



Northwest Territories Poverty Progress Profile

CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY, 2015

OVERVIEW

Since the early 2000s, the Northwest Territories (NWT) has maintained a significantly higher per capita income than the rest of Canada; however, the latest statistics show that 17.2% of residents struggle with low-income.¹ There is a vast income gap between the major centres where mostly non-Aboriginal people live and smaller communities where the majority of the population is First Nation, Inuit and Metis.² The territory has 33 communities, many of which are remote and difficult to access, with some of the highest rates of homelessness, crime and addiction in the country.³

In June 2013 the government approved *Building on the Strengths of Northerners: A Strategic Framework toward the Elimination of Poverty in the NWT*. In December 2014 the Second Annual Northwest Territories Anti-Poverty Round Table was held in Yellowknife. Over 100 delegates from community organizations, Aboriginal and community governments, non-governmental organizations and NWT businesses gathered to identify key poverty reduction priorities. The input gathered at the Round Table was used to finalize a Territorial Anti-Poverty Action Plan.⁴

In 2014 the Government of the Northwest Territories Anti-Poverty Action Plan was released. This Territorial Action Plan builds on the 2013 strategic framework and outlines government commitments to address the needs of those in, or at risk of, poverty from 2014-2016.⁵ Additionally, the Government of NWT Anti-Poverty Fund was established in 2014. This \$500,000 fund was created to support community-based anti-poverty efforts in the NWT region.⁶

Anti-poverty reduction initiatives are making an impact. In 2014 the government invested \$7.8 million dollars in poverty-reduction initiatives, providing an additional \$4.4 million in the 2015 budget, including a \$1.75 million food allowance increase.⁷

Components of Building on the Strengths of Northerners Strategic Framework

The core components of the framework offerⁱ:

1. A clear vision for poverty reduction efforts in the NWT;
2. Five key “pillars for action” – priority areas where the Government of NWT has pledged to play a leading role and where efforts will be focused in order to reduce poverty;
3. Corresponding goals under each priority area that establish a focus for poverty reduction;
4. An overview of current initiatives that relate to key priorities as well as opportunities for action; *and*
5. A description of the roles and responsibilities of partners who want to make these outcomes a reality.⁸

Highlights of Government of the Northwest Territories Anti-Poverty Action Plan

This plan outlines commitments for 2014-2016 that “address the needs of those most vulnerable and those at risk of falling into poverty, while promoting the prosperity necessary for the NWT to grow.”⁹ Intergovernmental collaborators for the plan include the Departments of Health and Social Services; Education, Culture and Employment; Industry, Tourism and Investment; Municipal and Community Affairs; and Justice, as well as the NWT Housing Corporation.¹⁰

The action plan identifies key actions building on five priority areas identified in the 2013 framework:

1. **CHILDREN AND FAMILY SUPPORT:** Developed from the *Early Childhood Development Action Plan*

GOAL: Children and families lead healthy lives free from poverty in a safe and nurturing environment.

AREAS FOR ACTION AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT:

- Improve access to and participation in early childhood development programs and services;
- Improve the quality of early childhood development programs, services and supports;
- Support women who do not typically access prenatal services to have healthy pregnancies and families to have positive early parenting experiences;

ⁱ Please note, that the five pillars for action have been used to structure the 2014 Anti-Poverty Action Plan

- Provide support and training to community organizations that deliver programming for children and youth and invest in food security initiatives for children and youth.¹¹

2. HEALTHY LIVING AND REACHING OUR POTENTIAL: Developed from the *Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan*

GOAL: NWT residents have access to the supports they need for healthy living and reaching their full potential.

AREAS FOR ACTION AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT:

- Provide better access to mental health services;
- Increase community capacity and promote awareness;
- Close gaps so that hard-to-reach individuals and groups are not missed;
- Improve academic achievement, including graduation rates and numeracy and literacy skills.¹²

3. SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING: Developed from the *NWT Housing Strategy*

GOAL: Everyone has a roof over their head and a safe and affordable place to call home.

AREAS FOR ACTION AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT:

- Ensure more affordable housing is available to NWT residents on fixed or low-income, improve housing quality in smaller communities;
- Develop a northern approach to the Housing First model that centres on quickly providing the homeless with housing and then providing additional services.¹³

4. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: Developed from the *Economic Opportunities Strategy*

GOAL: Sustainable communities managing their resources based on current need while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future generations.

AREAS FOR ACTION AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT:

- Improve basic infrastructure to support business opportunities;
- Reduce cost of living, support the effective delivery of services, diversify the economy through greater support for the traditional economy;
- Support communities to identify and address safety concerns that threaten the ability of children and families to lead safe and healthy lives.¹⁴

5. INTEGRATED CONTINUUM OF SERVICES

GOAL: NWT residents receive a continuum of integrated services according to their needs.

AREAS FOR ACTION AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT:

- Improve support for community-based organizations in the effective and efficient delivery of programs to meet the needs of residents;
- Ensure all orders of government and community-based organizations work together as partners on shared priorities and access points to social programs and services need to be streamlined and simplified, including appropriate referrals.¹⁵

MEASURING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

STATISTICAL/PROXY INDICATORS OF POVERTY (*Unofficial Measurement Tools*)ⁱⁱ

	Income Assisted Beneficiaries¹⁸	Households Experiencing Crowded Conditions (6+ people)¹⁷	Senior High School Graduates¹⁸	Household Food Insecurity¹⁹	Percent of Families with Less than \$30,000²⁰
2007	2,024 4.6%	*	372 52.8%	16.5%	1,820 16.6%
2008	2,067 4.7%	*	423 58.0%	17.8%	1,870 17.0%
2009	2,402 5.5%	6.7%	433 55.1%	9.8%	1,860 16.7%
2010	2,314 5.3%	*	403 54.8%	12.0%	1,840 16.4%
2011	2,313 5.2%	5.6%	396 54.1%	15.2%	1,790 16.0%
2012	2,240 5.2%	*	394 55.0%	20.4%	1,750 15.7%
2013	*	*	437 63.3%	*	*
2014	*	*	463 64.6%	*	*

* Data not available

ii Statistics Canada does not collect or compile data directly measuring poverty in Northwest Territories, such as the Low Income Cut-off (LICO), Low-Income Measurement (LIM), or Market Basket Measure (MBM)

Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

1. **HUMAN RIGHTS:** Human rights principles are not explicit in the framework, however, they were acknowledged during consultations: “it was agreed that all of us have a basic human right to adequate food, shelter, education, self-determination and freedom from discrimination.”²¹
2. **INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT:** According to the latest reports, the NWT Government spends \$140 million on 16 different income assistance programs.²² Despite this heavy funding, welfare rates remain low. In 2013 the total welfare income for a family of four was \$33,782.²³ However, according to the latest NWT Market Basket Measure, the income required for a family of four to meet its basic needs in Yellowknife is \$51,314.²⁴ In 2013 the Office of the Auditor General issued a report regarding Income Security Programs across the Northwest Territories.²⁵ The NWT Government accepted recommendations to clarify policy and comply with regular audits as well as to improve staff training and program evaluation.²⁶ The Department of Education, Culture, and Employment in NWT has established an annual Income Security Program report to update the public on its progress.²⁷

The unemployment rate in NWT is 8.2% – an increase from 2012 when it hovered around 7.6%.²⁸ This rate is not likely to change in the near future as the NWT anticipates its weakest regional economy this year.²⁹ However, the territory is expected to see greater growth over the next five years, which will likely affect employment positively.³⁰ The NWT minimum wage had been fixed at \$10/hour since 2011,³¹ however, as of June 1, 2015 it increased significantly to \$12.50/hour.³² This is due to the success of the Minimum Wage Committee, created in 2013 by the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment to advise on the best way to increase the minimum wage. NWT now has one of the highest minimum wages in Canada.³³

In 2010 the Government of NWT created the *Small Community Employment Support Program* to provide funding for individuals to develop workplace skills. The program has two streams aimed at youth workers and developing workplace capacity respectively.³⁴ The NWT also has the *Targeted Initiative for Older Workers (TOW)* for individuals between the ages of 55 and 64 who are unemployed and live in vulnerable communities. The *TOW* helps to upgrade workplace skills and re-integrate older workers through skills assessment and counselling.³⁵ In July 2015 the premiers of the Canadian Territories reached an agreement to give apprentices national certification beginning in 2016. This initiative eliminates many of the barriers associated with mobility and becoming an apprentice.³⁶

- 3. HOUSING:** The Government of the NWT has several programs in place regarding housing and homelessness. The *Shelter Enhancement Fund* provides money to temporary housing providers to upgrade their facilities, the *Small Community Homelessness Fund* provides funding to communities outside of Yellowknife that are working to improve housing conditions, and the *Homelessness Assistance Fund* provides emergency funding to individuals and families at risk of homelessness. The government recently announced that it will partner with four small NWT communities to provide supportive housing for individuals who might be unable to find housing because of their past actions.³⁷ The Government of NWT also has emergency funding in place to assist with homelessness and precarious housing, particularly in small communities across the territory. The Government of NWT is currently researching how a “Housing First” model, as recommended by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, could lower instances of housing instability and homelessness.³⁸

The Investment in Affordable Housing agreement between the federal government and the Government of NWT was extended from its original \$11 million investment between 2011 and 2014 with an additional \$18 million invested between 2014 and 2018. To date, the agreement has helped 311 households in NWT.³⁹ The *Northwest Territories Housing Corporation (NWTHC)* has invested an estimated \$79 million for affordable housing options in the territory since 2011.⁴⁰ It currently operates 2400 public housing units in 30 communities. Public housing operates on a rent scale designed to ensure no tenants pay more than 30% of their income on shelter.⁴¹

In February 2012 the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation announced \$2.3 million in funding for BETTY House (short for Better Environment to Transition in Yellowknife), a transitional housing project for women and children with 30 suites available for women and women with children to live in for up to three years.⁴² The one, two and three bedroom units at *BETTY House* are below market rent and help to alleviate the strain of paying for shelter for women who are homeless in the city.⁴³

- 4. EDUCATION:** The legacy of residential schools has discouraged much of NWT’s Indigenous community from accessing education. Low attendance rates speak to lasting traumas and enduring notions of schools as dangerous or hostile settings.⁴⁴ The average attendance rate is now 84%; this is equivalent to each K-12 student missing one day of school per week.⁴⁵ These low attendance rates have resulted in low educational outcomes. More than 25% of primary and secondary students are below the academic level expected for their age.⁴⁶ The high school graduation rate in the territory is now 65%, an improvement from 52% in 2010, but still below the national average.⁴⁷ Graduate rates would have to increase by about 15% to meet the average Canadian rate.⁴⁸ Approximately 43% of adults in NWT have literacy scores below the level needed to attain “a job in today’s knowledge-based world.”⁴⁹

In October 2013 a new 10-year framework for education entitled *Education Renewal and Innovation Framework: Directions for Change* was introduced in the legislature.⁵⁰ In June 2015 the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment introduced its first three-year *Education Renewal Action Plan* under the framework, which describes nine major commitment areas.⁵¹ These include embedding a positive sense of identity into school experiences, providing personalized education, recognizing and working with the strengths and the realities of small communities, renewing the K-12 curriculum in relevant and innovative ways and renewing relationships with Aboriginal governments.⁵²

The Government of NWT has increased school funding by 5% since 2011, bringing the total amount of funding for 2014-15 to \$148 million.⁵³ The NWT also has an *Inclusive Schooling* initiative in place to accommodate unique needs associated with learning (such as requiring individual education plans or gifted curriculums). The funding for *Inclusive Schooling* increased from \$7.2 million in 1999-2000 to \$26 million in 2014-15.⁵⁴

The government offers grants and loans to post-secondary students through the *Student Financial Assistance (SFA)* program. Because of increasing demand, the government recently amended the *Student Financial Assistance Act* to increase its total combined loan limit for the revolving fund for student loans.⁵⁵ In 2015-2016, NWT continues to increase funding to spend \$14.3 million towards the *SFA*.⁵⁶

- 5. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE:** In the NWT over 32% of children are vulnerable in the areas of social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language development as they enter grade one.⁵⁷ This rate is significant when compared to national statistics. 25% of Canadian children experience delays in their development;⁵⁸ in smaller NWT communities, this rate is as high as 60%.⁵⁹

Currently there are 2361 regulated childcare spaces for children aged 0-11 for the population of 3994 children age 0-5 years in NWT.⁶⁰ To better support families and early child development, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the Department of Health and Social Services have partnered to create a ten-year strategy, *Right from the Start: A Framework for Early Childhood Development in NWT*.⁶¹ The government has since released the *Early Childhood Development Action Plan* for 2014-2016.⁶² The plan contains 22 actions targeting up to five years old and their families.⁶³ The most recent territorial budget supports the plan and adds \$1.12 million to increase early childhood staff training, implementing new approaches to early intervention and providing special supports.⁶⁴

The NWT Government is continuing to introduce Junior Kindergarten (JK) into primary schools.⁶⁵ Since 2014, new JK programs have launched in Yellowknife, Inuvik, Hay River, Fort Smith and 29 other small communities across the NWT.⁶⁶ JK provides free, optional, play-based learning opportunities for 4 year olds and opens up more licensed childcare spaces for children aged three years and under.⁶⁷ The government has also recently implemented community-based respite programming for children with disabilities in several communities across the territory.⁶⁸

The *Healthy Families Program (HFP)* has expanded. This program promotes strong parent-child relationships through a voluntary and intensive intervention-based home visiting program.⁶⁹ HFP has expanded and is now offered in 15 NWT communities.⁷⁰ Mothers who suffer from addiction, who might be at risk of drinking alcohol during pregnancy, now receive priority referrals to counselling services to prevent Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).⁷¹

- 6. HEALTHCARE:** In a health report card published by the Conference Board of Canada, NWT ranks below most territories and provinces in overall health.⁷² Despite scoring an “A+” on self-reported health, NWT ranks worse than the poorest performing peer country in many areas including life expectancy, premature mortality, infant mortality and mortality due to cancer.⁷³

NWT communities have a high prevalence of addictions.⁷⁴ An estimated 32.7% of the population engage in heavy drinking.⁷⁵ In 2012 the government implemented *Shared Path Towards Wellness*, a three-year plan to combat addictions and improve mental health services.⁷⁶ In 2013 the Minister’s Forum on Addictions and Community Wellness published *Healing Voices*, a report on its public consultations focusing on effective community intervention.⁷⁷ *Healing Voices* demonstrated a need for land-based healing programs rooted in Aboriginal culture, informed by traditional knowledge and contemporary treatment models.⁷⁸ This recommendation and others have given rise to an updated *Addictions and Mental Health Action Plan*, expanding on-the-land healing programs across the NWT.⁷⁹ The Department of Health and Social Services is currently developing a new *Mental Health Act (MHA)*, establishing better protections for the rights of persons with mental illness.⁸⁰

Community wellness programs (collectively known as the *Northern Wellness Approach*) received nearly \$7 million in funding in the 2013-2014 fiscal year. These plans set out local health priorities developed by community wellness committees, local band councils and hamlet councils in every community across the NWT.⁸¹ Funds for community wellness programs are divided among Healthy Child and Youth Development programs, Mental Health and Addictions programs and Healthy Living and Disease Prevention programs.⁸²

The NWT Government now spends more than 25% of its budget on healthcare and social services; NWT is the first territory/province to combine health and social services.⁸³ In June 2015 Bill 44 – *An Act to Amend the Hospital Insurance and Health and Social Services Administration* received legislative assent, establishing a singular health and social services agency for the entire territory. The Act has special recognitions for the authority of the Tlicho Community Services Agency and allows for the creation of Regional Wellness Councils for local representation.⁸⁴

7. **FOOD SECURITY:** According to Statistics Canada, the household food insecurity rate in the NWT is 13.7%⁸⁵ This is the second highest rate among provinces and territories and is also well above the Canadian average of 8.3%.⁸⁶ As of 2012 NWT correspondingly has one the highest rates for children living in food-insecure households at 31.6%.⁸⁷ From 2014 to 2015, the government funded \$1 million towards nutritious food for early childhood, school and after-schools programs.⁸⁸ The most recent increases to operating budgets for social programs include an additional \$1.75 million for food allocation in the income assistance program.⁸⁹
8. **INEQUALITY:** Following a series of recommendations from the Office of the Auditor General, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment created a new position for a Senior and Persons with Disabilities Support Advisor in 2013-2014.⁹⁰ The Department has committed to undertaking a review of all existing disability program programs and services in the territory.⁹¹ In 2014 a review of respite services was completed, which has led to developing an integrated case management model and more community-based respite programs.⁹² Other services and resources for people with disabilities have yet to be reviewed.

Views From Outside the Northwest Territories Government

The *No Place for Poverty Coalition* has commended the Government of the NWT for ongoing investment in poverty reduction. The *Coalition* notes that while greater investment is needed to eradicate poverty in the long-term, the *2013 Anti-Poverty Strategic Framework* and the *2014 Anti-Poverty Action Plan* have made a positive impact.⁹³ Julie Green, co-ordinator for the *Coalition*, recognizes the increase to income assistance for food allowance as a particular achievement, describing the increase as a policy change long overdue.⁹⁴ However, the *Coalition* maintains that government has yet to take significant actions in areas like building more affordable housing and creating affordable childcare programs for children.⁹⁵

THE BOTTOM LINE

The NWT continues to make strides towards poverty elimination; its latest departmental agendas including the *Education Renewal and Innovation Framework*, *Right from the Start* and the Addictions and Mental Health Action Plan represent some significant improvements. Increases in food allowance and minimum wage will help many low-income households to access basic necessities. However, areas like employment and housing have yet to see major progress.

The *Government of the Northwest Territories Anti-Poverty Action Plan 2014-2016* provides a strong outline for carrying action forward. As the action plan's term comes to an end, a post-implementation evaluation will help sustain and carry forward the goals first set in *Building on the Strengths of Northerners*. NWT has the potential to make lasting progress if the principles of monitoring, evaluation and inclusion remain at the forefront of its poverty elimination efforts.

For More Information

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ENDNOTES

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