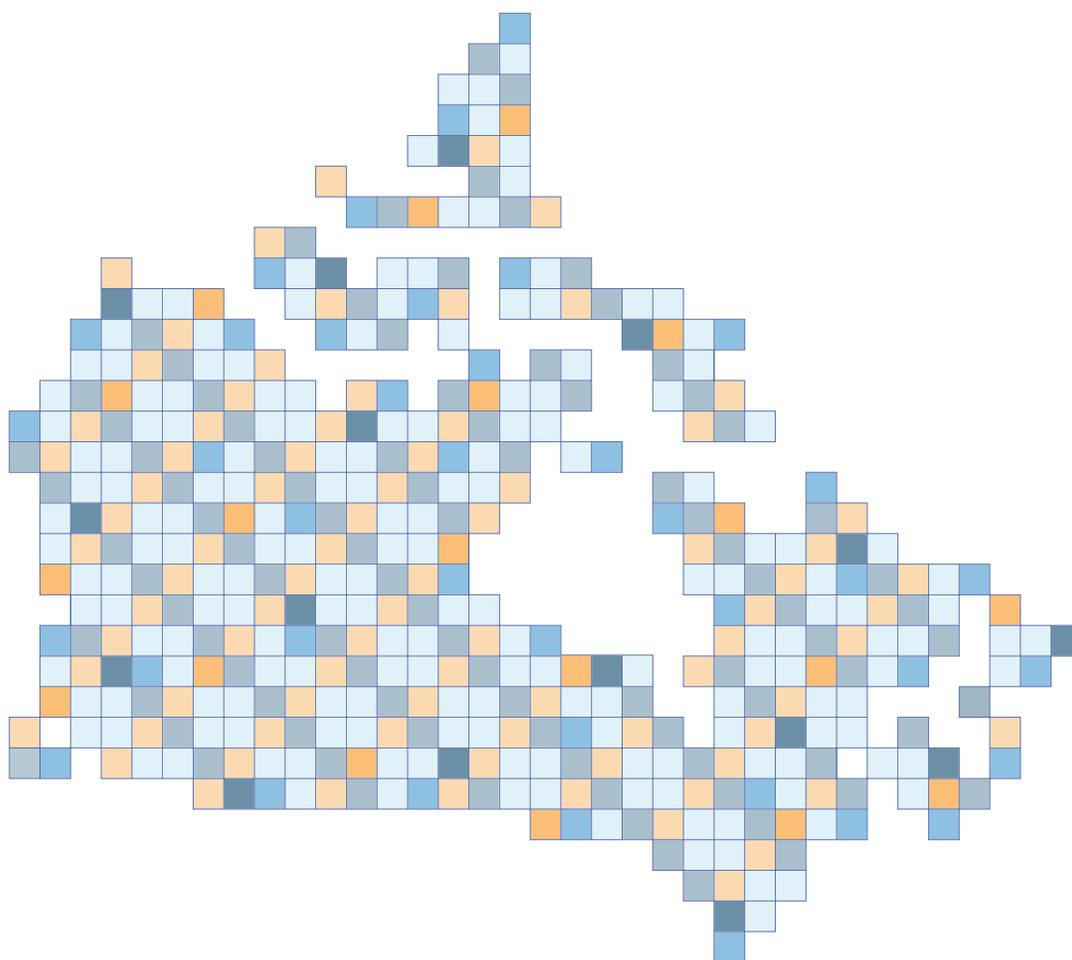


Northwest Territories Poverty Progress Profile



2016



CANADA WITHOUT POVERTY
CANADA SANS PAUVRETÉ

Poverty is a violation of human rights.

OVERVIEW

Since the early 2000s, the Northwest Territories (NWT) has maintained a significantly higher per capita income than the rest of Canada.¹ Despite this wealth, a “much bleaker experience”² needs to be addressed: poverty. It is a situation anti-poverty advocates note as “characterized by poor-quality housing and housing shortages, growing disparity in levels of education, employment and incomes, rising alcohol and substance abuse, and increasing rates of crime, suicide and homelessness.”³ There is a vast income gap between the major centres and smaller communities⁴ and the latest statistics show that 19.3% of the NWT residents struggle with low-income.⁵ The NWT has 33 communities, half of which don’t have year-round road access and have some of the highest rates of homelessness, crime, and addiction in the country.⁶

After years of work and consultations among community stakeholders across the NWT, the government approved *Building on the Strengths of Northerners: A Strategic Framework toward the Elimination of Poverty in the Northwest Territories* in 2013.⁷ In 2014, the *Strategic Framework* gave way to a more proactive action plan with *Working Together: An Action Plan to Reduce and Eliminate Poverty in the NWT (Anti-Poverty Action Plan)*.⁸

Plan Components and Highlights

In 2014, the government invested \$7.8 million in poverty-reduction initiatives, providing an additional \$4.4 million in the 2015 budget, including a \$1.75 million food allowance increase for people receiving income assistance.⁹ The latest *Annual Business Plan 2016-2017* further prioritizes lowering the cost of living through safe and affordable housing, solutions to address homelessness, food security, and universal and affordable childcare. However, no funding is currently attached to the plan.¹⁰

The five pillars of the *Anti-Poverty Action Plan* include:

Children and Family Support

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

Healthy Living and Reaching Our Potential

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

Safe and Affordable Housing

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

Sustainable Communities

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

Integrated Continuum of Services

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

Community Engagement and Plan Development

In 2014, the *Anti-Poverty Action Plan* was released after a Territorial Roundtable and the creation of an *Anti-Poverty Charter*. That same year, a \$500,000 *Anti-Poverty Fund* was established to support community-based anti-poverty efforts¹¹ and a second Territorial Anti-Poverty Roundtable was held in Yellowknife. Over 100 delegates from Indigenous governments, non-governmental organizations, community organizations, and businesses gathered to identify key poverty reduction priorities.

MEASURING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

Statistical Indicators of Poverty (unofficial measurement tools)¹²

	LIM Low-Income Measure After Tax ¹³ *****	Families Earning Less Than \$30,000 ¹⁴	Crowded Households (6+) ¹⁵	Household Food Insecurity ¹⁶	High School Graduates ¹⁷	Social Assistance** Recipients ¹⁸	Minimum Wage ¹⁹
2007	6,140	1,820, 16.6%	*	16.5%	372, 52.8%	2,024, 4.7%	\$8.25
2008	6,630	1,870, 17.0%	*	17.8%	423, 58.0%	2,067, 4.8%	\$8.25
2009	6,540	1,860, 16.7%	6.7%	9.8%	433, 55.1%	2,402, 5.6%	\$8.25
2010	6,520	1,840, 16.4%	*	12.0%	403, 54.8%	2,314, 5.3%	\$9.00
2011	6,740	1,790, 16.0%	5.6%	15.2%	396, 54.1%	2,313, 5.3%	\$10.00
2012	7,090	1,750, 15.7%	*	20.4%	394, 55.0%	2,240, 5.1%	\$10.00
2013 ***	6,870	1,720, 15.2%	*	24.1%	437, 63.3%	2,324, 5.3%	\$10.00
2014 ****	7,040	*	6.1%	*	463, 64.6%	2,312, 5.3%	\$10.00
2015	*	*	*	*	416, 66.7%	*	\$12.50

* Data not available.

** Social Assistance** refers to the total number of people assisted by all Social Assistance programs in the province.

*** *Building on the Strengths of Northerners: A Strategic Framework toward the Elimination of Poverty in the Northwest Territories* was introduced in 2013.

**** *Working Together: An Action Plan to Reduce and Eliminate Poverty in the NWT* was introduced in 2014.

***** *Building on the Strengths of Northerners: A Strategic Framework toward the Elimination of Poverty in the Northwest Territories* notes the Low Income Measure Before Tax as a statistical indicator of poverty in the territory (among many other indicators). Statistics Canada does not collect data directly measuring poverty in NWT, such as the Low Income Cut-off (LICO) or Market Basket Measure (MBM).

Progress to Date

The Government of the Northwest Territories has stated that it considers the *Anti-Poverty Action Plan* to be a living document that can be updated to reflect the changing realities of poverty in the territory. In March 2016, the government hosted the third annual Anti-Poverty Roundtable, where government representatives, Indigenous governments, civil society organizations, and businesses met in Yellowknife to discuss recent efforts to address poverty. After these annual roundtables, comments are implemented in the next iterations of the territorial anti-poverty action plan.²⁰

Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

Human Rights: Dignity and respect for people are common themes found throughout the NWT poverty reduction strategies. The strategies identify proactive steps that provide services to people through community input, community building, government budgeting, and cultural perspectives. Nonetheless, the government's poverty reduction framework and action plan do not explicitly use a human rights approach.

Income and Employment Support: The NWT spends approximately \$140 million on 16 different income assistance programs annually.²¹ In the 2015-2016 budget, \$930 million was allocated for social programs including social services, healthcare, education, housing, policing, and corrections.²² Despite such significant levels of funding, social assistance rates remain inadequate. In 2013, the total social assistance income for a family of four was \$33,782.²³ However, according to the latest NWT Market Basket Measure, the income required for a family of four to meet its basic needs in Yellowknife is \$51,314.²⁴

As of October 2016, the unemployment rate in the NWT is 7%, slightly above the national average and a drop from the 2015 rate of 9.1%.²⁵ Unemployment disproportionately affects First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people in rural parts of the NWT due to lower education rates and lack of access to jobs.²⁶ The NWT has the second highest minimum wage in Canada at \$12.50 per hour.²⁷

The *Canada – Northwest Territories Job Fund* is a six-year agreement that began in 2014 and contributes approximately \$1.1 million for job training and development.²⁸ The fund focuses on training individuals who are not eligible for Employment Insurance and prioritizes underrepresented people in the workforce.²⁹ The fund includes support for programs like the *Targeted Initiative for Older Workers*; *Learning Supports for People with Disabilities*; and *Small Community Employment Support*.³⁰ The 2016-2017 budget will provide \$4.3 million for new education, training, and youth development initiatives,³¹ including \$900,000 for employment support in smaller communities.³²

Housing: The cost of living in the NWT is high and housing insecurity is worsening. The percentage of households in core need has gone from 16% in 2004 to 19.8% in 2014.³³ In 2014, 15.8% of households, mostly in Yellowknife, were spending more than one-third of their household income on shelter costs. The same year, 13.7% of

homes, most of them in small communities, were categorized as unsuitable (too many residents for the number of bedrooms) and/or inadequate – lacking running water, an indoor toilet, bathing and washing facilities, and/or needing major repairs.³⁴

The 2016 Budget Address commits an \$82 million contribution to the NWT Housing Corporation (NWT HC), in addition to \$16.6 million in federal funding for affordable housing projects.³⁵ The NWT HC is the major supplier of social housing in smaller communities around the territory. The Government of the NWT is currently researching how a Housing First model can better address homelessness and is looking to implement a five-year Housing First program tailored to NWT communities.³⁶

The *Investment in Affordable Housing* agreement between the federal government and the Government of the NWT was extended from its original \$11 million investment between 2011 and 2014 to an additional \$18 million invested between 2014 and 2019.³⁷ By 2015, the agreement has helped 403 households in the NWT, including 174 seniors, 36 people experiencing disability, and 66 households experiencing family violence.³⁸

Education: The legacy of residential schools and colonialism impedes access and success within the territorial education system. The latest NWT statistics on education levels show staggering disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In 2014, 12% of the Indigenous population had education levels below Grade 9 compared to only 1.1% of the non-Indigenous population.³⁹ In the 2014/15 academic year, 56% of Indigenous students graduated from high school, compared to 89.8% of non-Indigenous students.⁴⁰ The total high school graduation rate in the territory is now 66.7%, an improvement from 52% in 2010, but still below the national average by approximately 15%.⁴¹ In 2014, 4.7% of Indigenous peoples in the NWT had a university degree, in comparison with 34.2% of non-Indigenous peoples.⁴² Additionally, about 42.5% of adults in the NWT have literacy scores below the level needed to attain “a job in today’s knowledge-based world.”⁴³

As the only jurisdiction in Canada that officially recognizes Indigenous languages, the Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) department created Dene Kede and Inuugatigiit curricula.⁴⁴ Additionally, the government hopes to inform the curricula with Indigenous world views and land-based education.⁴⁵

The government offers grants and loans to post-secondary students through the *Student Financial Assistance (SFA)* program. Due to rising demand, ECE increased the combined loan limit from \$40 million to \$45 million.⁴⁶ The total ECE budget will increase to \$316 million for supporting post-secondary students and low-income children and for employment programs for people with disabilities.⁴⁷ However, there is still a gap in connecting education to sustainable employment. First Nation, Inuit, and Métis people in the NWT are reported to have less access to schooling, adequate post-secondary training or resources such as transportation into the city that could guide people into a trade or employment.⁴⁸

Early Childhood Education and Care: Over 32% of the NWT children are vulnerable in the areas of social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development by the time they begin school,⁴⁹ compared to 25% of children living across Canada. In smaller NWT communities, as many as 60% of children experience delays in their development.⁵⁰

In 2015, there were 113 licensed childcare programs⁵¹ that could occupy 2,361 regulated childcare spaces for children aged 0-11, although there were 3,994 children in the 0-5 age range alone.⁵² To better support families and early child development, ECE and the Department of Health and Social Services have partnered to create a ten-year strategy, *Right from the Start: A Framework for Early Childhood Development in NWT*.⁵³ The government has since released the *Early Childhood Development Action Plan* for 2014-2016.⁵⁴ The plan contains 22 actions targeting families with children up to five years old.⁵⁵

The *Healthy Families Program (HFP)* promotes strong parent-child relationships through a voluntary and intensive intervention-based home visiting program.⁵⁶ HFP has expanded and is now offered in 16 NWT communities⁵⁷ but is yet to be evaluated on its overall effectiveness with families. Mothers who suffer from addiction or who might be at risk of alcoholism during pregnancy now receive priority referrals to counselling services to prevent Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.⁵⁸ *NWT Child Benefits* provides cash to families with less than a \$30,000 income⁵⁹ – this benefit is paid to families with incomes up to \$80,000 in gradually reduced amounts.⁶⁰

Healthcare: In a health report card published by the Conference Board of Canada, the NWT ranks below most territories and provinces in overall health.⁶¹ Despite scoring an “A+” on self-reported health, the NWT ranks poorly in many areas including: life expectancy, premature mortality, infant mortality, and mortality due to cancer.⁶² In 2014, 51.4% of people in the NWT perceived their health to be very good or excellent, 59.4% perceived their mental health to be very good or excellent, and 78% reported having a somewhat or very strong sense of community belonging.⁶³ However, these numbers significantly decrease for people with an income less than \$50,000: only 34% perceived their health to be very good or excellent, 41.5% perceived their mental health to be very good or excellent, and 76.9% reported a sense of community belonging.⁶⁴

The NWT is the first territory/province to combine health and social services. The government is adding \$7 million to Health and Social Services for health facilities, long-term care beds, and for implementing the new *Mental Health Act*, which comes into force in 2017.⁶⁵ Recent amendments to the *Mental Health Act* establish enhanced access to services and better protections for the rights of persons with mental illness.⁶⁶

Community wellness programs, collectively known as the *Northern Wellness Approach*, received over \$7 million in funding in the 2013-2014 fiscal year.⁶⁷ The plans set out local health priorities developed by community wellness committees, local band councils, and hamlet councils in every community across the NWT.⁶⁸ Funds are divided among Healthy Child and Youth Development programs, Mental

Health and Addictions programs, and Healthy Living and Disease Prevention programs.⁶⁹

Inequality: Indigenous peoples in the NWT disproportionately experience worse social conditions than other groups. In the NWT, 20% of Yellowknife, 50% of regional centres, and 90% of the smaller community residents are Indigenous.⁷⁰

Food Security: Most food insecure households rely on wages, salaries, or self-employment.⁷¹ From 2014 to 2015, the government funded \$1 million towards nutritious food for early childhood and school and after-school programs, but food insecurity was not mentioned in the 2016 Budget Address.⁷²

Views From Outside the Northwest Territories Government

The No Place for Poverty Coalition has commended the NWT for ongoing investment in poverty reduction. The Coalition notes that while greater investment is needed to eradicate poverty in the long-term, the *2013 Anti-Poverty Strategic Framework and the 2014 Anti-Poverty Action Plan* have made a positive impact.⁷³ However, the Coalition maintains that government has yet to take significant actions in areas such as affordable housing and childcare programs.⁷⁴

A report from PROOF, a research team at the University of Toronto, recently showed that the NWT had the highest rate of food insecurity since 2005, jumping from 14.2% to 24.1% in the past decade.⁷⁵ The report called food insecurity in northern Canada a 'state of emergency'. The head researcher of the report, Naomi Dachner, commented on their findings in an interview: "we're talking about a very serious problem. One that's inextricably linked to health and well-being and so many people are being afflicted. We've got an epidemic I'd say."⁷⁶ This is the second-highest rate among provinces and territories and is well above the national average of 8.3%.⁷⁷ Moderate and severe food insecurity also increased to 17.9%.⁷⁸ As of 2014, the NWT correspondingly has the second highest rate of children living in food insecure households at 29%.⁷⁹

Yellowknife Centre MLA, Julie Green, recently voiced some concerns about changes to calculations for income support payments for families. In particular, she was critical about rules eliminating children under 18 from support for food and clothing. This change came shortly after the federal government introduced the new Canada Child Benefit meant to increase assistance for families below the poverty line. As MLA Green stated in an interview "[t]he GNWT is helping to perpetuate the poverty trap...they are not allowing families to experience the full benefit of the new federal anti-poverty initiative."⁸⁰ In response, the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, Alfred Moses, told CBC News, "There's been no concerns that have been brought to the office, no concerns from any of the families."⁸¹

THE BOTTOM LINE

Building on the Strength of Northerners is focused on using northern cultures and community perspectives to eradicate poverty and further strengthen communities. The *Strategic Framework* states “[o]ur approach to the elimination of poverty must be contextual and flexible, recognizing cultural and demographic differences and driven by community identified needs”.⁸² For example, many people living in the NWT may hunt, fish, trap, and gather food and wood for sustenance, and “[m]any of these people would not identify themselves as poor.”⁸³

The *Anti-Poverty Action Plan* provides a strong outline for action; however, this plan still requires adequate funding to be effective. Areas like employment, housing, food security, and early childhood development require significant attention. As the action plan’s term comes to an end, a post-implementation evaluation will help sustain and carry forward the goals first set in *Building on the Strengths of Northerners*. The NWT has the potential to make lasting progress if the principles of monitoring, evaluation, and inclusion remain at the forefront of its poverty elimination efforts.

FOR MORE INFORMATION



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⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² *Building on the Strengths of Northerners*, *supra* note 13 at 9.

⁸³ Ibid.