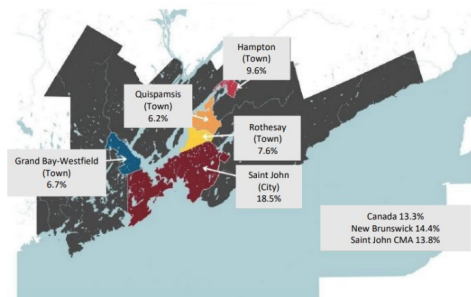


Data breakdown shows stark poverty differences in region



The prevalence of low income, based on the after tax census family low income measure, among the Saint John region municipalities shows deep disparities when it comes to where poverty is centralized.

Photo: Courtesy of the Human Development Council

Emma McPhee | Telegraph-Journal

A breakdown of the most recent 2021 census data highlights deep disparities in poverty indicators between Saint John and its surrounding area at a time when municipal reform could lead to a regional approach of tackling social issues.

The Saint John census metropolitan area (CMA), a region which encompasses the city, Quispamsis, Rothesay, Grand Bay-Westfield, Hampton and Fundy-St. Martins, is overall on par with New Brunswick as a whole when it comes to data points like median income and poverty levels.

In the Saint John region as a whole, the median household after tax income is \$65,000, up slightly from the New Brunswick median of \$62,000, for instance. But breaking down the data to the municipal levels, the city of Saint John's median household after tax income is just \$56,000. That's compared to Quispamsis, the highest by far, at \$95,000; Rothesay and Grand Bay-Westfield both at \$84,000 and Hampton at \$74,500.

This holds true for other poverty indicators, like poverty rates. While the census metropolitan area has an overall poverty rate of 13.8 per cent, not far off from the New Brunswick rate of 14.4 per cent, the city of Saint John has a poverty rate of 18.5 per cent, doubling and sometimes tripling the rates in the surrounding municipalities, where Quispamsis is at 6.2 per cent, Grand Bay-Westfield at 6.7 per cent, Rothesay at 7.6 per cent and Hampton at 9.6 per cent.

"If you look, and it's quite common throughout the country that in the CMAs, the central city tends to have the overwhelming presence of income, poverty, substandard housing, vulnerabilities," said Randy Hatfield, executive director of the Saint John Human Development Council, which compiled the data.

"But the distinguishing feature in New Brunswick is that the CMA in Saint John has disparities amongst the municipal units in the huge geography that are acute."

A census metropolitan area is, by definition, an area comprising an anchor city with a minimum of 50,000 people and at least 100,000 in the surrounding area, according to Statistics Canada. The two other CMAs in New Brunswick – Moncton and Fredericton – are more homogeneous when it comes to indicators of poverty.

Moncton has a median household income of \$60,000 and poverty rate of 16.3 per cent, compared to Riverview and Dieppe with median incomes of \$69,500 and \$75,000 and poverty rates of 9.3 per cent and 9.2 per cent respectively. Fredericton's median household income of \$64,000 and poverty rate of 15.2 per cent is not far off from the rest of its CMA at \$69,000 and 12.8 per cent.

It could present unique challenges moving forward as the Fundy Regional Service Commission takes on a new social mandate in 2024.

This year, the commission, which is made up of the same Saint John area municipalities, will take on a new community development file as mandated by the provincial municipal reform process. The file will include elements of social inclusion, affordable housing, newcomer settlement and diversity promotion. In 2024, an additional file will be added to the commissions that encapsulate Saint John, Fredericton and Moncton, broadening their focuses to include social issues like homelessness and poverty reduction.

What this will look like for the Saint John region is still to be determined, said Phil Ouellette, CEO of the Fundy Regional Service Commission, but it won't replace any work currently being undertaken by either the province, the local governments or poverty reduction agencies.

"It's really just a new venue to talk about this from a regional perspective, and to bring those opportunities that are at a regional in nature," Ouellette said.

"But I would say that each community has unique differences, new challenges, unique opportunities. Those should all be brought forward in a venue for regional collaboration."

For Hatfield, this raises some questions.

"I don't know how that's going to work in Saint John, given the disparities that you can see amongst (the municipalities)."

Looking at the data, Saint John Mayor Donna Reardon said it makes clear what she already knows to be the case: As the anchor city to the region, Saint John has the amenities to support those facing poverty, drawing people in need into the city.

"What is the responsibility of the region as a whole to support the metropolitan area in providing services to individuals who are in that lower tax bracket and experiencing poverty, and the issues that go with poverty?" Reardon said.

"Personally, I think, because of Saint John's status, and what we have for poverty ... I would like to see the (social) file come to the city. Because that's where the greatest need is."

Quispamsis Mayor Libby O'Hara said that while poverty tends to be centralized in Saint John, there are some issues like housing affordability and transportation that affect the entire region.

Over in Rothesay, Mayor Nancy Grant noted a "significant number of low-income people, and significant food insecurity," in her town, even though it might not have the same concentration of people in poverty as Saint John.

"I think it is important that Rothesay be included in any and all discussions surrounding poverty," she said.

Working regionally on social issues at this level is a first for Quispamsis, O'Hara said.

"When we look at the needs of people, we have to make smart recommendations that are going to help those that are most in need," she said. "And I think that's just something that we need to do better."