

## Can you live in N.B. on a minimum wage?



Heather Atcheson, a researcher with the Human Development Council, helped determine that a living wage in Moncton in 2021 would be more than \$18. She said they expect the number to be higher this year due to rising prices.  
Photo: Submitted/Greg Knudson

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Chris Engleton has worked full-time hours at a local grocery store for the past decade, but says money is always tight.

For a 38-hour work week, the Moncton man said he brings home at most \$1,800 a month. Nearly half of that is spent on his \$775 a month one-bedroom apartment, and that does not include the cost of utilities.

"About 80 per cent of my budget goes towards rent, power, car insurance, Bell services and fuel to travel to and from work," he said. "I am lucky if I have close to \$200 left for food and I can't afford much."

In 2020 as pandemic restrictions took effect, Engleton's work was considered essential. Now, as inflation drives up prices for everything from gas to groceries, he says living off his wage has only become more difficult.

"I work in a grocery store, so I know how things go up daily," he said. "Ever since the pandemic, it's getting worse, and I can't put any money away for saving. I don't even think I would be able to retire when that time comes."

Barely able to pay for the basics on minimum wage in New Brunswick isn't surprising to Heather Atcheson, a researcher with the Human Development Council.

"People living on minimum wage just aren't making enough to make ends meet," she said.

The minimum wage in the province is currently \$12.75. It's set to increase by a dollar later this year.

Last year, Atcheson led a research project looking at what would qualify as a living wage across the province. That report found that in Moncton, that wage would need to be set at \$18.65 in 2021. In Fredericton, the report found the living wage would need to be \$21.20 and in Saint John, they determined it would need to be \$19.75.

As she prepares to begin work on a similar report that will be released this fall, Atcheson said she expects that living wage to jump even higher.

"Last year's report doesn't take into account the most recent round of inflation," she said. "We do expect to see some pretty significant change."

While single people like Engleton aren't the only ones struggling to get by, Atcheson said they may have more difficulty accessing supports.

"They sometimes do fall through the cracks," she said.

Atcheson said it's likely New Brunswickers making minimum wage would need to rely on services like food banks to get by.

Using Engleton's grocery budget of approximately \$50 a week, the Times & Transcript visited two grocery stores to find out just how much food you can get for that amount to last a week. On Friday, it bought:

- 1 bunch of bananas
- 1 loaf of bread
- 1 package of two chicken breasts
- 1 small pack of ground beef
- 1 box of hamburger helper,
- 1 box of cereal,
- 3 cans of soup,
- 2 packages of Mr.Noodles
- 2 litres of milk.

Depending on where you shop, you would get \$2-\$3 change from \$50.

Atcheson said knowing the tight budget that minimum wage workers are on, the council plans to dive deeper into advocacy.

"We want to really push for the change that's so needed here," she said.