



# ARE WE SECURE ?

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Economic and material well-being



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Children and youth have a moral and legal right to an adequate standard of living for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development as set out in the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Article 27).<sup>1</sup> A family's monetary resources, the way income is distributed in society, and the social safety net offered by governments influence a child or youth's standard of living and in turn, their well-being.<sup>2</sup>

When caregivers lack monetary resources and are not met with sufficient social security, children and youth may be deprived and this deprivation is called poverty. When poverty is experienced by children and youth, it is multidimensional and extends beyond lacking material goods like food, shelter, and clothing.<sup>3</sup> Children experiencing poverty may not be able to live in the way they value (e.g., play, leisure) or be deprived of future choices and options (e.g., education, employment).<sup>3</sup> Their relationships can be affected as a result of shame, stress, or stigma.<sup>3</sup> For example, a child experiencing poverty may face increased parental stress, and that impacts the quality and amount of time available for parent-child interactions.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a child or youth experiencing poverty may face shame and stigma in the form of bullying or discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding how many children and youth are experiencing this wide range of deprivations – from material to non-material – is essential to estimating the true scale of poverty and tracking progress. It is also essential to understand the issue broadly if we intend to foster optimal health and well-being for Nova Scotia's children and youth. Such a broad view of poverty in childhood is consistent with definitions used by Canada's National Advisory Council on Poverty,<sup>4</sup> and eliminating poverty in all of its forms is one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that Canada has committed to realizing.<sup>5</sup>

Information about the adequacy of monetary resources and the material security of families with children and youth in Nova Scotia clearly shows the need for action. Data also point to the fact that lack of economic and material security is impacting overall child and youth well-being in the province.

■ Nova Scotia  
■ Canada

Dimension	Indicator		
Financial resources and income adequacy	<b>Persons living in poverty where basic needs are not affordable</b>	Percentage of children and youth under 18 years living in households with disposable income below the poverty line according to the Market Basket Measure, Canada's official poverty line	11.7% 9.7%
	<b>Persons living in severe income poverty</b>	Percentage of children and youth under 18 years living in households experiencing deep income poverty (below 75 percent of the Market Basket Measure)	4.9% 4%
	<b>Persons living in poverty where income is low relative to others</b>	Percentage of census families with children under 18 years with low income, based on Census Family Low Income Measure After Tax (CFLIM-AT)	24.3% 17.7%
Public policies related to financial support for families	<b>Income assistance cases involving a child or youth</b>	Percentage of children and youth, 24 years or younger, that are attending school and/or living in the home of a family that receives Employment Support and Income Assistance	30.1% 10,315 dependent children and youth N/A
	<b>New mothers with concerns about money for basic necessities</b>	Percentage of new mothers that responded "yes" to having concerns about money to pay for housing, food, clothing, utilities, and other basic necessities on a screening questionnaire	24% 5% N/A
Safe, secure, and affordable housing	<b>Children or youth living with a core housing need</b>	Percentage of children living in homes defined as having a core housing need based on standards of adequacy, suitability, and affordability	12.6% 12.6%
	<b>Parents that reported unaffordable housing</b>	Percentage of respondents with children or youth living at home that spent more than 30% of their monthly income on housing	36.6% N/A

\* Indicates a custom data request from the data source indicated.

## ESTIMATING THE SCALE OF POVERTY IN CHILDHOOD IN NOVA SCOTIA

### Monetary resources and Income-based poverty measures

One way of estimating the number of children and youth who experience poverty is to consider how many families are deprived of meeting their basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter due to low income – a so-called absolute poverty measure.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the Canadian government adopted the Market Basket Measure (MBM) as the country's official measure for this purpose. The MBM is used to calculate the number of children and youth who live in households with incomes below a level needed to purchase a modest basket of goods and services in their region, considering local costs. The level is adjusted for a family's size.<sup>7</sup>

In 2019, 11.7 percent of Nova Scotian children aged 17 years and younger were estimated to be experiencing poverty that deprived them of basic needs, as estimated by the MBM.<sup>8</sup> This was above the national average of 9.7 percent.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the 2019 data for Nova Scotia was published by Statistics Canada with a warning that this measure should be interpreted with care for the year 2019.

**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.**

Relative income-based poverty measures can be used to estimate poverty more broadly by looking at the number of families with such low income, relative to others, that their children are likely to be excluded from having goods or opportunities most people would consider normal for a good life. For example, those who may not be able to access regular internet at home or participate in extra-curricular events.<sup>6</sup> The after-tax Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM-AT) is used for this purpose. The CFLIM-AT creates a low-income threshold or relative poverty line at 50 percent of the median income of Canadians, then assesses how many children live in families with after-tax incomes that fall below the threshold (adjusted for the family's size).



In 2019, 24.3 percent of children and youth in Nova Scotia were estimated to be experiencing poverty as measured by the CFLIM-AT.<sup>8</sup> This is compared to 17.7 percent nationally and to 24.4 percent in 1989, when a promise was made by the House of Commons of Canada to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000 with unanimous cross-party support.<sup>9</sup>

The CFLIM-AT varies across Nova Scotia when applied to different regions. It is highest for children and youth in Digby (34.7 percent), Annapolis (33.7 percent), and Cape Breton (33.5 percent).<sup>8</sup> When the ages and family composition of the children identified by the CFLIM-AT are assessed, it becomes clear that young children and lone-parent families are over-represented; 27.9 percent of these children are under six years old and 51.7 percent live in lone-parent families.<sup>8</sup>

The CFLIM-AT is calculated for Nova Scotian children using information about a family's income obtained from tax-filer data, which represents 95 percent of families. Because not all families are represented and potential inaccuracies in self-reported tax information exist, the CFLIM-AT is an estimate at the population level, like the MBM. For the CFLIM-AT, a family is defined as members of a couple family with children, and lone-parents and their children (census families). Internationally, low-income measures (LIMs), like the CFLIM-AT, are widely used to reflect child income poverty and track progress on initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal to end poverty.

### **Depth of poverty**

Some children and youth experience a depth of deprivation that is greater than others, and this leads to more adverse impacts on their well-being. The proportion of children and youth living in deep or severe poverty can be estimated by assessing how many live in families with income below 75 percent of the threshold amount (poverty line) set by the MBM for the family's size. In 2019, an estimated 4.9 percent of Nova Scotian children 17 years and younger were living in severe poverty compared with 4 percent nationally. Children and youth living in deep or severe income poverty are likely experiencing a truly appalling level of deprivation.



## A FURTHER NOTE ABOUT MEASUREMENT

For Nova Scotia, the MBM is calculated using information about a household's income after tax, the family's size, and the cost of the modest basket of goods and services in four regions in the province. Data for the calculation come from a sample of Nova Scotians who respond to a Canadian survey. A statistical weighting is then used to show how the responses from the individuals sampled apply to the whole population of Nova Scotians. In 2019, responses used to calculate the MBM in Nova Scotia varied to a higher degree than would be statistically expected. The data were published with a "Use with Caution" warning for this reason. The lack of expected variability in responses can occur when a sample is too small to accurately represent a population. These numbers must be interpreted with care given this issue and because these data sources exclude children living on First Nations reserves.

## MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Individually, income-based measures provide important, yet imperfect information for estimating the number of children and youth experiencing poverty in Nova Scotia. Because income-level alone may not reflect the degree to which a child is broadly deprived, multiple additional measurement tools are used across Canada and internationally to understand this problem. For example, multiple child-specific material-deprivation indices have been created and are in use internationally.<sup>10,11</sup> Independent of family income, these indices directly ask children about how deprived they are of basic needs and other important material goods and experiences like receiving a gift on their birthday or having a bit of pocket money.<sup>12</sup> A child material-deprivation index or tool could be applied in Nova Scotia to help improve the information available to those tasked with estimating the scale and burden of childhood poverty, designing effective solutions, and tracking progress on this critical issue.

It is possible to glean information about the scale of deprivation children and youth in Nova Scotia are facing based on other data collected about material deprivation of basic needs.

### **Food Security**

Based on Statistics Canada's 2017-2018 *Household Food Security Survey Module*, 19.5 percent of Nova Scotian children reside in a food-insecure household, higher than the national average of 16.2 percent. Food insecurity is considered a sign of broader material deprivation that occurs when members of a household have inadequate or insecure access to food due to economic or other constraints.<sup>13</sup>

### **Housing**

Housing and community spaces should be affordable, safe, and healthy. Housing affordability has emerged as a significant issue, especially within urban settings. As of September 2021, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Nova Scotia was \$1,660 a month, only slightly below the national average of \$1,763 a month,<sup>14</sup> despite Nova Scotia having the lowest median after-tax income among all provinces.<sup>15</sup>

When housing is unacceptable because it is in poor condition, unsuitable (i.e., too crowded for the number of people), or unaffordable (costing 30 percent or more of a household's before-tax income), household members are considered to have a core housing need. According to the 2016 Census, the most recent data available, Nova Scotia had a higher percentage of children under 18 years (12.6 percent) living in core housing need than the other Atlantic provinces but a lower rate than British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Ontario.<sup>16</sup>

In Canada, 24.1 percent of all households reported spending 30 percent or more of their income on shelter costs based on the 2016 Census.<sup>16</sup> The rate for Nova Scotia was less than the Canadian average (21.5 percent); however, 25 percent of households in the Halifax census metropolitan area spent 30 percent or more on housing. The 2019 Engage Nova Scotia *Quality of Life Survey* found that 36.6 percent of respondents who are parents spent more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing.<sup>17</sup> Of this group, 4.6 percent spent more than 50 percent of their monthly income on housing.<sup>17</sup>

### **Material deprivation of new parents**

Data collected by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness on intake forms completed for the *Healthy Beginnings: Enhanced Home Visiting* program show that approximately 24 percent of mothers under 20 years and 5 percent of mothers 20 years and over reported



concerns about material needs.<sup>8</sup> The critical importance of ensuring that pregnant parents and families caring for a newborn have the material resources they need must be viewed in relation to the significance of the early years for overall childhood health and development.

## HOW ARE CHILDREN AND YOUTH FEELING THE IMPACTS OF EXPERIENCING POVERTY IN NOVA SCOTIA?

Measures of income poverty and data about material deprivation give us insight into the scale of the issue of childhood poverty in Nova Scotia, but there is also a need to understand how child and youth well-being is impacted by the experience of poverty.

The *Nova Scotia Student Success Survey* provides a small glimpse into how poverty impacts peer relationships through stigma or discrimination.<sup>18</sup> In 2018-2019, 28 percent of all students (grades 4 to 12) reported feeling less respected than other students. Of those who felt less respected, 16 percent said they felt it was due to their family's income. Nearly 1 in 5 (19 percent) of students in the same survey indicated they felt unsafe or threatened in the last 30 days. Of those, 19 percent thought it was because of how much money their family has.<sup>18</sup>


The 2018-2019 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* survey provides another look at the impact of experiencing poverty in childhood using information about family affluence.<sup>19</sup> Nova Scotian children and youth with the lowest family affluence were 2.3 times more likely to report low life satisfaction than those with the highest family affluence. They were also less likely to report positive mental health, feelings of community safety, and involvement in teams and individual sports.<sup>19</sup> They were 1.7 times more likely to report feeling low or depressed, lonely, and that it was not safe for children to play outside during the day.<sup>19</sup>

### PASS THE MIC

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

- Youth participant





Children and youth with the highest family affluence were almost twice as likely to be involved in organized team sports. However, children and youth with the lowest family affluence were slightly more likely (4.0 percent) to be involved in community groups than their most affluent peers. These differences reflect the ways a child or youth may be limited in their participation based on the cost of certain activities.

Ensuring that all child well-being outcomes in Nova Scotia are being monitored alongside information about family income or socioeconomic status is essential for tracking impacts and progress related to any interventions.

## **SOCIAL SECURITY AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN PREVENTING CHILDHOOD POVERTY**

The UNCRC states that parents or other adults responsible for a child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities, the conditions of living necessary for their development. However, it is the government's role to appropriately assist those caring for children to provide an adequate standard of living through material assistance and support programs, especially related to nutrition, clothing, and housing.<sup>1</sup> UNCRC signatories, like Canada, have also committed to ensuring the right of every child to benefit from social security, including social insurance, by making sure caregivers receive the financial support they need to raise the child (Article 26).<sup>1</sup>

The Nova Scotia's Income Assistance (IA) program administered by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services is described as a program intended to help individuals who are not able to support themselves or their family. Families or individuals may get money for basic needs or help with other special needs depending on their unique situation.<sup>20</sup>

In 2019, 30.1 percent of all IA cases included families with children or youth. There were 10,315 dependent children and student family members living with families receiving IA support in Nova Scotia according to the Department of Community Services.

Total welfare income is the combination of government transfers like IA payments, federal and provincial child tax credits, and other provincial government transfers.<sup>21</sup> In 2019 Nova Scotia, along with New Brunswick, had the lowest welfare income provisions in Canada for the family types that are used to study national trends.<sup>21</sup> For lone-parent families with one child and couple families with two children in Nova Scotia in need of social security, total welfare income

## PASS THE MIC

“I wish kids had someone to talk to at school if they are living in poverty”

- Youth participant

provisions made up only 57 to 60 percent of the income they would need to reach the poverty line set by the MBM, Canada’s official poverty line in 2019.<sup>8,22</sup> This information demonstrates that Nova Scotia’s social safety net, even when combined with federal government transfers, allows poverty to persist, depriving children and youth of even the most basic material needs.

Child benefits, delivered by both the federal and provincial government, have been shown to be effective tools to reduce child income poverty when eligibility thresholds and amounts are appropriate. For example, the federal Canada Child Benefit (CCB) was tied to a 30.3 percent reduction in income poverty for Canadian children under 18 years in 2018.<sup>22</sup> The Nova Scotia Child Benefit (NSCB), a provincial benefit connected to the federal CCB, is described as an additional tool “to help families with low and modest income with the cost of raising children under 18 years of age”.<sup>23</sup> In July 2020, the threshold for receiving the NSCB was raised to \$33,999 from \$26,000 so that families with slightly higher incomes are now eligible to receive the benefit. Despite this change, some families with incomes below the poverty threshold set by the MBM are still considered to have too much income to be eligible for the NSCB. For example, the MBM poverty threshold for a couple with two children in Halifax was \$45,872 in 2019, which means this family would not qualify for the NSCB.<sup>8</sup>

**The NSCB is not indexed to inflation, so every year it may lose its effectiveness as a tool to alleviate child income poverty.**



## THE BOTTOM LINE

Global and Canadian research supports a negative relationship between poverty, income inequality, and outcomes such as infant mortality, childhood asthma, emotional and behavioural problems in childhood, readiness to learn, and educational achievement.<sup>24-27</sup> These adverse impacts in childhood carry through to adulthood, especially when children are deprived early and over a prolonged period.<sup>27</sup>

In Nova Scotia, too many children and youth are experiencing poverty. Without concrete action, the consequences of this will carry through to their future and that of our province. Past efforts to reduce child and family poverty in Nova Scotia have not led to adequate change.<sup>8,28</sup> Moving forward, decision-makers must take immediate steps to prevent the ongoing deprivation faced by children and youth, and reduce the number of children experiencing all dimensions of poverty using effective social securities. Designing a comprehensive child poverty reduction action plan that ensures a child's right to an adequate standard of living and reduces the ill-effects of poverty on child well-being is crucial.

It is paramount that efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate childhood poverty do not veer off course as governments change. Legislation is needed to guarantee government always has a plan that moves us closer to eliminating child poverty in all its forms, with targets and accountability mechanisms in place.

Because designing solutions that are long lasting requires improved information, implementing new and more comprehensive tools to measure multidimensional childhood poverty in Nova Scotia are essential steps on the pathway to change.

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