

Cape Breton advocates say child poverty numbers 'unacceptable'

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Source: The Telegram

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Dec 2020

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

SYDNEY — Cape Breton is once again at the top of a list no one wants to be on.

The annual report card on poverty in the province published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives once again shows staggering child poverty numbers for the island. They are among the highest in the province and the executive director of the Cape Breton Family Resource Centre says it's not acceptable.

"It's just unacceptable. I'm not sure how else to put it," said Joanna LaTulippe-Rochon, who isn't surprised by the numbers in the 2020 report.

"Our families are really struggling. It's sad. We've worked so hard for so many years and still we're making very small, incremental improvements. It's taking a really long time to improve things."

The 2020 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia, subtitled Willful Neglect, was released this month and uses data collected in 2018. As in the past two reports, one-third of children living here are in households with incomes below the poverty line. For the province, it's one in four, making it the third-highest child poverty rate in Canada and the highest in Atlantic Canada.

LaTulippe-Rochon spoke to a provincial committee on child and family poverty earlier this month about the struggles of families in Cape Breton living in poverty and the sacrifices they make.

Although she doesn't find the report surprising, it does cause her concern for what is in the future for low-income families in 2021.

"We're hearing stories of more than 6,000 people on the waiting list for affordable housing. Next year, groceries are expected to go up by \$700," she said.

"Our families are living well below the poverty line already. Add to this the anticipation of not having a suitable place to live, especially during a pandemic, and we're moving into the winter heating season which is very expensive, I anticipate a lot of cold, hungry people next year."

The Report

The 2020 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty, which gets data from Statistics Canada, puts parts of Cape Breton at the top of the rates for child and family poverty by:

- Census district Cape Breton with 34.9 per cent
- Federal electoral district Sydney-Victoria with 36.5 per cent

It was the third report in a row both districts had the highest rates of child and family poverty in Nova Scotia.

With regards to divisions by postal code, Eskasoni has the highest rate of child and family poverty in Cape Breton and second-highest in Nova Scotia with 73.8 per cent. It's the third report in a row the First Nation community has seen the highest numbers in Cape Breton, which have grown by 1.1 per cent from 2015-2018.

Inverness continues to have the lowest rate, as it has for the past three reports. However, the rate has increased from 16.2 to 25.7 per cent between 2015 and 2018.

Five areas saw decreases between the 2019 and 2020 reports, which were both released publicly this year. These are: Dominion, Port Hawkesbury, Scotchtown, Sydney, Sydney Mines and Glace Bay.

Scotchtown reported the biggest decrease, which was 8.1 per cent. Reserve Mines reported the biggest increase, which was 6.5.

The Recommendations

In 1989 a promise was made in the House of Commons to end child poverty by 2020. This hasn't happened and according to the 2020 report card, Nova Scotia is the only province or territory which hasn't seen a decrease in child and family poverty rates since 1989.

According to the report, the difference between the provincial rates are five to 6.4 per cent higher than Canada rates, compared to a difference of 3.1-4.3 per cent between 2000 - 2013.

Low-income families in Nova Scotia are so deep in poverty, the report indicates they are between \$9,926 and \$11,767 below the poverty line.

Nadine Bernard has been an advocate for ending poverty and food insecurity who is a member of the board of directors for Feed Nova Scotia. For her, the numbers in the 2020 report are disappointing.

"I'm completely perplexed as to what we aren't doing to help reduce these numbers," she said.

"Especially as an advocate who's been in this for 20 years, what aren't we doing? We keep working and working but our numbers keep staying the same."

The authors of the report card list 11 recommendations they believe will help improve child and family poverty numbers in Nova Scotia.

These include increasing minimum wage to \$15 within the next year, increasing the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and creating an accessible, affordable child care and early learning system.

LaTulippe-Rochon believes following all of the recommendations is the only way Nova Scotia and Cape Breton will see a reduction in child and family policy numbers.

"We need to follow all of them. We can't pick any one and go with that. We need to follow all of them and we need to stand up and say the situation we're in just isn't good enough."

020 Report Card Summary (uses 2018 data)

Highlights Provincially

- Poverty rate provincewide — 27.8 %
- Compared to 1989 — 24.4 %
- Child poverty rate children under 6 — 28.5 %
- Child poverty rate all children — 24.6 %
- Child poverty rate single parent homes — 53.1 %
- Child poverty rate two parent homes — 11.7 %
- Low-income rates over 50 per cent in postal code areas with Indigenous communities

Poverty Lines

Single parent, 1 child — \$30,877

Couple, 1 child — \$37,816

Single parent, 2 children — \$37,816

Couple, 2 children — \$43,666

Related link: Campaign 2000: 2020 annual report card of child and family poverty ^[3]

Region: Nova Scotia ^[4]

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