



# Sydney Mines, NS

## Community Conversation Summary

17 April 2023

CAMPAIGN 2000  
END CHILD & FAMILY POVERTY



## Introduction

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Below, we've summarized the main themes of the community conversation in Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia with twenty youth with lived experience of poverty.

The conversation was hosted by *Community CARES Youth Outreach* and 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 (September 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, abuse, and discrimination, including harm to children through the child welfare system.

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.

A major theme that emerged with a sense of urgency was the need to break the cycle of poverty that young people and their children continue to experience in Sydney Mines and the nearby communities. Participants described feeling stuck in this cycle, seeing their own children start to fall into it, and the pain and hopelessness that comes with being able to identify the cycle, but not have the resources, policies, and programs in place to break it (as well as inadequate funding for existing organizations doing the work to break it). The injustice of the child welfare system and social assistance system, particularly the way they penalize young parents, especially mothers, and people living in poverty, are major factors in this cycle. The need for adequate affordable housing and mental health care was also clear.

## A community with no poverty has...

### *Enough affordable food for everyone*

- Children would have lunch and everyone would be fed and healthy.
- Urban farms, gardens, and food growing for community.
  - Pear or apple trees instead of flower baskets on main streets.
  - "Orchards and community gardens, berry picking sites."
- Less judgment for using food banks.

### *Community gatherings, trust, and support*

- Community days of the week where everyone works towards community goals, like picking up litter, working in the community garden, offering services and medical care free of charge, etc.
- Trust in neighbours: "To leave your child with a neighbour and say, 'Hey, I need to run to the store for this. Can you watch my kid for a few minutes?'"
- More family and community gatherings without strict housing regulations: "Having backyard barbecues and [inviting people] without the risk of being evicted."

### *Different systems*

- Four day work week, with the fifth day for community work and shared tasks.
  - "A priority for community on one day of the week where everybody has their specific tasks ...like a good communism."
- Higher taxes on wasteful or non-essential items.
- Community barter system, e.g. trading eggs for shoveling driveway, results in good relationships with neighbours.

### *Safety and health*

- Clean and safe streets without needles on the ground.
- Mental health care to make this happen: "If our mental health was better and our healthcare was better for mental health, we wouldn't have so many people using and there wouldn't be so many needles all over the place."
- Lower crime rates because people would have enough money for food and not need to steal.
- Less drug dealers because people would have enough money to not sell drugs.

### *Housing for all*

- Boarded up houses would be repaired and used to house low-income families.
- No homelessness, everyone would have warm shelter.

### *Children would be supported and not have to worry*

- Services and support for children.
- “Children will be able to be children and have the same things other kids have in the community” – they wouldn’t have to worry about money, they would be able to have enough to eat and time to play.

*Cycles of poverty and abuse are broken*

- Working towards this: “Somebody has to break the cycle, and I feel like that's why everybody's in this room, so they can break the cycle.”

## Being a young person in Sydney Mines and experiences of poverty

*Poverty is traumatic and feels like an inescapable cycle*

- Poverty is widespread and normalized: “This whole town, we don’t call poverty, we just call it living because that’s how we live.”
- Injustice and harm of poverty: “Poverty is a crime itself and it’s traumatizing families.”
- Poverty feels like a cycle that’s hard to escape or break:
  - History repeating itself: “I’m struggling the way my grandparents were struggling.”
  - Can’t see how to fix it: “We want to have what we never had. We’re breaking so many other cycles with abuse and tension and neglect, but if we’re not able to give them the support, if we’re not able to give them the food or the transportation, we’re back on our level of where we were before. How can we make this better for the next generations?”
  - Witnessing the cycles play out in younger generations and feeling powerless to stop it: “My daughter... I was the same way as a child. It’s almost like I’m watching myself through her. Her depression, her anxiety, her cutting herself, all of it, it’s me through and through. How can I stop this? Because I know what’s going to come happen next. Addiction is next and it scares the hell out of me ...I lost a lot of people from addiction. It’s a sad reality that it could be my daughter one day. It kills me.”

*Living in survival mode*

- Every day is about survival, living “in fight mode.”
  - “We’re surviving. Every day is, where are you getting the next two litres of milk?”
- Even if you’re working, you’re still not making enough, living paycheque to paycheque with precarious finances.
  - No money for sudden expenses – getting caught in the cycle of never being able to cover everything: “There’s always something wrong with your car, and

you have no money to do it. Then you get pulled over, then you get a ticket, and then that's an additional cost. So then you have to pay the ticket, but you can't pay to get your car fixed, so you're going to have the same issue."

- "When GST was late, there were a lot of families pushed... to food banks."

### *Impact of poverty on children*

- Kids are aware of and worrying about families' money problems:
  - "Children shouldn't know when an adult's getting a cheque or assistance or something...But they have to when they're 16 or 15 and they're missing Easter or Christmas because mom's money didn't come in."
  - "They're also so young knowing that if my mom doesn't get her welfare cheque, I'm not going to eat."
- Struggling to give kids what other kids are getting because of finances, e.g., can't send kids to birthday parties because you can't afford a gift.
- Kids taking risks to make money, e.g., selling drugs and cigarettes at a young age, selling harder drugs as they get older.
- Food – hard to afford healthy and adequate food for kids.
  - "Our children go without breakfast, [get] lunches for school, tiny meals for supper, then go to bed with a very hungry tummy."
  - School lunches from cafeteria are very expensive: "For fries and chocolate milk, it was \$8.75."
  - Cheaper to go to McDonald's, makes it difficult to eat healthily.

### *Housing is unaffordable, in disrepair, and unavailable*

- Many houses in the community are in disrepair, boarded up, or empty: "That one's boarded, that's one gone, that one's on fire, that's one's gone."
- Evictions due to poverty are common:
  - "There are people who are single parents and are struggling that are getting evicted, for power bills being extremely high, or they can't afford to buy the groceries."
  - Limited housing so people often have to stay in hotels when they're evicted.
- Evictions due to strict regulations around who can be in the unit – for some rental housing, you're not permitted to have anyone other than residents in unit, but situations of poverty, food insecurity, and abuse make this impossible:
  - Kids can't have friends over, but sometimes the kids are in worse circumstances, so they stay over because they are in bad situations at home, but that leads to eviction.
  - Or, "they feed too many kids in the community, and they all come to your door," and that leads to eviction.
- Fires in apartments have been more frequent lately.

- Suspicion that landlord is to blame, for insurance money because they're also struggling financially, but the tenants lose everything: "It's all for insurance, everything is for money, because no one has enough money to survive. So they're doing whatever they can. Even if they're starting fires."
- Homelessness is increasing and takes different forms:
  - Moving from couch to couch, kids stay with grandparents.
  - People do food delivery gig work and sleep in their cars in a parking lot.
  - People who go to school in Sydney can't find housing and commute from Halifax.
  - Sleeping in a tent outside in the winter.
  - Child welfare forcing one parent to leave the house if they're not doing well, but not supporting with housing, so they have to sleep in their car.
- Challenges with regional housing:
  - Long wait lists: "[My friend has] been on the list for three and a half years and it's ridiculous."
  - Living in hotels in the meantime: "She's right now living in a hotel because there's no housing."

#### *Barriers to and inadequate rates of social assistance*

- Specific barriers and requirements to obtain social assistance and its benefits:
  - Assistance not offering help unless you have kids.
  - Being young parents at 16, not getting any support because they were considered common law.
  - Barriers and double standards for supports from income assistance program:
    - Having to get a note from a doctor to be able to get a phone.
    - Needing to purchase things upfront and submit receipt for reimbursement, which is difficult to have enough money to do, but when you can do it, then they question how you had the money upfront to purchase it.
    - Changing standards of what income assistance will cover, e.g., giving no support for a funeral when they said they would.
- Assistance rates are far too low and haven't changed:
  - Not enough to actually feed yourself, rates don't change when prices rise.
  - "I haven't been on assistance in over 10 years. I just recently got on to get [dental care] and I'm getting the same amount now as I did 10 years ago...How hasn't that changed? How isn't that higher when the price of gas and living, food, everyone's going up?"
  - Having to work under the table because assistance rates are not enough to live on.

## *Harm, discrimination, and lack of support from child welfare system*

- Frequent, discriminatory, and arbitrary apprehension of children:
  - Because parent is living in a hotel: "I'm raising one of my friend's children right now because she was homeless and she lived in a hotel. And her children were taken from her. She is a great mom, but now, I'm raising her oldest because she became homeless because of the system."
  - Because parent is a young mom.
  - Because parent doesn't get enough social assistance for adequate food – if you can't feed your kids, the government takes them away, but the government doesn't give you enough money to feed the kids.
  - Because parent seeks help for mental health or drug use.
    - Being afraid to get help for mental health because your children might get apprehended: "I had horrible postpartum depression, but was terrified to get help because I thought, they'll take my baby."
    - Multiple participants said they had recently lost their children because they got help for their mental health.
    - People using drugs are afraid to get help because they might lose their baby.
  - Child welfare is very quick to apprehend kids: "I don't know if other people's children are removed as easily and quickly as all of ours are in other communities."
  - Child welfare focuses on the wrong situations:
    - Not helping kids whose parents are using hard drugs, witnessing parents overdosing – feels arbitrary: "It's weird how they pick and choose who they're going to take and who they're not and who they're going to give back."
    - Apprehending kids and giving them back to abusive ex-partner.
    - Focus on income more than actual parenting – apprehending kids from low income families, but not ones with controlling/abusive fathers.
- Lack of support and assumptions of neglect from child welfare.
  - No attitude of trying to keep families together: "We're here to take your kids, not we're here to offer you support. Do you need any assistance for groceries? Is there anything we can do so we can keep this going together?"
  - Child welfare using false pretences to come to your house, or coming due to a false accusation, but still finding fault: "They'll go check it out and see that it's not true, but they're still taking notes. They'll pick and pick and pick until they find something."
  - Kids don't have a voice in child welfare interactions.
- Harmful and abusive foster care system.

- Many instances of abuse in the foster homes:
  - “Sometimes they think that they're doing better by putting the kids in foster care. [But the] stories that they said before we were able to get them ... it's not safer in the foster care system whatsoever. If anything, you're almost putting the kid at more risk.”
  - “[Young children] had to push up a dresser up against the door so the dad wouldn't come in. [They were] only eight. It was insane.”
  - “[Family members] were like five and six. And they were telling me things that I've never even heard of. It's just scary.”
- Poverty in foster homes is common.
  - E.g., not being able to go to birthday parties because it's not in the department's budget.
  - Assumptions that child welfare puts children in better situations than they started with – “No, you live in poverty, even worse... You're abused.”
- Injustice of the foster care system, child apprehension, and funding this system.
  - “It doesn't really make sense that they'll reimburse foster parents and give them phones to raise children that other people can't afford to raise. So a stranger could raise your kids. We'll pay them to do it but we won't pay you extra for it.”

#### *Safety and violence*

- Violence has increased recently: murder, gun violence, drug violence.
  - “Before, everyone was dying of an overdose. Every week, there was someone dying of an overdose. [Now...] Same with murders.”
- Poverty leads to risky or unsafe work: It can be hard to feel safe at night because people are out on streets working because they need to make the money to get a hotel or food.
- Theft is common: No trust with neighbours, having to lock your home and car.

#### *Hopelessness and powerlessness*

- Frustration and hopelessness that things aren't changing.
- Fear for children growing up in the community.
- Feeling powerless to make things change:
  - Feeling like the government doesn't realize how expensive food is for how little assistance rates are.
  - Or feeling like “they realize. They just don't care.”

#### *Stigma and judgment for living in poverty as a young person*

- Being made to feel less than, like people look down on you.
- Social media bullying from peers.



- Not having enough money to buy a couch, having to take it from the garbage, being judged for that.

### *Stigma and judgment for being a young mom*

- Stigma and judgment is especially intense when living on a low income.
- Judgment for having multiple kids at a young age.
- Challenges with going to school:
  - Those who could bring their baby had challenges with having to leave class when the baby cried, judgment from peers and teachers.
  - Others weren't allowed to take the baby to school.
- Lack of support from family and community.
  - Judgement and shaming from parents instead of support, even when you're struggling to make ends meet with a baby: "Instead of trying to help me with groceries ...they'd be like, 'Well, you shouldn't have had a kid at 16. What did you do with your money?'"
- Connecting hard childhood to having kids at a young age: "I had a really shitty childhood growing up back home....Hence, the reason we look for love and have babies at 16."

### *Drug use*

- Drug use can impact finances negatively, exacerbate poverty.
- Stigma and judgment for having used drugs in the past, even the distant past: "You will have that stigma attached to you for the rest of your life."

### *Mental health and neurodiversity*

- Mental health, neurodiversity, and disabilities in children.
  - No supports or accommodations from teachers or schools.
  - Parents don't have the support from teachers, are being judged by teachers.
  - Parents don't have the capacity to meet with teachers or find new supports for children: "Not because parents don't care. But because parents don't have enough time and brain capacity ... when they can't even afford food."
  - Teachers need more support and education around learning disabilities/mental health issues for kids.
  - Challenges with inclusion in existing programs for kids with disabilities.
- Mental health for young people
  - Engage in self harm from depression and abuse.
  - Challenges with self-esteem: "Nobody teaches us to feel good about ourselves. We have to get our validation from other people, which is ridiculous."

## What is working in your community?

### *Supporting kids*

- Teaching kids financial literacy and trusting them with that information: “I feel it’s an important lesson to teach them because my parents never taught me anything about money when I was a kid.”
- Recognizing that love and connection matter most: “It’s who’s there and who loves them and who cares about them that’s there. That’s what matters.”

### *Services, programs, and supports*

- Services that are well-resourced, e.g., the Allied Centre supported with funding for tooth extraction for a person on assistance.
- Specific people, e.g., a guidance counsellor who advocated for being able to bring a baby to high school, a doctor who gave mental health medication rather than alerting child welfare to parent’s mental health challenges.
- Support from staff at CCYO and from the CCYO groups – often takes the place of family support.
  - CCYO is the “heart of Sydney Mines.”
- Cooking class where you take home meal prep and recipes.
- Mobile Art Centre, a bus that goes around on certain nights of the week and has art projects for youth and adults.
- COVID fairies during the pandemic, where people brought gifts or donations to others in the community.
  - The goodwill and community kindness of this: “It was such a big community bonding session, where people didn’t even want to get credit. They just did it.”
- Churches
  - Will give you necessities and help when you ask.
  - Run events for the holidays, e.g., a market for children to buy presents for a nickel: “It was one of the sweetest things I’ve ever seen. How excited were your kids to give those gifts?”
- Activities for kids and youth
  - The Boys and Girls Club used to have a program with sports, donuts and hot chocolate.
  - J Street and North Sydney kids and youth programs/centres.
  - Day care and play group.
  - Food bank in North Sydney opening gym for kids’ recreation.
  - Library: Has a Lego program for kids under 10, an older kids book club, home school groups.
- Halifax examples: Good programs for homeless youth, struggling teens, programs for young mothers and people with low incomes (Supportive Housing for Young Mothers,

Phoenix Youth Centre), with self esteem classes, team building exercises, cooking classes, safer sex education.

- Online groups:
  - Buy Nothing North Sydney online group for free items.
  - Being able to post anonymously online on the Cape Breton Moms Helping Moms Facebook group and have people drop off needed items.

#### *Community understanding and care*

- Sometimes the community comes together: “There are special days where we can become a community. But then we don't know each other after that.”
- Supporting others living on low incomes:
  - Letting parents know they don't need to bring a gift to birthday parties because many can't afford it.
  - Flexibility with bill payments from some care providers.

#### *Hard to think of things that are working*

- Staying in your own bubble, not engaging with community, is something that worked for one participant.
- Another expressed, “Well, what's working? ...Nothing is.”

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

#### *Housing*

- Prioritize housing for families with young children.
- Use what's already there – use the abandoned homes, turn buildings into homeless shelters, put heat pumps on buildings – NS Power already willing to give free heating supplies.

#### *Major changes to child welfare system and child apprehension*

- Support families to grow their capacity to care for children instead of separating them: “Instead of taking children from their mothers, why not have a facility where the child and the mother can go stay with somebody that watches over them until the mother is capable of taking care of their child.”

#### *Flexibility and better support from income assistance*

- Income assistance should reflect everyone in the home's needs:
  - Be able to have kids included in birthday parties, be able to have a gift for their own birthday, not miss out on social inclusion in those ways.
  - Have rates increase as kids age and have new needs, not decrease.

### *Support, services, and education for mental health and disabilities*

- More education and support for parents of children with learning disabilities.
- Specific programs and activities for children with disabilities, and inclusion in existing ones.
- More support in school for neurodiverse children: Offer multiple ways of learning for different learning styles and abilities.
- Mental health support: “That’s the biggest thing, I think. Once your mental health gets better, you can start getting out there and being able to participate in the community. ...When you understand where your behaviours are coming from, you’re not just floating through your day.”
- Education about mental health in schools: Coping strategies, mental health disorders.

### *More accessible programs, supports, and services, especially for children and youth*

- More programs and groups where you can bring your children or where child care is provided.
  - Mom and kid groups.
  - Especially for people in recovery from addiction.
- More welcoming environments for kids in the communities
  - Community centres for kids.
  - More opportunities and activities for older kids (9+).
- More awareness and coordination of supports and services, information about what’s available: E.g., a newsletter from schools.

### *Guaranteed access to basic needs*

- Everyone should be able to have their basic needs met – examples included money, food, medication, a phone, and menstrual products.
- Food:
  - Lower prices on healthy food
  - More access to fruits and vegetables
  - More cooking classes for everyone
  - Breakfast, lunch, and take-home programs from schools, and less stigma around them for kids
- Health care:
  - Better coverage for medication, including chronic conditions like diabetes
  - Free dental care
  - Free medical education to bring more doctors to the community
- Everybody should be able to have a phone.
- Free and accessible menstrual products for all, including children and youth:

- “The government should literally be providing it ... We cannot control it, we cannot stop it. It's every single month.”

*More conversations and change that comes from them*

- Being able to gather and talk like this more often: “Funding for more things like this, more conversations because it's healing to say things out loud and feel validated in the suffering that you've experienced.”
- Amplify the voices of the people in the community because urgent change is needed: “We’re stretching our limits so far, and you’re stretching their limits... we need you guys to reach out for us....We have no one to speak for us. It only goes so far and it stops.”
- Make change happen so the children growing up now don't have to sit in the same room and talk about the same issues.