



ONE CHANCE TO BE A CHILD



A DATA PROFILE TO INFORM A BETTER FUTURE FOR
CHILD AND YOUTH WELL-BEING IN NOVA SCOTIA

SUMMARY REPORT

One Chance to Be a Child: A data profile to inform a better future for child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia

Summary Report

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Department of Pediatrics and Healthy Populations Institute

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FOREWORD

The following document represents a summary of a broader effort to uncover and organize what is currently known about the rights and well-being of children and youth in Nova Scotia. It offers six overarching recommendations and 12 actions for a better future. A diverse multi-disciplinary group of child and youth service providers, academics, and community advocates began the work to assemble this data profile in 2018. We hope that One Chance to Be a Child will spark a conversation with decision-makers and others invested in improving the lives of children and youth. Collectively, we need to understand the rights of children and youth and how we can better assess and enhance child and youth well-being in the province. This will ultimately result in better-informed legislation, policies, programs, and services.

The data presented in this data profile were assembled prior to the COVID 19 pandemic. New information suggests that some children and youth who were already in precarious situations are now faring worse. The COVID 19 pandemic impacted few groups more significantly than young people who rely on school food programs for nutritious meals, who lack access to safe places to play or gather, and who need positive and nurturing human connections to support their development. Further work is needed to assess the rights and well-being of children and youth in Nova Scotia in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic.

The title of the data profile, One Chance to Be a Child, reflects the critical nature of childhood, a period that lays the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. While children have just one chance to be a child, we have many opportunities to honour their potential. We must acknowledge our shared responsibility for ensuring the full rights of Nova Scotian children and youth are recognized – and critical to laying the building blocks for optimal well-being.

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ABOUT THE ONE CHANCE TO BE A CHILD DATA PROFILE

Measurement matters, especially when it comes to the lives of children and youth – those for whom we are collectively responsible. This data profile provides a contemporary and comprehensive snapshot of how children and youth are doing in Nova Scotia by addressing six questions posed in UNICEF Canada’s report *Where We Stand: The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being*, which broadly assesses the status of well-being for young people across the country. The questions are:

- Are we secure?
- Are we learning?
- Are we healthy?
- Are we happy?
- Are we connected to the environment?
- Do we belong and are we protected?

The questions are guided by UNICEF’s *Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being*, which asked Canadian children and youth to define important aspects of their well-being.¹ Information in the data profile is also informed by other provincial, national, and international efforts to measure well-being.

The answers to the six questions about well-being were obtained by combining the input of young people with the best data available, identified through expert consensus.

The results offer important insights. They highlight key areas that require urgent attention and others where provincial stakeholders must commit to ongoing improvement.

Information about various groups of children and youth (including those who identify as African Nova-Scotian, Mi’kmaq, or 2SLGBTQ+, those who are new to the land now known as Canada, or those living with disability) is explored through separate spotlight essays. These essays were prepared by community representatives and honour the unique historic and cultural factors that influence well-being outcomes. They also recognize data sovereignty and the right of groups that have been systemically oppressed and marginalized to guide how their data are represented.

What is Well-being?

Well-being means different things for individuals and groups depending on their experiences, culture, and values. It is generally understood to mean having what is needed for a good life. Objective things like a person's living conditions and good physical health are certainly needed, but more subjective things like feelings and experiences also play a key role in well-being. To really understand the well-being of children and youth, we need to hear from them and engage them in discussions and decisions.

Why Now?

Children and youth are a vital part of Nova Scotia today, and their ability to reach their full potential and contribute to society will have a profound impact on the future of our province. They have just one chance to experience childhood, a period marked by a state of both “being” and “becoming.”²

In their “being,” children and youth have inherent dignity and distinct human rights that must be honoured. In their state of “becoming,” children and youth are being shaped by experiences that

will influence their life trajectories. What we do as a society to nourish and support children and youth impacts their present and future well-being.

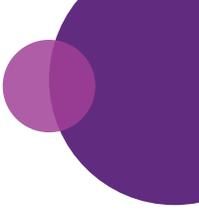
For too long, society has failed to prioritize the being and becoming of our youngest citizens. We must begin to seriously consider the implications of our decision-making on a child's ability to experience a fulfilling childhood and on their prospects for a brighter tomorrow.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) presents a framework to guide the way forward.³ Ratified by Canada in December 1991, the UNCRC contains 54 binding articles that affirm a child's rights, including an adequate standard of living (article 27), access to education (article 28), and opportunities for play, leisure and rest (article 31).³ By meeting our moral and legal obligations to respect the rights of all children in Nova Scotia, we make substantial strides for all people in Nova Scotia.

Now is the time to act.

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously (article 12, UNCRC). To ensure that the voices of young people are heard by those in positions of power, there are sections throughout this data profile that highlight how young people feel about their well-being that were shared during specific engagement activities.





Our Approach

We use a population health approach to examine the data that are available about children and youth in Nova Scotia.

Data from population health monitoring are typically collected by government agencies, health authorities, and researchers. The data are collected either from all members of a group, community, or region, such as through a Census, or from a sample of individuals, like Statistics Canada or school-based surveys. Data that come from a sample of individuals are taken to be as representative as possible of the larger population.

Data have limitations. For example, they may come from sources where small numbers or lack of real-life diversity in the sample limit how accurately the data represent the experiences or outcomes of certain individuals or subgroups. Data may also come from questions not directly aligned with the topic of interest or from sources where information is missing. As well, population health data allow us to look at differences within or among groups during a specific period only.

Throughout the data profile, information about the rest of Canada is provided when available to create a general comparison to Nova Scotia. Because of the limitations of all population health data, it is difficult to know how precise any estimate or comparison between Nova Scotia and Canada is in real-life terms.

The flaws and uncertainty of population health data mean it is important that key decisions about children and youth are not made on any single source of information alone. Despite imperfections, however, population health data for Nova Scotian children and youth are critical to guide decision-making.

The authors present this data profile and the accompanying recommendations to inform better discussions and decisions, and to spark a conversation about how data quality and collection can be improved upon when it comes to the well-being of children and youth in Nova Scotia.

A Quick Look: Children and Youth in Nova Scotia

For this data profile, we define children and youth as those ages 0 to 18 years, but in many instances, a broader age range is included due to parameters on how data were collected.¹



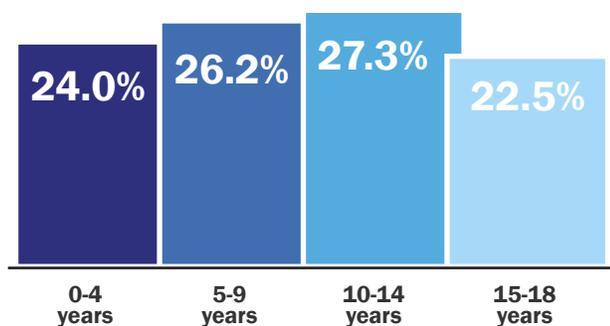
981,889

Total Population of Nova Scotia (2020)^a

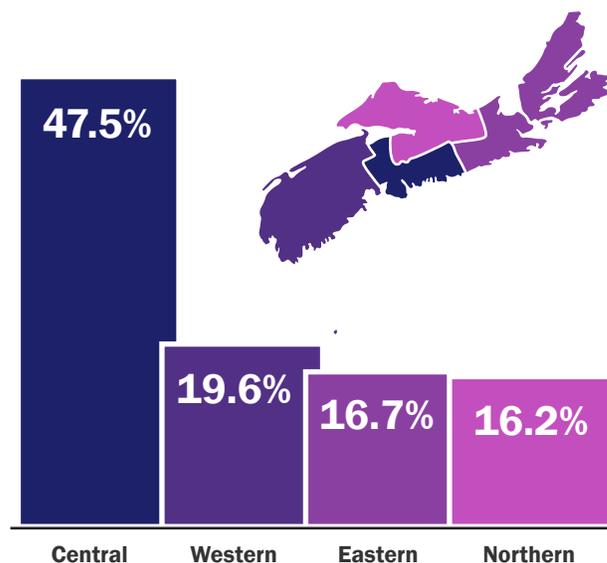


176,377

Population 0-18 years^a



By Age^a



By Health Zone^b

^a Statistics Canada, Annual Demographic Estimates, Provinces and Territories, 2020

^b Statistics Canada. 2016 Census of Population

ARE WE SECURE ?

Economic and material well-being

BOTTOM LINE

Children and youth in Nova Scotia are not and cannot be fully secure in the face of child and family poverty. Poverty can limit the ability of children to grow up healthy and happy and to develop to their full potential. Too many children and youth live in poverty in Nova Scotia. The data in this profile tell us that they feel its effects in nearly every aspect of their well-being. Poverty in childhood is a direct affront to multiple children's rights.⁴

Experts have concluded that multiple measures are needed to achieve a robust understanding of the scale and nature of the issue.⁵ There are fundamental and practical reasons for applying diverse measures to understand material well-being and security of children and youth; these are expanded upon in the *One Chance to Be a Child* full data profile.

SNAPSHOT

- The Market Basket Measure (MBM) is one tool used to estimate how individuals are experiencing poverty.⁶ The measure was chosen to set the government of Canada's official poverty line in 2018. Based on the responses given by a sample of Nova Scotians to the Canadian Income Survey (CIS), the MBM can be applied to estimate how many children and youth in Nova Scotia live in households without enough money to purchase a basket of basic goods and services based on costs in this region.

Using the MBM, it is estimated that 11.7 percent of children aged 17 years and younger – approximately one in nine – were living in families experiencing poverty resulting in deprivation of their most basic material needs like food, clothing, and shelter in 2019.⁷ This was above the national average of 9.7 percent.⁷ It represents a decrease from the



“When children are struggling in Nova Scotia, our province is struggling, our future is struggling”

- Youth participant

14.8 percent estimated in 2018 and 20.7 percent estimated in 2015. The MBM has limitations that require it to be interpreted with caution, however, and these are explored in more depth in the full data profile.

- When the scale of poverty is assessed by whether a child is deprived of their basic needs alone, the true number of children and youth who are prevented from flourishing due to poverty is likely to be underestimated. The census family low-income measure after tax (CFLIM-AT) can be used to help estimate how many children and youth are experiencing poverty more broadly. This type of measure is often used in Canada and internationally.⁸ The CFLIM-AT looks at the number of children and youth who live in families where a lack of monetary resources is likely to exclude them from having material goods or opportunities most would consider normal for a good life, such as receiving a modest gift on their birthday, having internet in the home or participating in extracurricular activities.⁹
- By applying the CFLIM-AT to tax data, an estimated one in four children in Nova Scotia were living in families experiencing poverty that limited their access to goods and opportunities most would consider normal (24.3 percent).¹⁰ This is compared to the national average of 17.7 percent.¹⁰ Children living in lone-parent households and families with children under the age of six face even higher rates.¹¹ The CFLIM-AT also has limitations that are explored in the full data profile.
- Nearly one in five children in Nova Scotia (19.5 percent) lived in a food-insecure household in 2018.¹² This is higher than the national average of 17.3 percent. Because household food insecurity occurs when there is inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints, this problem is inextricably linked to poverty.
- According to the 2019 Engage Nova Scotia Quality of Life Survey, 37.9 percent of families with children or youth living at home spent more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing in 2019.¹³ Housing is considered unaffordable when it costs 30 percent or more of a household's before-tax income.¹²

- Children and youth who responded to the 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey* in Nova Scotia and whose families had the lowest quintile of income based on a validated Family Affluence Scale were more likely to report low life satisfaction and to feel sad, depressed, or lonely.¹⁴ They were more likely to report low self-confidence. They were less likely to trust others or to think it's safe for kids to play outside.¹⁴ They were less likely to eat fruits and vegetables or to be involved in organized sports.¹⁴

Poverty experienced in childhood is a tragedy of public policy. Nova Scotia's children and youth are paying the price.



1 in 5

**children and youth
lived in a food-insecure
household in
2017-2018**

ARE WE LEARNING?

Cognitive, social, and emotional well-being

BOTTOM LINE

Positive steps are being taken to ensure the right of Nova Scotian children and youth to access learning and education. The recent implementation of universal pre-primary will positively influence early developmental outcomes for children, thereby establishing a foundation for future learning. Further steps are needed to improve access to affordable quality childcare in Nova Scotia to ensure we are sowing the seeds of learning in the earliest and most critical period of child development.

While children and youth in Nova Scotia are learning in schools, positive experiences and strong educational achievement are not universal. Too many young people feel that school is not a safe or enjoyable place to be. Too often, these feelings are experienced by young people who face barriers and structural inequities related to race or ethnocultural group, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.

SNAPSHOT

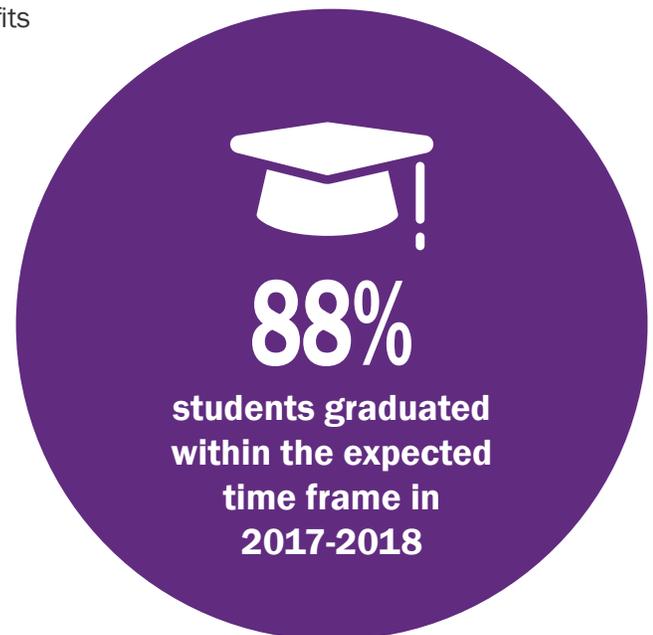
- In 2020, over one-quarter (25.5 percent) of Nova Scotian children in grade primary were vulnerable in one or more areas of their development as measured by the Early Development Instrument.¹⁵ This is similar to the national estimate of 27 percent.¹⁵
- The universal pre-primary program has the potential to contribute to improved cognitive, social, and emotional development of children and youth in Nova Scotia. Efforts to monitor pre-primary program implementation, uptake, and effectiveness across the province will be critical moving forward.¹⁶



“Asking students what their interests are or how they prefer to learn can help students to learn effectively.”

- Youth participant

- Just half of Nova Scotian students in grades 6 to 10 (50.7 percent) who responded to the 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey* agreed that “school is a nice place to be” compared with 64.1 percent of their peers in other provinces and territories.¹⁴ The difference was most apparent in high school-aged students in grades 9 and 10. Improving school environments is crucial to supporting learning, development, and broader well-being from early childhood through to adolescence.
- Encouragingly students appear to have a desire to learn and teachers in Nova Scotia are supporting them: 73 percent of students in grades 4 to 12 who responded to the 2018-2019 *Student Success Survey* agreed that they enjoyed learning, and 95 percent agreed that their teachers believed they could do well in school.¹⁷
- Graduation and pursuit of higher education or training is important for employment success and other benefits to lifelong well-being. In Nova Scotia, 88 percent of students graduated within the expected time frame in 2017-2018, higher than the national average of 81 percent. It is not known how many students who complete high school in Nova Scotia go on to be employed or pursue higher education.¹⁸



ARE WE HEALTHY?

Physical well-being

BOTTOM LINE

Too many children and youth in Nova Scotia are failing to attain optimal physical health due in large part to structural and social barriers like poverty, food insecurity, and lack of safe places to move and play. To respect the right of young people to achieve optimal health, efforts must begin even prior to a child being born and extend through adolescence.

Universal healthcare is a key contributor to child and adolescent physical health and is currently under immense strain in Nova Scotia. Ensuring access to primary healthcare and investing in prevention, alongside the implementation of complementary healthy public policy would improve physical health for children and youth in Nova Scotia.

SNAPSHOT

- From the 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey*:¹⁴
 - Just 27.9 percent of students reported that they were meeting daily physical activity guidelines. This is compared with 25.1 percent of their peers in other provinces and territories. Girls in grades 9 and 10 were least likely to meet guidelines at a concerning rate of 16 percent. Physical inactivity among Nova Scotian children represents a longstanding issue too often framed as a matter of personal choice. The environmental context that influences opportunity and access plays a far more important role, however, and is amenable to policy-level influence.
 - Only 34.8 percent of youth in grades 6 to 10 reported eating both fruits and vegetables at least once a day compared to 42 percent nationally. These data must be considered within the context of poverty and the availability of affordable nutritious food.

- A greater proportion of Nova Scotian youth in grades 9 and 10 reported being sexually active than their peers in other provinces and territories (25.6 percent vs. 18.9 percent). These data should be considered alongside the positive fact that young people in Nova Scotia report engaging in safer sexual practices at a rate comparable to or higher than the national average.
- In Nova Scotia, 60.3 percent of youth reported using condoms (62.4 percent nationally), and 57.4 percent reported using an oral contraceptive pill (50 percent nationally). This is encouraging data given that Nova Scotia has yet to implement the Canadian Pediatric Society's recommendation to make contraceptives free to all youth up to 25 years of age.¹⁹
- An estimated 36.7 percent of Nova Scotian children and youth aged 12 to 17 experience overweight or obesity, according to self- or parental-reported Body Mass Index (BMI) data.²⁰ This percentage is much higher than the national estimate (24.5 percent). Although BMI is an imperfect measure at an individual level, it is obtainable and useful at a population level for guiding public policy, especially policy that supports strong food systems and supportive environments designed to promote movement and play.
- In 2019, 21 percent of all emergency department visits to the IWK Health Centre, the region's tertiary healthcare centre for children and youth, were related to injuries.²¹ Injuries remain a leading cause of morbidity and hospitalization for young people in Canada.²²
- From the *Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drug Survey*, conducted between October 2018 and June 2019 with youth in grades 7 to 12:
 - 25.1 percent of Nova Scotian youth reported vaping in the last 30 days, versus 20.2 percent nationally.²³ Older youth reported vaping more than younger youth. The rates of vaping among females has significantly increased, effectively closing the gap between genders.²³
 - 24.8 percent of youth in Nova Scotia reported engaging in high-risk drinking in the previous year compared to 23.4 percent nationally.²³



- 
- In the full data profile, substance use is explored with a detailed assessment of this issue among children and youth in Nova Scotia.
 - In Nova Scotia, 76.8 percent of children had not had their first dental visit by the recommended age of one year.²⁴ The average age when children first visit a dental professional was 2.7 years, and 44.1 percent of children had developed cavities by this time. Early preventive dental visits are important for establishing lifelong oral health and for preventing costly restorative or emergency treatments. A spotlight on oral health is included in the full data profile.
 - As of October 2021, 10,428 children and youth under age 16 were registered as needing a family doctor on the Nova Scotia registry.²⁵ Regular and reliable access to primary healthcare is essential for instituting preventive health measures and for establishing the foundations of lifelong health.



“We need to recruit enough medical professionals so kids are taken care of.”

- Youth participant

ARE WE HAPPY ?

Mental well-being

BOTTOM LINE

The number of children and youth in Nova Scotia who report struggling with their mental health and well-being is consistent with a concerning trend seen among young people in rich nations globally. Influences on mental health and well-being are interconnected and far reaching from adverse childhood experiences like abuse and poverty to physical health problems, quality of relationships, and experiences of racism and bullying.

Access to specialized healthcare for mental illness consumes significant public attention and is part of a child and youth's right to health. Improving the overall mental well-being of Nova Scotia's children and youth also requires ensuring their safety, meeting their basic needs, and fostering positive relationships. Access to services and support for parents facing mental health and addiction issues is also paramount to protect child well-being.

SNAPSHOT

- From the 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey*:¹⁴
 - Most students in grades 6 to 10 reported normal to high life satisfaction, but 19.9 percent reported low life satisfaction. This is compared to 17.8 percent of students in other provinces and territories. The way children and youth view their lives is critical to their well-being in the present and the future.
 - Almost a third (33.8 percent) of students in grades 6 to 10 reported a period of feeling so sad or hopeless each day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some of their usual activities. In other provinces and territories, this figure is 30.3

“We have to identify the cause of distress and depression to be able to deal with it; you can’t fight what you can’t identify.”

- Youth participant

percent. A concerning and notable trend was among girls in grades 9 and 10 who reported such sadness or hopelessness at a rate of 53 percent provincially. This is much higher than the average of students in grades 6 to 10 combined.

- Building skills to handle appropriate stress is an important part of child and adolescent development. Nova Scotian students in grades 6 to 10 reported a belief in their ability to handle problems at a rate of 78.9 percent compared to 80.7 percent of their peers across the country. They reported a belief in their ability to handle the demands of daily life at a rate of 85.6 percent compared to 86.5 percent of their peers in other provinces and territories.
- Data from Statistics Canada show that 61.1 percent of youth aged 12 to 17 in Nova Scotia said their mental health was excellent or very good in 2019 compared to 68.6 percent of youth across Canada.²⁶ As reported by a caregiver most knowledgeable about the child, 91.7 percent of children aged one to four were reported to have very good or excellent mental health, as compared to 93.4 percent of children in Canada in this age group.²⁶



1 in 5

**of students reported
low life satisfaction
in 2018-2019**



ARE WE CONNECTED ? TO OUR ENVIRONMENT

Physical environments

BOTTOM LINE

In a province rich in natural landscapes, many children and youth are not able to connect directly with the natural environments where they live. The mounting pressure of the climate emergency is affecting children and youth and will continue to do so.

Efforts are needed to protect the natural environment for future generations and to ensure that young people in Nova Scotia can access the well-being benefits that come from connecting with nature. Built environments should also be designed to support child health and well-being, for example through adoption of child-friendly policies and practices, promotion of active-travel opportunities, and easy access to green spaces.

SNAPSHOT

- Nearly 80 percent of Nova Scotian households reported having greenspace near their home according to data from Statistics Canada in 2019. While comparable to New Brunswick, this is substantially below the Canadian average of 90 percent.²⁷ Access to nature and greenspace are associated with positive mental health and well-being among children as well as cognitive development in areas such as stress moderation, attention, and memory.²⁸
- From the 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey*:¹⁴
 - Only 16 percent of children in grades 6 to 8 reported walking to or from school compared with 24 percent nationally. Supporting active travel is a key strategy for promoting positive physical and mental well-being, addressing low levels of physical activity, and mitigating climate change.

- More than 80 percent of Nova Scotian children and youth in grades 6 to 10 believed it was safe for younger children to play outside during the day compared with 78.6 percent nationally. Creating safe spaces for children to play and be active is a fundamental right.



“We only have one world; we have to take care of it. Us kids want to grow up and have our own kids in a clean world too.”

- Youth participant



Nearly **80%**
of households with
children have greenspace
near their home

DO WE BELONG?

ARE WE PROTECTED?

Social environments

BOTTOM LINE

In most cases, Nova Scotian children, youth, and their families are contributing positively to an overall sense of belonging among young people. However, there are also key threats to a child's ability to feel a strong sense of belonging and to be safe and secure in Nova Scotia. Peer-to-peer bullying, discrimination, violence, and poverty are critical threats. Key changes in public policy are needed to ensure that the integrity of families is strengthened and supported, and that children's rights related to protection from harm and discrimination are honoured. Change is also needed to address structural inequities in the social environments where children and youth live and grow.

SNAPSHOT

Do we belong?

- From the 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey*:¹⁴
 - 38.3 percent of students in grades 6 to 10 reported high levels of family support, similar to their peers in other provinces and territories (37.3 percent). As well, 41.1 percent reported a high degree of support from friends, also similar to their Canadian peers (42.3 percent). Obtaining consistent support and understanding helps children and youth develop the emotional regulation needed for future relationships.
 - 66.9 percent of Nova Scotian students in grades 6 to 10 reported feeling a connection to who they are. Nationally this figure was 65.9 percent. Nova Scotian youth reported a feeling of connection to others at a rate of 59.7 percent vs. 56.5 percent of their peers



“Children are ready for change and a better world. Adults need to catch up”

- Youth participant

across the country. The perception of trust is influenced by affluence: children who reported lower family wealth were nearly twice as likely to say they are unable to trust others compared with those who report high family affluence.

- According to the 2018-2019 *Student Success Survey*, 78 percent of students in grades 4 to 12 reported feeling they belonged at their school in 2019.¹⁷ An overwhelming majority of students in these grades in Nova Scotia have at least one friend they can go to if they need someone to talk with. As well, 84 percent of students could identify at least one adult to go to if they needed someone.¹⁵
- Most young people 12 to 17 years in Nova Scotia reported a sense of belonging to their local community (85.1 percent). This was just under the national average of 86.5 percent.²⁰

Are we Protected?

- Nova Scotian students in grades 7 to 12 reported being bullied at rates higher than the national average (grades 7 to 9: 31.2 percent in Nova Scotia vs. 23.6 percent nationally reported bullying in the last 30 days. Grades 10-12: 27.1 percent in Nova Scotia vs. 19.9 percent nationally).²³ The negative impacts of bullying on broader well-being in childhood and beyond are well documented globally.²⁹
- In 2018-2019, one in five students in grades 4 to 12 reported feeling unsafe or threatened at school.¹⁷ Key reasons for feeling unsafe included how the student behaved with others (33 percent), their mental health (24 percent), their marks in school (21 percent), the way they speak (20 percent), and how much money their family has (19 percent).¹⁷

- Children and youth aged 17 and younger in Nova Scotia are victims of police-reported violence committed by family members and non-family members at a rate higher than the national average (non-family violence: 839 per 100,000 in Nova Scotia vs. 655 per 100,000 in Canada. Family violence: 343 per 100,000 in Nova Scotia vs. 308 per 100,000 in Canada).¹⁷
- 21.9 percent of students in grades 9 and 10 who responded to the *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* survey in 2018-2019 reported being victims of teen dating violence in the last 12 months.¹⁴ Girls were most affected (26 percent). Nationally, this figure is 17 percent.¹⁴ In Nova Scotia, 18 percent of boys reported victimization compared to 14 percent of their Canadian peers.¹⁴





RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

Moving Forward

This summary is a snapshot of many issues that require action to improve the well-being of children and youth in Nova Scotia. A more in-depth analysis is included in the full data profile.

There are major gaps in data used to understand child and youth well-being and rights in the province. Information is currently gleaned from multiple surveys, weighted national census data, and Nova Scotia's governmental departments. The patchwork of sources leads to some inconsistencies. Data come from different time points, represent different age ranges, and in many cases, cannot be analyzed to understand inequities.

In some cases, there are very limited or no data available about the well-being of specific groups of children and youth. For important aspects of child and youth well-being, such as leisure, play and participation, data are extremely limited or not available at all.

Legislation, policy, and programming should be evidence-informed, data-driven, and reflective of need. Improving all aspects of child and youth well-being will require increased availability and access to quality data across sectors; these data can provide guidance for action and can help measure progress and outcomes.

The data compiled for this profile and the input we received from children and youth in Nova Scotia points to the need for improvement in a number of key areas – from oral health to food security to mental health. Where possible, the full data profile includes discussion of actions that could improve well-being outcomes in these areas.

While actions aimed at single issues are necessary and may seem simpler to implement, systemic change that upholds fundamental child rights will lead to sustainable improvement in the overall well-being of all children and youth in Nova Scotia.





We propose six over-arching recommendations and 12 actions that collectively embody the four principles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*:³ Those principles are:

1. Non-discrimination
2. Best interests of the child
3. The right to survival and development
4. The views of the child

Two recommendations focus on what we view as the most urgent threats to child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia – 1) poverty and 2) systemic racism and discrimination. Four recommendations focus on actions that would signal a clear prioritization of children and youth well-being and rights in Nova Scotia.

The six recommendations and 12 actions require the prompt attention of provincial leaders and decision-makers across all sectors to give young people in Nova Scotia their one chance to be a child and achieve a positive trajectory into the future.

1

Listen to children and youth, consider their rights and focus on their best interests when making decisions

We recommend that the provincial government and municipal governments across Nova Scotia take clear action to realize Article 3 and Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* regarding the best interests of the child and a child's right to be heard.³

Action 1

Enact legislation or bylaws that require a child-rights impact assessment be submitted when considering new legislation, policy, or relevant child-focused programs, and services.

Action 2

Work with existing youth-led or youth-serving organizations in Nova Scotia to understand how children and youth want to be engaged in decision-making. Consider establishing child and youth panels or advisories within government ministries or departments to provide counsel on decisions that affect young people.

2

Reduce and eventually eliminate poverty experienced by children and youth

We recommend that the provincial government take clear action to realize Articles 6, 24, 26, and 27 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* regarding the right to life, survival, and development; the right to enjoy best possible health; and the right to an adequate standard of living and appropriate social security.³

Action 3

Establish a provincial poverty-reduction plan to respond to the crisis of child poverty in Nova Scotia. The plan should include:

- A clear explanation of the policy levers that will be used in the short term to provide immediate relief to children and youth in the direst need. A data-driven assessment should be provided that outlines the anticipated impact of each of new action.
- Medium-term and long-term targets and actions that will contribute to achieving the goal of reducing and ultimately eliminating child and family poverty in all its forms in Nova Scotia.

Action 4

Pass legislation to ensure that future governments continue to adhere to a plan for reducing and eventually eliminating poverty in Nova Scotia. Legislation should ensure that:

- Future plans be derived in consultation with important stakeholders, including children, youth, and other individuals with lived experience of poverty.
- Plans be publicly available and regularly reviewed.
- Plans include short-term, medium-term, and long-term targets based on a defined and comprehensive set of poverty measures and data sources and with a recognition of the higher rates of poverty experienced by certain groups due to broader inequities.
- Plans be established within a framework of accountability and transparency. This may include mandated annual reporting on a series of poverty measures, evaluation of the effectiveness of any efforts aimed at achieving set targets, analysis of how the provincial budget supports the plan, and an independent committee of experts appointed to provide external oversight and evaluation.

3

Prioritize the elimination of systemic racism and discrimination

We recommend that the provincial government and municipal governments across Nova Scotia take clear action to realize Article 2 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* regarding the right to be protected from discrimination and to ensure that all child rights are respected regardless of race; colour; sex; language; religion; national, ethnic or social origin; disability; or other status.³

Action 5

Provide positions of leadership to individuals from communities that have historically faced systemic racism and discrimination. Develop provincial action plans for eliminating systemic racism and discrimination in direct consultation and collaboration with these leaders and communities.

Action 6

Ensure the rights and actions outlined in international law and previous national and provincial inquiries and consultations are acted on, including:

- Implementing the full breadth of rights outlined in the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.³¹
- Implementing the full breadth of rights outlined in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.³²
- Implementing Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action with clear accountability and public reporting on progress.³³
- Implementing the calls to justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls with clear accountability and public reporting on progress.³⁴
- Implementing the recommendations in the Spirit Bear Plan with clear accountability and public reporting on progress made.³⁵
- Implementing the key actions outlined in the report from the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry with clear accountability and public reporting on progress.³⁶
- Implement the priorities of groups including the African Nova Scotian Decade for People of African Descent Coalition.³⁷

4

Establish an independent body dedicated to children and youth rights

We recommend that the provincial government in Nova Scotia take clear action to fully realize Article 4 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* regarding appropriate measures needed to fully implement the breadth of unique children's rights.³ This includes establishing an independent human rights institution for children. Such an entity can have many functions.

These functions could include receiving and reviewing matters related to individuals or groups of children and youth; advocating, mediating, and resolving disputes on behalf of children and youth that involve their rights; conducting investigations when a process of dispute resolution has not resulted in a satisfactory outcome for a child or youth; making recommendations proactively to government about legislation, policies, and practices that respect the rights of children and youth; preparing reports on matters that relate to the promotion and protection of children's rights; engaging in child and youth outreach and education on their rights; and engaging in public promotion and awareness of the importance of children's rights.

Action 7

Enact legislation to establish an independent body dedicated to children and youth rights. Engagement and consultation with Mi'kmaw communities should be carried out to establish how parallel support for Mi'kmaw children and youth will be provided.

Action 8

Apply internationally recognized best practices in establishing the independent body by ensuring legislation is:

- Grounded in national and international best practice as established by the Paris Principles and United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.^{38,39} These documents provide critical guidance on the independence, mandate, resources, and accessibility to children and youth required to establish an effective independent child rights' institution.
- Mandated to serve all children and youth, not just those in systems of care. Children and youth will interact with systems of care along their life course, including health, education, community services, and justice systems.

5

Develop a strategy to fully enshrine the rights of children and youth and improve their well-being

We recommend that the provincial government and municipal governments across Nova Scotia take clear action to realize all articles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* as a matter of moral and legal obligation.³ Opportunities for optimal child and youth well-being are implicit in the 54 articles of the convention.

Action 9

Engage children, youth, and the adults who care for them in defining a shared vision of well-being. Define key outcomes that would be seen if a shared vision of well-being were honoured and child rights fully implemented in Nova Scotia.

Action 10

Develop a strategy to fully realize the articles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, informed by the community's shared vision of well-being. Such a strategy should:

- Be derived in consultation with key stakeholders, including children and youth.
- Be publicly available and regularly reviewed.
- Include a clear explanation of the actions that will be taken and a timeline. A data-driven assessment of the anticipated impact of each of these actions should be provided.
- Be established within a framework of accountability and transparency. This may include mandated annual reporting on a series of measures, evaluation of the effectiveness of any efforts, and the oversight and evaluation of an independent committee of appointed experts.

6

Implement a system to robustly measure and monitor the rights and well-being outcomes of children and youth in Nova Scotia

We recommend that the provincial government and municipal governments across Nova Scotia take clear action to create a system for measuring and monitoring the well-being outcomes of children and youth and ensuring their rights are respected as established by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.³ Data about child rights and well-being in Nova Scotia is currently gleaned in a patchwork fashion with critical gaps that prevent informed decision-making. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly called for a cross-national collaboration to improve data availability about children and youth in Canada.³

Action 11

Enact legislation that entrenches a duty to systematically collect robust data for the purposes of measuring, monitoring, and reporting on progress made to realize child rights and well-being. This legislation should:

- Recognize key child rights and well-being outcomes that will be systematically measured and monitored.
- Support the implementation of modern systems of data collection and linkage.
- Affirm a duty to collect the data needed to monitor rights and assess well-being outcomes across all relevant sectors.
- Affirm a duty to collect data that can be analysed by key factors such as age, race, or ethnocultural group; sexual orientation; gender identity; disability; and family income.
- Give special attention to monitoring the rights and measuring the well-being of children and youth in special situations of vulnerability, such as children in care.
- Affirm a duty to work directly with communities that have faced systemic racism and discrimination to ensure data sovereignty and representation is respected.



6

Action 12

Align efforts to measure and monitor the well-being and enshrine the rights of children in Nova Scotia with federal and international efforts and standards. Such efforts would facilitate national and international comparisons as benchmarks to track provincial progress. Such model efforts include the electronic monitoring tool Global Child and UNICEF's *Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being*.^{1,40}



NO TIME TO WASTE

Implementation of these six key recommendations and 12 actions are needed right away to improve child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia. Systemic change that prioritizes the rights of children and youth is the only way forward.

Let us commit to ensuring each young person gets their one best chance to be a child.

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