



# Halifax, NS

## Community Conversation Summary

April 19, 2023

**CAMPAIGN 2000**  
**END CHILD & FAMILY POVERTY**



**CCPA**  
CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
CENTRE CANADIEN  
de POLITIQUES ALTERNATIVES

## Introduction

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Below, we've summarized the main themes of the community conversation in Halifax, Nova Scotia with nineteen people with lived experience of poverty.

The conversation was hosted by the *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Nova Scotia* in partnership with *Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty*.

This summary is in four sections based on the topics of discussion. Main themes with related content and quotes are presented for each topic. The conversation content will be further analyzed over the next year, alongside content from other conversations across the country, to help create a community-driven indicator framework and recommendations for action.

This summary was created after sending a draft to the participants and host organizations to see if these points sounded right, offer an opportunity for corrections or clarification, and ensure that they had the chance to hold and use this information as soon as possible. This finalized version (August 2023) reflects the feedback we received, and the content will be further analyzed over the next year with attention to that feedback. Thanks to everyone who participated and responded!

We've tried to be true to the content and emotion of the conversation, which touched on the sensitive and difficult topics of experiencing poverty and discrimination, and that may come through in what's presented here.

Since this is a summary, we have listened to what participants shared and reflected that back here. With that in mind, there may be content presented here that does not align with Campaign 2000's values or platform.

The urgent need to address the housing crisis was a major theme. Participants described the way that having safe, secure, affordable housing is a human right that, when violated, leads to trauma, violence, and cyclical poverty, but if fulfilled, would allow for health and wellness, community connection, and the ability to engage in society. Systemic racism and discrimination against Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities was also a prominent theme, in particular the disenfranchisement of land, gentrification of historic communities, and perpetuation of systemic oppression through white-led non-profits. The immediate need to increase social assistance rates and overhaul the existing system to address discrimination and provide better coordination of supports was also clear.

## A community with no poverty has...

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### *Safe, secure, and affordable housing*

- Accessible, affordable, safe housing in good condition
  - No threats of eviction, no term leases, safe from pests, landlord is responsive to issues
  - Heat, hot water, and water included
- Housing and utilities that cost no more than a third of your income
- Ensuring housing for all would lead to healthy individuals and families, less crime, violence, addictions caused by trauma, more community investment, greater sense of belonging
- People contribute to housing construction/maintenance as a way to build skills and be invested in their community
  - People are valued, trained, resourced to build their community

### *Everyone is valued and connected*

- Community participation, care, social connection, and support
  - Speaking up for each other
  - “Everybody’s valued.”
- Communal, collaborative community so people are invested
  - As mentioned above for housing, people would contribute to their community and be resourced to do so: “People have an investment in their community, in their infrastructure, you have value and accountability shared and collaborative and you give them skills... they’re learning construction, gardening, masonry – have them work side by side. Teach them the skills to build their community.”
- Community-oriented alternatives to consumerism: meal kitchens, free haircuts, access to resources, community gardens, bartering, skill-sharing.

### *Employment and education*

- Free education, training, and work experience for everyone
  - “They all become then trained and experienced workers that are able to provide back to society.”
  - Access to structure and opportunities in day to day: “Access to job training, actual jobs, even if it’s only part-time work or a volunteer opportunity.”
  - Jobs that meet people’s needs and offer job security
- Employment for everyone
- Education and literacy for everyone

### *Income security and wealth equality*

- More money to be able to meet basic needs, including housing
- Living wage and basic income
- Substantial disability support that accounts for high costs of medical care and supplies
- Student loans are forgiven
- Tax reform, because government services depend on taxes, and having more money for that would let services continue and expand, but the money “shouldn’t come out of the pockets of the most vulnerable folks in our society.”
  - Inheritance tax laws
  - Increased capital gains tax
  - Condensed income tax bracket

### *Safety, health, and mental health*

- Community would have less mental health challenges and better mental health supports
  - E.g., a support line for mental health challenges and free, accessible in-person counselling
  - Rehabilitation and support for all forms of mental health and addiction issues, including PTSD and ADD/ADHD
- Less guns and violence
- Less drugs, more harm reduction
- Rehabilitation and support for people who have been incarcerated

### *Equality and supports for children and youth*

- Support for youth aging out of child welfare system
  - Supports would include independent living skills, financial literacy, interpersonal skills, self-advocacy, support for experiences of abuse or trauma.
- Equality: “Every child, no matter what, would have the same opportunities.”

## **Experiences of poverty in Halifax**

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### *Social assistance, disability assistance, and other benefit programs*

- System is set up to perpetuate poverty and marginalization – inadequacy of rates and supports
  - Social assistance system is “set up to keep you in it.”
  - Rates are far too low: “You can’t live off what they give you. You never could. You’re taking from one bill to pay another.”

- Very low shelter allowance from social assistance – not enough to rent a unit, perpetuating homelessness: “We have to stay in the shelter for three, four, five, six months and build up our money.”
- Comparing rates with how much it costs to have someone in a shelter or incarcerate them – government pays much, much more for those costs than they give a person to house and support themselves.
- Disability assistance is not enough: “It’s not much more than income assistance. And an able bodied person can hardly live on income assistance and wouldn’t have extra needs like medication and mobility support and therapies.”
- Benefits won’t cover costs for children’s programs, e.g., theatre program
- Discrimination and judgment from system and workers: “Even just how you’re treated as a person. How you’re talked to. How they try to make you feel less of a person. Nobody deserves to have to be made to feel like that just to live day by day, just to get the basic needs and supports that everybody should have.”
- System is not proactive or supportive with helping find work: “I was supposed to get an employment support worker. I’ve been waiting [for six months].”
- Barriers to access and coordination of services
  - Barriers with unnecessary paperwork and administration for social assistance
    - “Everything from the special diet to the telephone allowance – needing a doctor’s note for a telephone allowance, that is ridiculous.”
  - Accessibility barriers: “When I went to go on income assistance, I needed to sign the paperwork. They could not or would not provide me accessible versions.”
  - Threats of child apprehension: “I was left a single parent with two children with an apartment and no family income. I was told, in order to keep my children, I had to go on income assistance.”
  - No coordination between services
    - Income assistance doesn’t help with finding work, but social workers will direct you to them.
    - “Same with housing – almost anything you ask them, they pass it on.”
    - “They just shuffle you around.”
  - Even for the supports available, “They put you through a hard time trying to qualify for any of that and the case workers won’t talk to you. And the waitlist is long for people to get in and see an Employment Support Worker.”
  - Wanting to go back to school – getting cut off
- Stigma and discrimination for being on social assistance
  - Stigma and discrimination from landlords – won’t rent to someone on social assistance when they have an alternative applicant.
  - Lack of support and connection from family and friends due to stigma of being on income assistance.

### *Child welfare system and ageing out*

- Injustice of parents not being supported to raise and care for their own children but foster parents being given money to care for those children.
- Poor conditions of group homes:
  - Lack of accommodation for youth with disabilities: "I have ADHD and my chores were late – not by even an hour – two minutes late – when I was [kicked out early], I had nowhere to go."
  - Example of group home with no blankets, sheets, or towels
- Lack of support for youth aging out of care
  - No financial or other supports, increased risk of your own child being apprehended, cycle of poverty and child welfare interaction: "It just circles because you get out of care, but you have nowhere to go. And then if you have a kid, they steal your kid – because you can't provide for this kid because of poverty."

### *Housing, homelessness, and gentrification*

- Housing is completely unaffordable
  - Housing costs are so high, all income has to go to it, people can't afford food
  - Inability to afford housing while expensive condos keep being built: "You can't afford housing. [But] every time you turn around there's condos."
  - Housing is often geared to students rather than other renters
  - Feels depressing and hopeless
  - Housing shortage and labour shortage means that immigrants are coming to Nova Scotia to work and can't find a place to live
- Gentrification as major contributor
  - In North End and Uniacke Square areas in particular (historically African Nova Scotian communities) – community is being pushed out
  - Injustice of gentrification:
    - "They want to come in communities, into the places where years before they were deemed no good and nobody wanted these places."
    - Places that were deemed unfit land in the past, marginalized, discriminated against: Now condos are going in, rents are increasing, "and it takes away from the community.... Just look at North Preston, you have people paying for years and years and years for land [for which] they won't give them the land titles. You gave them that land because you didn't think they'd be able to live off and sustain it, grow it to what it is – and they've been there for over 400 years. And then now, they want to come in ...because all of a sudden now, they can make money off it."
- Social housing

- Government hasn't built new public housing for 30 years, is disorganized with current units, both their condition and occupancy
- Stigma and stereotypes based on your address, if you live in public housing: "When an employer looks up your address, you don't get a call back."
- Renters can't make improvements to their units that would lower costs
  - Power bill is always going up, but as renters, no autonomy in building, can't do upgrades to increase power efficiency which would decrease bills – tenant can't even apply for grant for this.
- Homelessness is increasing
  - Homelessness is growing: Even two people, working, often can't find a place to live.
  - One participant told us, "I don't know where I'm sleeping tonight."
  - Homelessness affects every aspect of life: "People without housing find a hard time to be situated in any other aspect. It's hard to function at a job if you're homeless. It's hard to stay employed if you're homeless. It's hard to be a productive member of society in any aspect, without falling for addictions, or mental health, or anything like that if you're having all of the trauma of homelessness."
- Housing people in hotels is unsustainable and the funds could be better used elsewhere
  - High costs of housing people in hotels – the high amounts could be given to people for rent: "They'll spend thousands of dollars to put people in a hotel that [doesn't] have the necessities – but they won't find you a place and pay your rent every month for \$1200."
  - Hotels are profiting but are not set up to adequately support people, no proper kitchen, only allowed limited belongings.
  - Hotel regulations are devaluing and dehumanizing, staff stigmatize people staying there.

### *Historic and ongoing systemic discrimination against African Nova Scotian community*

- Historically Black neighbourhoods in Halifax are disproportionately affected by poverty, homelessness, and incarceration.
- Direct result of government policies and investments – the lack of intentional anti-racist policies and investments, particularly around housing, means: "A lot of folks experiencing homelessness are of Black or Indigenous descent. And a lot of folks who are suffering from periods of incarceration are Black or Indigenous descent."
- Black community members have "always been side-tracked in jobs, for education, for opportunities; [are] locked up unjustly... not having an opportunity to get out of a vicious cycle."

### *Racism and discrimination from non-profit sector and service providers*

- Non-profits and service providers benefit from projects and funding meant to help marginalized people: “A lot of the times, the only ones that benefit from it are the people that actually work for those programs and who work for those non-profits.”
- Whiteness and covert racism of non-profit sector that serves diverse demographics
  - Should instead be by communities, for communities: “If you’re trying to help a certain group of people, and you’ve never walked in their shoes, it’s hard to understand their vision and their needs and the assessments they have to have done, in order to suit their needs properly and appropriately.”
  - Perpetuates cycles of poverty and marginalization while non-profits benefit and maintain their position: “None of these programs become sustainable – because these non-profits profit and the community never profits – because if they profited they ... would be sustainable on their own without the non-profit.”
- Service providers discriminate against marginalized groups: “They sometimes take away services ... to give to other people, to suit their own needs, and in the process, they degraded the little people who are more vulnerable systematically. That’s what it’s like living in poverty conditions in North End Halifax.”
- Particular systemic discrimination related to land and housing against Black communities in Nova Scotia:
  - Non-profits harming Black communities through supposedly equitable projects: “Some of these organizations would want to go into historically Black neighbourhoods, buy up the properties, and then fill it up with folks who are not from the community.”
  - Example of land trust meant to be for Black communities but headed by white organizations/people: “In Nova Scotia, they have a history of taking – expropriating land from historic communities – and they never give [it] back. But then they want people to buy into the land trust that people never gained fruition off of, yet everybody who is running it always benefits.”

### *Systemic inequality for newcomers*

- Difficulty finding employment – still can’t find a job after a year, and running out of money
- Inequities of newcomers not being able to work in their own profession
- Unfair and untransparent lack of supports and resources: “There’s people that moved here, thinking, ‘Oh Canada’s a great place.’ And now they want to move to other places because they feel it was going to be different than what it is. I didn’t think I was going to come from one country to another and struggle.”

### *Cycles of poverty, daily stress, trauma, and not seeing a way out*

- Stress and trauma of just trying to survive every day:



- “When you’re wondering where you’re going to sleep, what you’re going to eat, when you have to decide between paying for your rent or paying for medications – that’s a lot of stress on somebody just trying to live from day to day.”
- “You’re in trauma mode every day trying to survive.”
- Cycle of unmet needs and lack of supports at all levels of government: “These basic things that we need just to live ... are not being met on a provincial or federal level – then we have a snowball effect. Addictions, mental health, homelessness, and it’s just going to keep going and going and going.”

### *Employment and education*

- Post-secondary education is unaffordable and loan repayment perpetuates poverty
- Ageism and ableism create barriers to employment
- Employment income is inadequate, often not a living wage:
  - People get jobs then leave because wages aren’t enough – jobs can’t keep people sustainably to put money back into communities
  - People are forced to move away: “They’re leaving but you can’t blame them ... Nobody wants to leave their place they grew up and the place they love.”

### *Violence and incarceration as a result of poverty*

- Violence in communities is due to poverty and violations of human rights
  - “Your safety is jeopardized when people’s human rights are not being met. Because then they do things, in order to make money, in order to help support themselves and their families. ... It would get rid of a lot of the crime and violence with guns, drugs, [sex work], you name it– if there wasn’t a dire need.”
  - Gangs, violence, putting self at risk of incarceration – this is all a result of poverty: “Where people get incarcerated, the reasons why they do the stuff that they do, a lot of times, it’s in order to survive.”

### *Challenges with community and government action*

- Mass mobilization of people living in poverty is difficult
  - People do not have the time or capacity as they are focused on survival
  - Systems are inaccessible and bureaucratic
  - People sometimes aren’t comfortable to come forward and speak about their situations due to stigma
- Frustration with government inaction and lack of accountability: “Right now I think it’s a lot of excuses and not solutions.”

## What is working in your community?

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Due to the large group, we weren't able to ask this question – the conversation focused on the vision and experiences, then moved to brief action items at the end. But participants still found a way to share the strengths of their community when discussing the other prompts, and those are included here.

- Poverty can be a misleading term – the North End is a rich and vibrant community in so many ways, especially its children and youth:
  - “The North End of Halifax... this is one of the richest and most diverse groups of people I've ever lived amongst. The kids are great, you know what I mean? They're active. They're involved. I'm sitting here in the library every day, regardless of colour, race, creed, or whatever. Somebody's doing a good job somewhere – parents – but just to say that I think it's a very rich community in a lot of ways.”
- Opportunities to specialize in high schools: “If you have a propensity towards nursing, or tech, or robotics in your Grade 11 year onwards, you can now specialize.”
- Food provided at events and meetings is helpful and should continue
- Ecology Action Centre program for new Canadians related to green energy through the Nova Scotia Community College was named as a good opportunity

## Actions that the government needs to take are...

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### Housing

- Prioritize housing security:
  - “Even if you didn't have secure jobs but you had secure housing and you had the basic things you need – you could build from there.”
  - “Housing is health.”
- More binding language and policy to enforce housing as a human right in Canada.
  - Housing is “a human right, not a commodity.”
- Government needs to provide housing, continue to build it, give it to people who need it.
- Housing should be regulated in both public and private sectors.
  - “[Regulate] housing by square footage – you can only charge so much money per square footage for the amenities that you're having – then people could afford to live in homes.”
  - “Rent being tied to square footage, or the unit as opposed to the lease. I think that would be really important.”

- No fixed term leases, landlord abuse, unregulated rent increases.
- Do this provincially and federally so the problem is solved everywhere.
- Accessible housing for people with disabilities (all kinds of disabilities)
- Coordinate with communities and find creative housing solutions, e.g., seniors wanting to scale down, families in need of housing, address both problems at once.
- Deprivatize electricity

### *Income and income assistance*

- Set a basic income for everyone
- Address discrimination against those on income assistance
- Politicians should earn what basic citizen earns: “If you can’t survive on what the basic system earns you – that needs to change. And how are you going to change that, if you have not experienced it?”

### *Employment*

- Increase minimum wage to living wage
- More job opportunities for new immigrants
- More support systems to help people find jobs and sustain them, help with budgeting
- More employment opportunities
- Employment programs that take disabilities into account

### *Tax reform*

- Tax changes to address wealth inequality and allow everyone’s basic needs to be met
  - Inheritance tax laws
  - Increased capital gains tax
  - Condensed income tax bracket

### *Meet basic needs*

- Ensure access to basic needs: housing, nutrition, education
- Basic needs need to be met “before you can get out of this trauma space and be an entire functioning person.”

### *Anti-racist action and policy change*

- Full recognition from multiple levels of government of historically Black neighbourhoods, including Uniacke Square
- More support both for newcomers and historic residents of communities
- Government should invest into antiracist equitable policies

### *Institutions*

- Jails should be more supportive, rehabilitative environments
- Group homes should be reformed

- E.g., better funding, youth should have more agency, homes should not be centred on punishment for behaviour, but instead offer care and support to solve problems together.

### *Disability*

- Solutions by disabled people for disabled people: “Nothing about us without us.”
- Funding for disability community for land trust in condos – convert to affordable, accessible housing
- Disability resources that don't require a diagnosis in order to receive support (medical misogyny and medical racism can prevent people from accessing diagnoses)

### *Class*

- Add legislation for discrimination against people based on class: “I think that could be one basic change even to the Canadian Charter, which would help to build more of a framework about laws that could address poverty.”

### *Systemic change based on root issues*

- Explore and address root causes of poverty
- Work against divide and conquer mentality – “we’re all up against the same problem”
- More unifying, collaborative solutions

### *More conversations with real change as a result*

- Implement real change based on people’s concerns: “It would be really nice if this could all be followed up by action, rather than more talk, more talk. There has to be something concrete.”
- More conversations and meetings like this, with a meal, with new faces: “conversations like this need to continue.”
- Value people and their contributions: “People being valued... for whatever they can contribute – encourage people to contribute and collaborate. That builds community.”