

Child poverty rates highest in minority groups, report finds ^[1]

Newcomers hit especially hard, with poverty rate as high as 71%

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EXCERPTS

Poverty affects a disproportionate number of children in New Brunswick minority cultural groups and in certain urban centres, a new report shows.

For newcomers who arrived between 2011 and 2016, the rate is as high as 71 per cent, according to the latest Child Poverty Report Card from the Saint John Human Development Council.

The report found nearly half of visible minority children in the province (46.7 per cent of 7,840) are living in poverty.

For immigrants, the child poverty rate was 57.1 per cent.

Meanwhile, children in a few cities are also more likely to be living in poverty.

Saint John, Bathurst, and Campbellton all have child poverty rates of over 30 per cent — compared to just 10.6 per cent in Dieppe, 10.1 per cent in Grand Bay-Westfield and 8.1 per cent in Quispamsis.

Within Saint John municipal Ward 3, the rate was 47.8 per cent.

Living below the line

Poverty is defined as having an annual family income of about \$30,000 for a lone parent with one child, for example.

For a couple with two children, it's \$42,000.

However, a co-author of the national version of the report said many New Brunswick children are living well below that line, in deep poverty, which has many repercussions.

"They're likely to have inadequate housing," said Sid Frankel, an associate professor for the faculty of social work at the University of Manitoba.

"There's likely not to be a reliable supply of nutritious food. The kids are experiencing a great deal of stress and they're experiencing stigma and discrimination from their peers. Sadly they're at a high risk of not doing well in school.

"And they are at a high risk of not only physical disease but mental health problems and even premature mortality through their whole lives. And very sadly, they're at much higher risk of being poor as adults."

The report calls for changing the narratives of racial oppression and creating greater access to jobs and competitive rates of pay for racialized people.

Newcomers must be welcomed in a "substantive way," and there should be quality, co-ordinated settlement services, including English and French-language classes.

'Very unsettling'

Genette Gautreau, assistant director of the New Brunswick Multicultural Council, said the report was "very unsettling and concerning."

But she wasn't surprised.

"We know that refugee resettlement is certainly fraught with more barriers and challenges based on disruptions in education and career paths, on language learning, on the mental health concerns and everything that that brings a refugee to a country like Canada."

Myriam Mekni, executive director of the Multicultural Association of the Greater Moncton Area, or MAGMA, noted that the recent influx of refugees, as opposed to other types of immigrants, probably skewed the poverty rate high for visible minorities.

"It might have not been a good chunk of years that we took the statistics on, but it does also speak to the challenges that the newcomers

face in general. ... The first year or two are not exactly easy for any newcomers to overcome."

Mekni said most MAGMA clients are "really underemployed right now."

"To be able to survive and provide for your family you will have to settle for jobs that are probably not what you have dreamt of before coming into Canada."

The overall New Brunswick child poverty rate, according to the report, is 21.7 per cent, representing about 30,000 children.

That is down from 22.8 in the previous report but still exceeds the national rate of 18.6 per cent.

Small improvements, not enough

There have been some small improvements, said provincial report author Chelsea Driscoll, but the big picture suggests it's not enough.

"In 1989, the federal government resolved to eliminate poverty by year 2000. Obviously they've come shy of that goal."

At that time, one in four New Brunswick kids lived in poverty.

Now it's approaching one in five.

"All progress should be celebrated and acknowledged," said Driscoll, "but there's still a long way to go."

Driscoll said the Canada Child Benefit and new day-care subsidies were steps in the right direction.

The report recommends further actions such as increasing the Canada Child Benefit, investing more in early learning and child care, implementing a universal pharmacare program, expanding maternity leave coverage and raising the minimum wage.

"These are all different policies that will help reduce this problem," Driscoll said.

The Canada Child Benefit has lifted about 690,000 children out of poverty, said Frankel.

But another 1.4 million children are still mired in it.

Changes still needed

Frankel said there are many ways the benefit program could be bolstered.

"There needs to be significant increases and not just for the youngest children as the government has promised."

Some classes of immigrants are not eligible, he said.

Indigenous children only get it if their parents file income tax returns.

An estimated 53 per cent of Indigenous children living on reserves are in poverty.

And there are problems in the administration of the benefits, he said.

"For example, when women leave violent situations and go to shelters it's often difficult for them to obtain the benefit or retain the benefit even when it's most needed."

When parents split and there is joint custody, said Frankel, there's a very long process before payments are made.

He'd like to see rules that require provinces to provide adequate welfare rates and greater investment in housing.

He's also hoping the federal government will attach \$6 billion to the poverty reduction strategy it previously announced.

'An immigrant lens'

Gautreau would like to see all anti-poverty initiatives examined through "an immigrant lens."

"The pathway out of social assistance for a newcomer is going to look different than the pathway out of social assistance for other New Brunswickers."

She said services like language programs are key.

Mekni is advocating for such training in the workplace.

"That's a solution that has been adopted by many other provinces and cities," said Mekni, "and it has brought good very positive results."

We're working on this with some major employers in the region. But it needs to be across the board."

Foreign credential recognition is another priority.

"That can really limit their access to quality employment and long term careers in the province," said Gautreau.

Mekni said one key to reducing poverty among newcomers is to "enlighten the community" that immigration is beneficial to New Brunswick.

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Region: New Brunswick ^[4]

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