



# Nova Scotia Poverty Progress Profile

CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY, 2015

## OVERVIEW

In 2007 the Nova Scotia provincial government passed the *Poverty Reduction Working Group Act*.<sup>1</sup> The Act appoints a group responsible for making recommendations for a poverty reduction strategy in the province. The Act mandates that the working group be composed of representatives from several government departments, community action groups and public interest agencies, including a group representing Aboriginal interests. Unlike some other provinces, the Act does not require consultation with people who have lived experiences with poverty (i.e. New Brunswick's Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation). For example, s 5 of the Act requires the duty to consult with various government departments.

In April 2009 Nova Scotia introduced their poverty reduction strategy: *Preventing Poverty, Promoting Prosperity*.<sup>2</sup> The plan includes provincial and federal investments in each of its primary goal areas. It also outlines the provincial commitment of reducing the number of people living in poverty by the year 2020.<sup>3</sup> The most recent data from Statistics Canada reveals that over 8% of the population of Nova Scotia lives below the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO).<sup>4</sup> The cost of poverty in Nova Scotia is estimated between \$1.5-2.2 billion per year.<sup>5</sup> Although the plan is in its sixth year, there are no clear measures of progress yet available. Without these measures, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the provincial strategy.

## Plan Components and Highlights

The vision included in the 2009 plan is: “to break the cycle of poverty by creating opportunities for all people living in Nova Scotia to participate in the prosperity of the province and enjoy a better standard of living.”<sup>6</sup> The plan is organized around four main goals as follows:

1. **ENABLE AND REWARD WORK**
  - Investments in training and job creation
  - Tax refunds no longer considered income for IA clients
2. **IMPROVE SUPPORTS FOR THOSE IN NEED**
  - Increase income assistance rates in line with inflation
  - Increase availability of affordable housing
3. **FOCUS ON OUR CHILDREN**
  - Increase availability of the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and the Low Income Pharmacare for Children Program
  - Create more subsidized childcare spaces
4. **COLLABORATE AND COORDINATE**
  - Increase public awareness
  - Use community development model to increase public involvement

## **Community Engagement in Plan Development and Implementation**

In 2008, a working group was formed in accordance with the Act, composed of members of organizations representing either community, government or social service agencies.<sup>7</sup> Together, the working group reviewed current programs and supports available and results of public consultation (which included a public survey receiving 1300 responses) and made recommendations regarding strategies, priorities and implementation of a poverty reduction strategy.<sup>8</sup> The group met every two weeks in the winter and spring of 2008 and prepared a report that was presented to the Government of Nova Scotia. The report included recommendations for transportation, people with disabilities, Pharmacare and income. These recommendations helped to form the official poverty reduction strategy.

## MEASURING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

### Statistical Indicators of Poverty (*Unofficial Measurement Tools*)

	<b>LICO<sup>9</sup></b> Low Income Cut-off After-tax	<b>LIM<sup>10</sup></b> Low-Income Measurement	<b>MBM<sup>11</sup></b> Market Basket Measure	<b>Food Bank Usage<sup>12</sup></b>	<b>Welfare Recipients<sup>13</sup></b>
<b>2000</b>	105,000, <b>11.6%</b>	144,000, <b>15.9%</b>	129,000, <b>14.2%</b>	20,917, <b>2.2%</b>	73,700
<b>2005</b>	78,000, <b>8.6%</b>	135,000, <b>14.8%</b>	130,000, <b>14.3%</b>	25,453, <b>2.7%</b>	52,300
<b>2009</b>	73,000, <b>8.0%</b>	153,000, <b>16.8%</b>	142,000, <b>15.5%</b>	20,344, <b>2.2%</b>	42,300
<b>2010</b>	71,000, <b>7.7%</b>	135,000, <b>14.7%</b>	132,000, <b>14.5%</b>	22,573, <b>2.4%</b>	43,200
<b>2011</b>	64,000, <b>7.0%</b>	123,000, <b>13.5%</b>	131,000, <b>14.3%</b>	22,550, <b>2.4%</b>	43,100
<b>2012</b>	77,000, <b>8.4%</b>	140,000, <b>15.3%</b>	145,000, <b>15.8%</b>	23,561, <b>2.5%</b>	43,700
<b>2013</b>	*	134,000, <b>14.6%**</b>	*	21,760, <b>2.3%<sup>14</sup></b>	43,800
<b>2014</b>	*	*	*	19,664, <b>2.1%<sup>15</sup></b>	43,100

Note: 2009 – poverty reduction strategy introduced

\* Data not available

\*\* Please note that data from the 2013 calculation of Low Income Measure (LIM) is from the Canadian Income Survey (CIS) instead of the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)”.

### The Nova Scotia Government's Success Indicators

In its executive summary, the Government of Nova Scotia indicated that Preventing Poverty, Promoting Prosperity was to be accompanied by benchmarks and objectives for each of the four goals. However, since 2009, these benchmarks have not been developed. The government has also not released any official progress reports, unlike other provinces. Any progress since 2013 has not been reported.

Nonetheless, the government website lists “great strides” toward these goals under the Department of Community Services. Progress dated 2013 and earlier for each of the four goals is highlighted as follows.

**ENABLE AND REWARD WORK:** increases to minimum wage, investments in student assistance programs and expanding online career and resource service centres are some recent achievements.<sup>16</sup>

**IMPROVE SUPPORTS FOR THOSE IN NEED:** increases to social assistance, developing the Learning Disabilities Support Framework and supporting a mental health curriculum in health education.<sup>17</sup>

**FOCUS ON CHILDREN:** investing \$2.5 million to increase the Nova Scotia Child Benefit for 24,000 low-income families with children. Summer programs and early childhood literacy programs have been expanded. Affordable Living Tax Credit rates have increased to \$255 per individual adult with an additional \$60 per dependent child.<sup>18</sup>

**COLLABORATE AND COORDINATE:** SchoolsPlus, an interagency approach to service delivery, has been expanded to include more schools; stakeholder consultation produced the provincial housing strategy in 2013.

Without current updates, it is difficult to measure any goals in progress since 2013.

## Notes on Thematic Areas

1. **INCOME SUPPORT:** There are 44,000 Nova Scotians receiving full or partial income assistance to meet their basic needs of income, food, shelter and clothing.<sup>19</sup> In 2014 the Department of Community Services announced that it would improve accessibility to essential special needs, including: transportation to medical appointments, eyeglasses, child care, emergency dental work and funeral arrangements.<sup>20</sup> A full list of eligibility, personal allowances and special needs services provided can be found in the Employment Support and Income Assistance policy manual at: [https://www.novascotia.ca/coms/employment/documents/esia\\_manual/esia\\_policy\\_manual.pdf](https://www.novascotia.ca/coms/employment/documents/esia_manual/esia_policy_manual.pdf).

Though the provincial government increased income assistance benefits in 2013 by \$17 per month (which amounted to a 23% increase since 2009), there have not been any announced increases since then.<sup>21</sup> Employment support (ES) and income assistance (IA) are combined into one program (ESIA) which the provincial government is currently in the process of reviewing.<sup>22</sup> This review process could explain the lack of funding increases in the last two years

The 2014-2015 provincial budget allowed the Child Tax Benefit to reach 1,300 more children with families who have a maximum income of \$26,000. In previous years the threshold income was \$25,000.<sup>23</sup> The 2015-2016 provincial budget shows cuts of \$1000 total to the ESIA branch of community services; these differences are negligible.<sup>24</sup>

2. **HOUSING:** Two years have passed since the Nova Scotia Government revealed plans to deliver the province's first long-term housing strategy.<sup>25</sup> Phase 1 of the Housing Nova Scotia

initiative began in April 2014 with a \$4 million investment by the provincial government which will be allocated to building new units, health and safety and accessibility upgrades for social housing units.<sup>26</sup> The housing strategy's goal is "to ensure that Nova Scotians can find the housing choice that's right for them and their families, at a price they can afford, in a healthy, vibrant community that offers the services, supports and opportunities they need." This strategy is being implemented currently by Housing Nova Scotia. Still in its infancy, the plan focuses on strategic partnerships between governments with the aim of reducing homelessness and protecting vulnerable citizens.<sup>27</sup> Earlier this year both the provincial and federal governments announced additional funding of \$8 million for the Social Housing Assistance Repair Program (SHARP).<sup>28</sup> SHARP will enable cooperative housing facilities to make structural, plumbing and other accessibility repairs over the next three years.

In 2014-2015, an interim advisory committee consisting of non-governmental groups and housing clients was formed to track the project and help meet its housing commitments.<sup>29</sup> In 2013 nearly 1300 families were on the waitlist for affordable public housing;<sup>30</sup> currently, the waitlist is approximately 4,300-4,500 households per year.<sup>31</sup> The director for housing services in Nova Scotia has been careful to point out that this is "pretty stable" and not "a crisis, necessarily."<sup>32</sup>

According to the Department of Community Services, in the 2014-2015 year, \$350,000 was administered to the Supportive Housing Youth Focus Team (SHYFT), which provides housing support services for youth aged 16-24 in south-western Nova Scotia.<sup>33</sup> The program, originally a 24/7 service, reverted to typical weekday business hours when funding was cut in April 2012.<sup>34</sup> Thanks to SHYFT's persistence, this funding was restored in 2014 and the shelter continues to operate at all hours.<sup>35</sup>

3. **EDUCATION:** The SchoolsPlus program was expanded in 2014, providing accessible services for low-income families. Some of the services that SchoolsPlus offers include health services, homework support, a social worker and justice services.<sup>36</sup> Recent changes include providing mental health clinicians to school-aged children.<sup>37</sup> Support services like this are crucial for low-income children, as they are disproportionately affected by poorer educational outcomes.<sup>38</sup> Since the announcement of the 2015-2016 provincial budget, the Education and Early Childhood Development Department has seen an increase in overall funding. However, very few substantive changes are anticipated.<sup>39</sup>
4. **CHILDREN AND FAMILY:** The 2014 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty is titled A Generation of Broken Promises. Since the 1989 House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada, child poverty in Nova Scotia has actually increased from 18.1% in 1989 to 22.2% in 2012.<sup>40</sup> Of these impoverished children, nearly 50% come from lone

parent families.<sup>41</sup> The report suggests that the most vulnerable are racialized immigrants and Aboriginal children.<sup>42</sup> The report also includes a number of recommendations including strengthened supports for low income families, addressed through increases in minimum wage and low income assistance rates and making sustainable changes in policy.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives states that investment in accessible and affordable early learning plays a pivotal role toward poverty reduction.<sup>43</sup> In 2014 the Department of Community Services announced a \$75,000 annual increase to be given to 26 family resource centres in Nova Scotia, offering supports and services to families and children under 6 years of age.<sup>44</sup> Programming includes parenting courses, a public health drop-in clinic, English as an Additional Language (EAL) programs for newcomers, and nutrition and food security programs. These programs vary in different communities according to need and funding sources.<sup>45</sup>

Food security remains a major problem in Nova Scotia. In 2012 11.9% of all households reported food insecurity.<sup>46</sup> That number has risen to 17.5% in 2015, the highest among all of the Canadian provinces and preceded only by Nunavut.<sup>47</sup> Children and families are negatively impacted by this trend, accounting for nearly one third of all food bank users.<sup>48</sup>

5. **HEALTHCARE:** In the 2014-2015 budget, the Government of Nova Scotia committed to focusing on healthcare in rural and remote areas and planned to devote \$10.6 million to support programs to train, recruit, and hire physicians.<sup>49</sup> Seniors are the fastest growing population in Nova Scotia as well as the third oldest population in all of Canada.<sup>50</sup> In 2014 the Nova Scotia Government committed to spending \$32.6 million for home care support so that seniors can remain in their homes for a longer period of time.<sup>51</sup>

The 2015-2016 provincial budget allocates only a 0.8% increase in funding for the Department of Health and Wellness, the lowest increase in over a decade.<sup>52</sup> Most recent changes include a call for a better mental health care system<sup>53</sup> and the launch of the Nova Scotia Health Authority in April 2015.<sup>54</sup> The NSHA has partnered with the IWK Health Centre to better coordinate health resources in the province.<sup>55</sup>

The provincial government also announced in December 2014 that it was eliminating its Extended Pharmacare program, which provides medical insurance benefits to low-income Nova Scotians and individuals on IA.<sup>56</sup> Individuals on this program are being transferred to the larger family Pharmacare program for the province, in a move supporters claim will simplify the complicated health benefits system.<sup>57</sup> This will likely have negative effects on low-income Nova Scotians.

6. **EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT:** On April 1, 2015 minimum wage in Nova Scotia increased to \$10.60 for experienced employees and \$10.10 for employees who have less than three months experience.<sup>58</sup> Nova Scotia's minimum wage is the sixth highest in Canada following behind Nunavut, Manitoba, Ontario, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon.<sup>59</sup>

Statistics Canada states that as of May 2015, Nova Scotia has the fourth highest unemployment rate in Canada at 8.8%, next to Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. The rate is also 2% higher than the national average.<sup>60</sup> In the 2013 Speech from the Throne, the Government of Nova Scotia announced its commitment to strengthen a partnership with the Mi'kmaq community by providing more training and employment opportunities.<sup>61</sup> Most recently, economists have suggested that Nova Scotia could increase economic growth by investing in youth graduate retention, effectively ending the annual migration of post-secondary students out of the province.<sup>62</sup>

7. **COMMUNITY BUILDING/INVESTMENT:** Nova Scotia will continue to fund the free 211 service which assists residents in finding adequate social, health and government services.<sup>63</sup> In 2015 the provincial government announced a partnership with the service to increase supports to seniors.<sup>64</sup> In 2014 the provincial government announced a \$500,000 investment toward the Community Transportation Assistance Program (CTAP) to assist communities without bus service.<sup>65</sup> The CTAP service is especially beneficial for the 43% of Nova Scotians who live in rural areas with limited or no means of accessing services.<sup>66</sup>

## Views from Outside the Government

Food insecurity rates have increased nearly 6% in the last three years. According to the Food Action Research Centre (FoodARC), fewer than one in four people experiencing food insecurity use food banks in the province.<sup>67</sup> FoodARC commends the positive actions taken by the provincial government, but acknowledges a greater need.<sup>68</sup> FoodARC recommends increases in income assistance rates and affordable housing, as well as investing in childcare and community transit.<sup>69</sup>

Many feel that the current initiatives are inadequate. The CCPA is clear in its 2014 Report Card on Child Poverty and Health that the Nova Scotian Government has not done enough to combat child poverty.<sup>70</sup> Canada Without Poverty board member Wayne MacNaughton and *Community Society to End Poverty-NS* member Stella Lord point to other shortcomings. In 2013 Lord co-authored *Cornerstone Compromised: A Critical Analysis of Changes to Special Needs*

Assistance in Nova Scotia. The report finds the current program ineffective and exclusionary, pointing to changes that have exacerbated existing problems.<sup>71</sup> <sup>72</sup> Lord also points to a lack of community consultation where it matters most - Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) reform.<sup>73</sup> MacNaughton argues that improvements to minimum wage and pension eligibility have done little for those on welfare or CPP disability. Without verifiable benchmarks for poverty reduction, government claims of success are unchallenged.<sup>74</sup> General public opinion on increases to social assistance finds government support lacking for those in need.<sup>75</sup>

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

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Despite financial contributions to social programs and services, inequalities are still prevalent in the province. Excluding the top-earning 10% of Nova Scotians, the average income of the remaining 90% is a mere \$26,700.<sup>76</sup> Since the introduction of Nova Scotia's poverty reduction strategy in 2009, no tangible targets have been given to measure progress. Reducing poverty by 2020 is proving to be a major challenge. With the fifth highest provincial rate of child poverty (17.3%)<sup>77</sup> and the third highest food insecure province in Canada,<sup>78</sup> the need for effective poverty reduction strategies is greater than ever.

### **For More Information**

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## ENDNOTES

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