathurst. While increases to the minimum must be done carefully to limit damage to employers, that cannot be a reason to indefinitely stall wage hikes. For many reasons, both ethical and practical, we cannot allow child poverty levels to grow or remain at current levels.

Children have been through significant changes at school and home during the pandemic. We owe it to them to ensure their families can prosper, and give them the start in life they deserve.