



# Yukon Territory Poverty Progress Profile

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## OVERVIEW

The Yukon government, specifically the Department of Health and Social Services, released its *Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Strategy* in December 2012. The report argues that it will direct social policies, services and programs to ensure the reduction of poverty and to foster social inclusion. A large proportion of the report describes the extent of poverty and social exclusion, and it vaguely lists the goals that need to be achieved. Developed in collaboration between government representatives from different departments and non-governmental advocacy organizations such as the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition and Yukon's Status of Women Council, the strategy has three goals: the reduction of inequities (e.g. improve literacy skills, skill enhancement employment opportunities), improving access to services (e.g. education, health care, transportation and social services), and fortifying community vitality (e.g. through awareness).<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that although this report was presented as a poverty reduction plan; it is rather a descriptive document listing a number of initiatives within the framework as described above.

Statistics Canada has yet to produce reliable data on the Yukon Territory, including the three measurements of poverty (LIM, LICO, MBM). Therefore, this document portrays an approximation of poverty in Yukon, but does not give an exact analysis of the territory.

### Action on the Ground:

The Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition (YAPC) has been at the forefront of advocating for poverty eradication since 1996. They spread awareness about persistent poverty, facilitate actions to diminish poverty and provide a voice to the disadvantaged population.<sup>2</sup> Yukon is facing a housing crisis. Many people in the Yukon spend 30% or higher on housing,<sup>3</sup> and unaffordable housing has been a significant contributor to poverty.<sup>4</sup> According to the Yukon Stats Bureau, the median rent for Yukon was \$862 and \$875 for Whitehorse in 2012.<sup>5</sup> In March 2013, the median rent set the highest record in Whitehorse (\$856), an increase of 3.8% from the previous year. Meanwhile the vacancy rate for rental accommodation is 1.5%. Within the last six years, the average price for house purchase has increased by 80% (including an adjustment for inflation).<sup>6</sup>

The YAPC released a report a few years ago - ***A Home for Everyone: A Housing Action Plan for Whitehorse in February of 2011***. Recently, a progress report was published which outlines the current housing situation, actions and progress, as well as recommendations. According to the report, the City of Whitehorse has now recognized in their strategic plan that attainable housing is one of its top priorities.<sup>7</sup> The Yukon Housing Corporation is also developing a Housing Action Plan for Yukon. They recently held a 1-day symposium in which invited representatives from First Nations, Municipal, Territorial and Federal Governments gathered to set priorities for each element of the housing continuum.<sup>8</sup>

### **Vulnerable groups**

In Yukon, First Nations people, single parent families, and women are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and poverty. Almost 25% of the Yukon population is First Nations.<sup>9</sup> The poverty rate for First Nations children is significantly higher compared to non-First Nations children. Colonial experiences, absence of sufficient services (specifically in the 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>10</sup> This population has also suffered widely from residential school system which aimed to assimilate 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 such as domestic violence and poverty.<sup>11</sup>

The unemployment rate for First Nations persons in the Yukon is 21.9%.<sup>12</sup> In addition, persons of Aboriginal descent are more likely to be homeless.<sup>13</sup> In Yukon, the majority of children in care are First Nations,<sup>14</sup> and 37% of First Nations people do not have a high school education.<sup>15</sup> There is a difference of 8.8 years of life expectancy between First Nations men and non- First Nations men, and 7.3 for women.<sup>16</sup>

**Single parent families** face higher poverty levels (three times more), compared to two-parent families in Yukon.<sup>17</sup> They are likely to reside in overcrowded houses, and their conditions are much worse than those on social assistance.<sup>18</sup> Thirty percent of single parent families earn below \$30,000, 75% of lone-parent families are headed by women.<sup>19</sup>

In Yukon, poverty disproportionately influences women, and a vast majority of single parent families are headed by women.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, **women** are particularly susceptible to domestic violence and are forced to stay in violent relationships when they experience housing insecurity. The Yukon Health Status Report (2009) revealed that sexualized assaults and spousal abuse are 2-3 times higher in the Yukon than in any other province, and that women's shelters are used between 3-10 times more often per day in the territories than elsewhere in Canada. Housing insecurity is partially to blame because many women are forced to engage in survival sex in exchange for housing.<sup>21</sup> There are currently 3 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>22</sup>

## **MEASURING PROGRESS**

### **Statistical Indicators of Poverty in Yukon (unofficial measurement tools)**

According to the *Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Strategy*,<sup>23</sup> the Low Income Cut-offs (LICOs) suggest:

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

<b>Additional Indicators</b>	
Rate of Food insecurity	<b>16.8%</b> (compared to the national average of 12.3%) <sup>24</sup>
Unemployment Rate (November 2013)	<b>5.0%</b> (drop from 5.5% in November 2012) <sup>25</sup>
Population with less than a high school diploma	<b>18%</b> (over 25) <b>37%</b> for Aboriginal Yukoners <sup>26</sup>

### **Government Initiatives & Progress to Date**

1. **Human Rights:** The Yukon government does not make reference to a human rights framework in regards to eliminating poverty.
2. **Income & Employment Support:** Social assistance rates for a single person currently sit at \$16,092 annually, while a person with a disability receives \$19,092 per year.<sup>27</sup> Unemployment in the Yukon is currently at 5.4%,<sup>28</sup> while their employment rate is the third highest in Canada at 68.6%.<sup>29</sup> The minimum wage sits at \$10.30, an increase from \$9.27 in May 2012. Minimum wage in the Yukon is indexed to the annual Whitehorse Consumer Price Index.<sup>30</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>31</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>32</sup> There has been a \$4.5 million investment on a Second Stage housing project for women which opened in September 2013.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, there are no housing options/services available for people with mental health or addictions issues, those who are labelled as ‘the hardest to house or for people transitioning out of institutions.’<sup>34</sup>

A new *Down Payment Assistance* program was created to assist people with paying their down payment when purchasing a condominium, townhouse or home. People have to qualify for mortgage that requires a minimum of 7.5% of the payment. They have to provide at least 2.5% of the payment, and the other 5% is added by the Yukon Housing Corporation. The maximum loan provided to applicants is \$18,000, and there is a 2% interest for a specific time period.<sup>35</sup>

A Request for Qualifications by Yukon Housing Corporation for affordable housing projects recently closed on December 10, 2013. The government is offering the remaining monies from the Northern Housing Trust Fund (\$13 million) to leverage an additional \$13 million for projects that will provide housing at 95% of the median rent for 10 years. Projects must add eight units in Whitehorse or two units in rural Yukon.<sup>36</sup>

The Salvation Army provides emergency shelter to the homeless. Notably, it is a unisex shelter, and it is the only shelter for adults in Whitehorse. Although it is an 'emergency shelter', an average of 15 clients stay or have stayed for extended periods of time. The Salvation Army is hoping to rebuild the shelter in a new location with expanded services within the next five years. The new shelter will double the number of emergency beds available, include a number of self-contained units (transitional housing) and as well as program space.<sup>37</sup>

A new emergency youth shelter, operated by Skookum Jim's Friendship Centre, opened in January 2013 with six beds available for youth aged 17 to 24.<sup>38</sup>

4. **Health care:** Risky behaviours such as binge drinking and tobacco use are also high in Yukon. In the past year, 48% (compared to 12% for Canada) reported being binge drinkers.<sup>39</sup> What is severely lacking though, is land based treatment options for First Nations people.<sup>40</sup>

There are 180 physicians per 100,000 people, and there is an extreme shortage of specialists such as psychiatrists, cardiologists and surgeons in Yukon, compared to other provinces.<sup>41</sup> Recently, Yukoners have been asked to report if they are looking for a physician for medical care. Thus far, 1500 people have reported that they were unable to find a physician and it is estimated that there were 8000 people without a physician last year. The Department of Health and Social Services has a hotline that assists people to find physicians; nevertheless, there is a recorded message stating that clinics are not registering new patients, with the exception of pregnant women.<sup>42</sup> Many patients do not have access to health care services. Access to quality health care is even more difficult in the communities. Research has been done through the Council of Yukon First Nations looking at reducing the gaps and barriers around access to health care in Yukon First Nation communities.<sup>43</sup> In order to address health care accessibility issues, new hospitals have been built and will soon open in Watson Lake and in Dawson City.<sup>44</sup>

5. **Women:** In 2007, the Yukon government established the Women's Equality Fund, which was created to aid organizations working towards women's equality. For the first three years, \$175,000 was funded to women's organization; then it was 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 are directly serving women, participating in research, awareness and advocacy, as well as emphasizing issues in regards to education, leadership, violence and skills development.<sup>45</sup>
6. **Education:** On average, 58% of Yukon students have a high school diploma; the rate is only 40% for First Nations populations.<sup>46</sup> Yukon's Premier, the Education Minister and the Chief of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation signed an education agreement in July of 2013, which will allow all parties to establish programs and curriculum collaboratively.<sup>47</sup> Amendments to the Education Act were passed in 2013, which will lead to an increase in instructional time, allowing students to spend more hours learning the material. There has also been 15 hours allocated for professional development for the teachers, starting in September.<sup>48</sup> Also starting September 2013, full time college students in Whitehorse will be able to access discounted bus passes. The

transit routes have also been changed, and hours have been expanded slightly leading to higher ridership.<sup>49</sup>

7. **Early Childhood Education and Care:** The Child Care Subsidy Program assists eligible low income households with the costs of child care services at licensed child care centres or family day homes. The financial aid is dependent on an income test that takes the household net income, family size, and the community in which one resides into consideration.<sup>50</sup> The Child Development Centre also provides free early supports and therapeutic services to Yukon residents.<sup>51</sup>
8. **Food insecurity:** In 2011, 16.8% of households in the Yukon experienced food insecurity.<sup>52</sup> There are two food banks in Yukon- one in Whitehorse,<sup>53</sup> and the other in Watson Lake.<sup>54</sup> These food banks typically experience shortages of food, whilst the demand for food amongst residents continues to increase. The Whitehorse food bank serves three times the number of people per month than had originally been estimated when it opened its doors in May, 2009.<sup>55</sup>

The Nutrition North program, which replaced the Food Mail program, was established to improve access to adequate food in isolated communities.<sup>56</sup> Old Crow is the only community in Yukon that is serviced by Nutrition North. The program has had detrimental effects on the community.<sup>57</sup> The Nutrition North program has had minimal impact on lowering the food prices and on offering a variety of food items to users.<sup>58</sup> Transporting food is extremely costly, for instance, users pay anywhere between \$0.83 to \$2.63 per kg depending on the food item plus surcharges and tax.<sup>59</sup> There have been protests about the escalating food prices, and the effect of the Nutrition North program on communities is questionable.<sup>60</sup> There was no consultation with northern communities when this program was put into effect.<sup>61</sup>

### **Views from outside the Yukon government**

The *Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Strategy*, published in December 2012, has been criticized as it merely includes a list of guiding principles. It does not include any new initiatives or allocate more funding for services and programs that can reduce poverty. It took the government three years to create this strategy; however, no action items exist.<sup>62</sup> The official opposition party argues that the framework does not have any measurable goals or an action plan to eradicate poverty.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in actuality, Yukon does not have a poverty eradication plan.

The Yukon is experiencing a housing crisis. According to the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition, although some efforts have been made to resolve the housing crisis, housing support for economically disadvantaged populations is practically nonexistent. People experiencing mental illnesses and addiction, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, youth, women coming out of justice system are particularly in need of supportive housing and transitional shelter. There is also an absence of transitional and emergency shelter for families.<sup>64</sup> The absence of emergency shelters for families has profound implications for child apprehensions. According to a study, low income families (earning

below \$20,000) in Whitehorse are five times more likely to not have children below the age of 18 living with them, compared to those who are better off. In 2010-2011, there were 198 children in care through the Department of Health and Social services.<sup>65</sup> Although the new *Child and Family Services Act (2008)* has helped reduce child apprehensions, improvement is certainly needed.<sup>66</sup>

### **THE BOTTOM LINE:**

Yukon residents are experiencing high poverty levels. Yukon may have a poverty framework; however, it has yet to create a poverty plan with action items and measurable goals. There is no doubt that the rising housing expenses and increased costs of living contributes to poverty. Sufficient investments need to ensure that there is affordable housing, emergency shelters, and transitional housing and housing with supports for vulnerable groups. Support from the government in the context of sufficient housing, social assistance, access to health care services has remained inadequate. The YAPC continues to fight poverty and seek collaboration with government, NGOs and community agencies to help accomplish its goals of poverty eradication.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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