

## UPDATE: Saint John's child poverty rate three times higher than in Quispamsis: report



Heather Atcheson, a researcher with the Saint John Human Development Council, says a new report on child poverty shows that within the greater Saint John area, there are "significant differences" between poverty rates in the city and the neighbouring suburban towns.  
Photo: Saint John Human Development Council/ Submitted

Robin Grant, Local Journalism Initiative | Telegraph-Journal

**SAINT JOHN** • The child poverty rate in Saint John is more than three times higher than in Quispamsis, according to a new report outlining how nearly one in every five children in New Brunswick lives in poverty.

The 2021 New Brunswick Child Poverty Report Card, released last week by the Saint John Human Development Council, includes a breakdown of the province's two census metropolitan areas: Saint John and Moncton. Data from the greater Saint John region shows "significant differences" between poverty rates in the city and neighbouring suburban towns, said Heather Atcheson, a researcher with the organization.

In Quispamsis, the child poverty rate is pegged is 8.5 per cent, while Saint John has a rate of 32.4. The report also includes data on Grand Bay-Westfield, Rothesay and Hampton, where the rates are: 10.1 per cent, 11.9 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively.

Saint John is a more populous area than the suburban towns, said Sam Risk, executive director of the KV Oasis Youth Centre. But that doesn't mean child poverty doesn't exist there.

"We do still have a poverty rate in those areas, and they can't be ignored just because somewhere else has a higher rate," she said.

The child poverty report card also outlines how the distribution of poverty across Saint John is significantly different.

The rate in Ward 1 was below the provincial average of 21.7 per cent, while the other wards had rates that exceeded it. Wards 2 and 3 had child poverty rates of more than 40 per cent.

Saint John has the third-highest poverty rate in the province at 32.4 per cent.

While the data is from tax filings from 2019, Atcheson's report points to new data from Hunger Count 2021, which indicates food bank visits across Canada increased over the last year, due to low incomes and increased housing and food costs.

In New Brunswick, a total of 20,408 visits to food banks were reported in 2021, with 6,544 of those visits involving children.

"It's important to know that, with the unexpected school closures due to COVID-19, children who rely on meal programs in schools, their food insecurity would be heightened," she said.

Missy Bewick, executive director of Bee Me Kidz in Saint John, said she's expecting to see the child poverty rate climb as the pandemic continues. The organization is seeing more middle-class families making use of its programs.

"Unfortunately, middle-class families are experiencing more hardship because of inflation, rising costs, changes in jobs and everything going up," she said. "If you don't have an income that is going up, it's really hard. I think now more than ever families need our support."

In the Valley, the number of families using the Kennebecasis Valley Food Basket dropped to about 50 per cent throughout the pandemic, which the food basket's Brian Rignanesi said is likely due to the federal government's Canada Emergency Response Benefit or CERB. But the numbers are beginning to climb again after CERB ended in early October.

Rignanesi also noted there are slightly more clients at the food bank from Rothesay than Quispamsis.

Child poverty has long-lasting impacts on the growth and development of a child, said Rob Belliveau, chair of The Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative.

"Children who live in poverty often enter kindergarten up to a year-and-a-half behind their peers, and if we don't help them catch up, the consequences for them and for our economy are dire," wrote Belliveau in an email. "Any child not reading at grade level by Grade 3 is six times less likely to graduate, and high school dropouts are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed, locking these kids into a lifetime of poverty – a situation that is largely preventable."