

Census shows Nova Scotia has highest number of low-income children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A quarter of children under age six in Nova Scotia live in low-income households — a number that has not improved in the last 10 years.

New census data released by Statistics Canada on Wednesday shows Nova Scotia has the highest rate of children living in low-income families, as well as the second lowest median household income in Canada.

Wednesday's data shows that 25.7 per cent of children under six in the province lived in low-income households in 2015, compared to 25.3 per cent in 2005 — significantly higher than the national average of 17.8 per cent. For youth under 18, 22.2 per cent live in low-income households, compared to 22.6 per cent in 2015 — in that category, the national average is 17 per cent.

Statistics Canada defines low-income households as those in which family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family. While Statistics Canada doesn't use the term, many other metrics of studying income also refer to this as the poverty line.

There is a significant amount of disparity in the province when it comes to low-income households. In Digby, Yarmouth and Middleton — the three areas with the highest number of low-income households in the province — about a third of households are low-income, but when you look at households with children under 18, that percentage jumps to around 50 per cent. For households with children under six, it's closer to 60 per cent.

Antigonish, Argyle and East Hants are three areas with the lowest rate of overall low-income households — less than 13 per cent. In Halifax, just under 15 per cent of households are low-income. Provincially, 17.2 per cent of households, overall, are low income, compared with 14.2 per cent nationally.

First Nations reserves are not included in the measure of low-income households — those numbers come out in a different release next month that focuses on subpopulations — but past studies by groups like the Centre For Policy Alternatives have shown children living in households on reserves have the the highest rate of poverty.

Christine Saulnier, provincial director for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said when it comes to lifting children out of poverty in a low-wage economy like Nova Scotia, the answer is quite simple: adequate and affordable child care.

"We have two parents working, they need reliable child care and they need it to be affordable, especially in our economy," she said.

Saulnier said this is especially difficult for families with very young children, as infant child care spaces can cost upwards of \$900 a month.

Saulnier said Nova Scotia ought to look to the Quebec system where child care is universally subsidized and affordable. With a lower median household income than Nova Scotia, according to the recent census data, Quebec still has a much lower rate of children living under the poverty line — about 14 for both children under six and youth under 18.

"Child care there has been a priority for more than a decade so the fact that you can access affordable child care means families are not making the same kind of choices as families here are. They're able to afford all the things they need to be able to afford so they are above that poverty line," she said.

Although child care is important for lifting young families out of poverty, Saulnier said there's more to the equation.

On top of having the highest rate of children living in low-income households, Nova Scotia has the second lowest median household total income in Canada based on the latest census data at \$60,764 (second to New Brunswick), and one of the lowest median individual total income at \$31,813.

"You can't have low wages and high costs and high taxes, something's got to give in that equation or we will continue to lose people," she said.

Nova Scotia already has the second worst growth rate in Canada and it doesn't take an expert to show the current economic climate only serves to push young families away.

"We need to grow the economy from a bottom-up approach: raise wages, invest in our workers, invest in training, lower our tuition fees so we're not saddling this generation with debt and lower that risk so people get out there and do what they need to do including having children," Saulnier said.

While Wednesday's stats on poverty do not include Indigenous populations, the median household and individual income statistics, however, do — the lowest in the province in both categories are located on First Nations reserves. To compare, Eskasoni in Cape Breton had the lowest median household income in the province at \$23,317 while Antigonish, with the highest had a median household total income of \$63,090. The last annual report on child poverty for the Centre for Policy Alternatives released in November showed 75 per cent of children in Eskasoni were living in households below the poverty line.

Cheryl Maloney, president of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association, said organizations like hers are looking at grassroots solutions like increasing food security, but, she said, the issues contributing to poverty in First Nations communities are systemic.

"We aren't flourishing as we should because we're not meant to flourish in reservations and away from our food sources," she said. "We woke up one day where you could hunt and fish and feed yourself to the next day being in a reservation with a power system, and new regulations on hunting and fishing and things and we have been stuck in that system ever since. The issue of child poverty and First Nations communities goes so deep in colonization."

Maloney said she believes women — who in general have a much higher rate of education than men in Nova Scotia First Nations — are key to alleviating poverty, but they just don't have the opportunities within their communities.

That trend shows up the census data. While, in general, men in Nova Scotia have a higher median total income than women, \$38,379 compared to \$26,750, on a number of First Nations reserves women appear to make significantly more — sometimes double.

Despite the higher level of education and earning power, Maloney said Indigenous women often aren't in key decision making roles, or the communities can't afford to pay them what they're worth to work within the community.

"Then you have these women in single families taking care of elders, children, grandchildren — when they bring money into a family they bring it into the extended family."

She said ensuring women are adequately compensated for their labour and creating opportunities for them to flourish in their fields would help lift many families out of poverty in First Nations communities.

[A series of infographics representing Statistics Canada Census data: household median income; individual median income; by median income, men make more than \$10,000 more per year than women in N.S.; women's median income; comparing median incomes around N.S. and the rest of Canada. View infographics online]

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