



# Yukon Territory Poverty Progress Profile

CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY, 2015

## OVERVIEW

The Yukon Department of Health and Social Services released the *Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Strategy* in December 2012. Its creation involved multiple government departments and non-government advocacy organizations, such as the *Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition* and *Yukon's Status of Women Council*. The strategy has three goals: reduce inequities (e.g. skill enhancement), improve access to services (e.g. education, health care, transportation), and fortify community vitality.<sup>1</sup> The report proposes to direct social policies, services and programs to reduce poverty and foster social inclusion. However, a large portion of the report is dedicated to description of the extent of poverty, only vaguely listing goals that need to be achieved. Although the report is presented as an action plan, it is more of a descriptive document.

Statistics Canada has not recorded reliable measurements of poverty (i.e. LIM, LICO, MBM) for the Yukon Territory. Therefore, this profile is an approximation of poverty in the Yukon, lacking some of exact measures found in other profiles.

## Action on the Ground

The *Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition (YAPC)* is at the advocacy forefront, spreading awareness about persistent poverty, facilitating actions to diminish poverty and providing a voice to the disadvantaged population since 1996.<sup>2</sup> The *YAPC* has taken action to respond to the housing crisis in the Yukon. 18% of people in the Yukon spend more than 30% of their income on housing,<sup>3</sup> and unaffordable housing has been a significant cause of poverty.<sup>4</sup> The median rent in Whitehorse was \$900 in 2014, an increase of 5.1% from the previous year and a new record high for the city.<sup>5</sup> Also in 2014, the vacancy rate for rental accommodation jumped to 4.7%, more than three times what it was in March 2013.<sup>6</sup> The method for assessing vacancy rates in rental accommodation by Yukon Bureau of Statistics has changed leading to disagreements about the actual vacancy rate particularly when assessing types of rental accommodation available (ie.

apartment vs. single detached housing) Between 2005 and 2011, the average price of a house increased by 80% (including an adjustment for inflation).<sup>7</sup> Since 2013, however, house prices have been steadily declining.<sup>8</sup>

The YAPC created *A Home for Everyone: A Housing Action Plan for Whitehorse* in February of 2011. In 2013 the YAPC published a progress report outlining the current housing situation and recommendations. According to the report, the City of Whitehorse has included attainable housing as a top priority in their strategic plan.<sup>9</sup> The Yukon Housing Corporation released “Ours to Build: Housing Action for Yukon 2015-2025 in June of 2015. A Community Implementation Committee has been formed. They held a symposium of representatives from First Nations, Municipal, Territorial and Federal Governments to set priorities for the housing continuum.<sup>10</sup>

## Measuring Progress And Success

### STATISTICAL INDICATORS OF POVERTY (*Unofficial Measurement Tools*)

According to the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Strategy,<sup>11</sup> the Low Income Cut-offs (LICO) suggest:

- 4.3% of all economic families were living below the LICO
- 9.3% of lone-parent families were living below the LICO

## Vulnerable Groups

In the Yukon, First Nations people, single parent families, and women are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and poverty.

**FIRST NATIONS** comprise almost 25% of the Yukon population.<sup>15</sup> The poverty rate for First Nations children is significantly higher compared to non-First Nations children. Colonial experiences, insufficient services (specifically in remote and isolated communities), lack of access to employment and educational opportunities, inaccessible housing and racism have all contributed to high poverty rates amongst the Yukon First Nations population.<sup>16</sup> This population has also suffered widely from the residential school system, aimed at forced assimilation for First Nations children. There were five residential schools in the Yukon Territory with the last one closing in 1986. Children in these schools experienced physical, sexual, as well as verbal abuse. The intergenerational trauma still persists today in various forms including domestic violence and poverty.<sup>17</sup>

In April 2014, the unemployment rate for First Nations persons in the Yukon was 6.3%,<sup>18</sup> compared to 3.9% for the entire labour force.<sup>19</sup> 37% of First Nations people do not have a high school education.<sup>20</sup> Aboriginal people are also more likely to be homeless,<sup>21</sup> and more likely to reside in overcrowded houses.<sup>22</sup> The majority of children in the care of the child welfare system are First Nations.<sup>23</sup> Most startling are the differences in life expectancy between First Nations and non-First Nations people. First Nations men and women live an average of 8.8 and 7.3 years fewer, respectively.<sup>24</sup>

**SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES** face higher poverty levels up to three times higher than two-parent families in the Yukon.<sup>25</sup> 30% of single parent families earn below \$30,000 and 75% of lone-parent families are headed by women.<sup>26</sup> Single-mother led households are twice as likely as the rest of the population to live below the poverty line and in overcrowded houses.<sup>27</sup> In 2011 over 40% of Aboriginal children lived in single parent households, twice as many as non-Aboriginal children.<sup>28</sup>

**WOMEN** are disproportionately affected by poverty in the Yukon, leading the vast majority of single parent households.<sup>29</sup> Women are also more susceptible to domestic violence, forced to stay in violent relationships because of housing insecurity. Many women are forced to engage in survival sex in exchange for housing.<sup>30</sup> The 2009 *Yukon Health Status Report* revealed that sexual assaults and spousal abuse are two to three times higher in the Yukon than in any of the provinces, and that women's shelters are used between three to ten times more often per day in the territories than elsewhere in Canada. There are currently three women shelters operating: *Yukon Women's Transition Home: Kaushee's Place* (Whitehorse), *Dawson City Women's Shelter* (Dawson City) and *Help and Hope for Families* (Watson Lake).<sup>31</sup>

## Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

1. **HUMAN RIGHTS:** The Yukon government does not make reference to a human rights framework in regards to eliminating poverty.
2. **INCOME SUPPORT:** The social assistance rate for a single person is \$16,092 annually, or \$19,092 annually for a single person with a disability.<sup>32</sup> Unemployment rates decreased 1.1% from 2013 to 4.3% in 2014 according to the Yukon Bureau of Statistics.<sup>33</sup> As of May 2015, unemployment in the Yukon has risen to 6.7%, very close to the national rate of 6.8%.<sup>34</sup> In April 2015 *minimum wage was increased to \$10.86,*<sup>35</sup> indexed to the annual *Whitehorse Consumer Price Index.*<sup>36</sup> Employed parents of missing, murdered or critically ill children are now eligible for financial benefits for up to 35 weeks and job protection under the *Employment Standards Act.*<sup>37</sup>

3. **HOUSING:** In February of 2013 the Whitehorse Mayor and Council supported the call for a *National Housing Strategy*. The *Yukon Housing Corporation* has also recently expanded their mandate in a new five-year strategic plan and committed to establishing a Yukon-wide housing action plan.<sup>38</sup> In 2013 the Yukon Government invested \$4.5 million on a second stage housing project for women opening *Betty's Haven*.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, there are virtually no housing options/services available for people with mental health or addictions issues, those who are labelled the hardest to house as people transitioning out of institutions.<sup>40</sup> In 2015, five transitional living units were slated to open for individuals with mental health issues.<sup>41</sup> These individuals would be able to live in the units from six months to two years, provided they meet certain criteria (e.g. that they are willing to follow a treatment plan).<sup>42</sup> However, as of September 2015, the only qualified non-profit to run the homes made an over-budget tender: this was rejected and no progress has since been reported.<sup>43</sup>

The City of Whitehorse and Kwanlin Dun hosted a Vulnerable People at Risk forum in April 2015 with more than 300 people in attendance. Follow up to the forum includes a roundtable with businesses to be held in September, 2015.

The Yukon currently has limited shelters. An emergency youth shelter, operated by *Skookum Jim's Friendship Centre*, opened in 2013 with six beds available for youth aged 17 to 24.<sup>44</sup> The Salvation Army is the only shelter for adults in Whitehorse. Although it is an "emergency shelter", clients are staying for extended periods of time due to lack of transitional housing.<sup>45</sup> In March 2015 the Yukon Government invested \$10.2 million in the construction of a new shelter with expanded services;<sup>46</sup> this would double the number of emergency beds available, including a number of self-contained units (transitional housing) and program space.<sup>47</sup> The new facility is scheduled to open in 2016.<sup>48</sup>

A new *Down Payment Assistance* program was created to assist people buying a condominium, townhouse or home. To qualify, people must be approved for a mortgage that requires a 7.5% of the payment - they provide at least 2.5% of the payment, and the *Yukon Housing Corporation* adds the further 5%. The maximum loan available is \$18,000 with 2% interest for a specific time period.<sup>49</sup>

In 2013 the Yukon government offered the remaining monies (\$13 million) from the *Northern Housing Trust* to leverage an additional \$13 million for projects that will provide housing at 95% of the median rent for 10 years.<sup>50</sup> The intention was to match private and NGO investments to double the fund. In 2014 \$300,000 of the fund were allocated to *Habit for Humanity* initiatives.<sup>51</sup> However, the government abandoned that plan last summer, commit-

ting instead to spending a total of \$1.5 million in two villages.<sup>52</sup> In June 2015, the government announced it planned to spend the remainder of the fund, a total of \$6.3 million, over four years on five new housing programs and grants.<sup>53</sup>

4. **EDUCATION:** On average, 58% of Yukoners, and only 40% of First Nations Yukoners, have a high school diploma.<sup>54</sup> In 2013 the Yukon's Premier, Education Minister and the Chief of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation signed an education agreement to allow all parties to establish programs and curriculum collaboratively.<sup>55</sup> Amendments to the Education Act were passed in 2013 to increase instructional hours, allowing students more time to learn the material. As of 2013 fifteen additional hours have been allocated for professional development for teachers.<sup>56</sup> Also during that academic year, discounted bus passes became available to full time college students in Whitehorse. To accommodate increased ridership, transit routes have changed and hours have been expanded.<sup>57</sup>
5. **HEALTHCARE:** The prevalence of risk-taking behaviours (e.g. alcohol and tobacco use), especially among youth, is comparatively higher in the Yukon. In 2012 48% of Yukoners (compared to 12% of all Canadians) reported binge drinking within the last year.<sup>58</sup> Land based treatment options for First Nations people are severely lacking.<sup>59</sup> Binge drinking affects children as young as 12: the Yukon Health and Social Services surveyed youths reporting that 24% of rural girls and 21 % of rural boys had been drunk within the last month.<sup>60</sup> Although the need for a mental health strategy has been recognized,<sup>61</sup> the Yukon remains one of the only two Canadian jurisdictions without one.<sup>62</sup> There are currently a total of two mental health nurses in rural Yukon.<sup>63</sup>

There are 180 physicians per 100,000 people, and an extreme shortage of specialists such as psychiatrists, cardiologists and surgeons in Yukon.<sup>64</sup> In 2013 it was estimated that 10-15% of Yukoners did not have a family doctor.<sup>65</sup> The Department of Health and Social Services offers a hotline to assist people in locating physicians, although there is a recorded message stating that clinics are not registering new patients, with the exception of pregnant women.<sup>66</sup> Many patients do not have access to health care services; access to quality health care is also a serious concern. To address accessibility issues, new hospitals have been built in Watson Lake and in Dawson City.<sup>67</sup> However, in 2014, the new *Watson Lake Hospital* still had no resident full-time doctors.<sup>68</sup> This has left the community feeling uneasy.

Through the *Yukon Home Care Program*, individuals can receive nursing and support services in their own homes, provided they are within the vicinity of a home care office.<sup>69</sup> Different services are available, from social workers to speech and language pathologists.

6. **WOMEN:** In 2007 the Yukon government established the *Women's Equality Fund*. For the first three years, \$175,000 was funded to aid women's organizations; this increased to \$300,000 from 2010 to 2013. This funding has been renewed, and the government announced that eight organizations will receive \$900,000 in the next three years. These organizations directly serve women by participating in research, awareness and advocacy, and emphasizing education, leadership, violence prevention and skills development.<sup>70</sup>
7. **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE:** The *Child Care Subsidy Program* assists eligible low-income households with the costs of childcare services at licensed centres or family day homes.<sup>71</sup> Rates depend on an income test that assesses household net income, family size, and community of residence.<sup>72</sup> The *Child Development Centre* provides early supports and therapeutic services.<sup>73</sup>
8. **FOOD INSECURITY:** In 2011 16.8% of households in the Yukon experienced food insecurity.<sup>74</sup> There are two food banks in Yukon: one in Whitehorse,<sup>75</sup> and the other in Watson Lake.<sup>76</sup> These food banks experience food shortages as the demand from residents continues to increase. In 2013 the Salvation Army served an average of 5,000 meals per month - 1,500 more than in 2012.<sup>77</sup> Every month in Whitehorse alone, food banks provide over 1,300 emergency food hampers.<sup>78</sup> Last year the Whitehorse food bank was serving four times the number of people per month than originally estimated when it opened in 2009.<sup>79</sup> Following government layoffs in 2014, the Watson Lake soup kitchen saw its numbers increase to a record high.<sup>80</sup>

Some communities are only accessible by air during certain times of the year. Some depend solely on air transportation to access perishable foods. This is extremely costly. Users pay anywhere between \$0.83-\$2.63 per kilogram plus surcharges and taxes depending on the food item.<sup>81</sup> This drives up the price of consumer goods. For example, the price of milk in Old Crow, Yukon in 2014 was more than double the price of milk in Edmonton, Alberta.<sup>82</sup>

The *Nutrition North* program replaced the *Food Mail* program in 2011 without any community consultation.<sup>83</sup> The program was established to improve access to adequate food in isolated communities.<sup>84</sup> Old Crow is the only community in Yukon that is serviced by *Nutrition North*.<sup>85</sup> However, this program does not address poverty and infrastructure, offering minimal impact on prices.<sup>86</sup> The program has had detrimental effects on the community, shifting subsidies to freight charges, which instead benefits retailers.<sup>87</sup> There have been protests about the escalating food prices, and whether retailers actually pass on savings to consumers is questionable.<sup>88</sup>

9. **INCARCERATION:** Aboriginal people continue to be overrepresented in the Canadian correctional system.<sup>89</sup> By 2008 the Whitehorse Correctional Center was at double its designed capacity.<sup>90</sup> Youth incarceration in the Yukon rose 38% between 2005 and 2011.<sup>91</sup> Mounting evidence suggests that poverty and homelessness are largely responsible for this phenomenon.<sup>92</sup> Many government officials advertise increasing incarceration rates as proven success of crime reduction initiatives,<sup>93</sup> although these numbers hardly translate to social improvement. Many inmates are incarcerated due to parole violations, including substance abuse,<sup>94</sup> compounded by a lack of mental health services.<sup>95</sup> Systemic discrimination, including effects of the residential school system, and disadvantage also play a large role in offence rates.<sup>96</sup> The 1999 Supreme Court of Canada decision in the *Gladue* case – codified in the *Criminal Code*<sup>97</sup>– requires judges to consider all reasonable alternatives to incarceration at sentencing, taking into account the special circumstances of the Aboriginal offender.<sup>98</sup> After more than a decade, these changes have had little impact.<sup>99</sup>

## Views From Outside the Yukon Government

The *Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Strategy* has been criticized as a mere list of guiding principles without new initiatives or changes to funding. The government spent three years creating the strategy, yet no action items exist.<sup>100</sup> The official opposition party argues that since the framework does not contain measurable goals or an action plan, the Yukon does not truly have a poverty reduction plan.<sup>101</sup>

According to the *Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition*, housing support for economically disadvantaged populations is practically nonexistent. There is also an absence of transitional and emergency shelter for families, with serious implications for child apprehensions.<sup>102</sup> Although the *Child and Family Services Act (2008)* has helped reduce child apprehensions, improvement is certainly needed.<sup>103</sup>

In June 2015 the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* published a report outlining the devastating impacts of residential schools on Aboriginal families, communities, and culture. The displacement of children was identified as a major contributing factor to many of the social problems facing Aboriginal communities today. With a significant link between Aboriginal descent, poverty and child apprehensions, some groups have suggested that a dark part of our history may

be repeating itself.<sup>104</sup>

## THE BOTTOM LINE

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Yukon residents are experiencing high levels of poverty and food insecurity. The current government plan is missing action items and measurable goals. Important next steps include investments to ensure affordable housing, emergency shelters, and transitional housing and housing with supports for vulnerable groups. Existing government support for housing, social assistance and access to health care services is inadequate. The *YAPC* is continuing to fight poverty, seeking collaboration with government, NGOs and community agencies.

### For More Information

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## ENDNOTES

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