

Promises to Keep:  
The Nova Scotia Child Poverty Report Card 2003

1989-2001

**Pauline Raven &  
Lesley Frank**

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Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Nova Scotia  
PO Box 8355 Halifax, NS, B3K 5M1  
Tel: (902) 477-1252; Cell (902) 430-7461  
Fax: (902) 484-6344  
Email: [ccpans@policyalternatives.ca](mailto:ccpans@policyalternatives.ca)  
Web: <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/ns>

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The contents and opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of the CCPA.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Pauline Raven holds a B.A. (Honours) degree in Psychology and a Masters degree in Sociology from Acadia University. Ms. Raven has publications in the area of child and family health and community-based program evaluation. Ms. Raven is the author of four previous Child Poverty Report Cards for Nova Scotia and is a CCPA-NS Research Associate.

Lesley Frank holds a B.A. degree in Sociology from Dalhousie University and a Masters degree in Sociology from Acadia University. Ms. Frank is a community-based researcher in the area of women's health and the social relations within families. Ms. Frank is a Sociology Instructor at Acadia University.

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## SUMMARY

Child poverty today is worse than it was more than a decade ago when Canadian Parliamentarians determined that child poverty should end by the year 2000. Disturbingly, the increase in child poverty for Nova Scotia is greater than the average increase across provinces. We have lost ground. The good news is rates began to drop in 1996. But, they are not dropping dramatically. If we don't accelerate the rates of decline, the prevalence of child poverty will not be below 10% in all provinces until 2032 and the real goal of eliminating poverty altogether won't be realized until many additional decades pass.

Statistics for the year 2001 are now available. It is apparent that neither the market place nor government interventions have addressed the severe economic shortfalls that large numbers of families with children experience. Data sets for Canada and Nova Scotia indicate that an even greater number and higher percentage of children lived in poverty in 2001 than in 1989. In 1989 the Canadian House of Parliament resolved to "achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000." Yet today, over one million (1.07M) Canadian children live in poverty.

In Nova Scotia, 38,000 children (19.2%) live below the base low income cutoff (i.e., in families where incomes are sufficiently low to create serious difficulties). This is close to 1 in 5 children, and well above the Canadian likelihood of 1 in 6 children (15.6%). Children experiencing the highest poverty rate continue to be those living with a lone-parent mother. The prevalence of poverty among Nova Scotian children living with lone-parent mothers was 53.9% compared to 12.8% for children living in a two-parent family.

From 1989 to 2001, only 4 provinces experienced a decrease in the overall incidence of children living in low income circumstances. However, for the more recent 1996 – 2001 period, overall rates fell for Canada and every province. For the later part of this period (1999 – 2001), Nova Scotia stands apart as the only province whose rate began to climb again.

Shortfalls in family incomes in Canada and Nova Scotia are sufficiently high enough to create severe difficulties. It is common for gaps between family income and the low income cutoff to be in the range of \$500 to \$700 per month depending on family type. The annual cost of closing this gap in Nova Scotia is just under \$147 million – an amount equivalent to 7% of our annual health expenditures or the tax cut initiated for 2004.

This 2003 Nova Scotia Child Poverty Report Card provides readers with statistics indicating that the current economic situation and/or government initiatives are failing Canadian children – particularly those residing in Nova Scotia. Children in Nova Scotia are falling further behind their Canadian counterparts. Currently, the high prevalence of child poverty in Nova Scotia is only exceeded in Newfoundland and Manitoba, and only Newfoundland has had a smaller decrease during recent years when rates began to decline.

The purpose of this report is to provide key statistics and to raise discussion and debate regarding what can be done about the troubling social phenomenon of child and family poverty in a nation as wealthy as ours.

This report underscores the need for an earnest and focused inquiry regarding the many factors that influence child poverty rates. It recommends that governments develop a coherent plan, with clear benchmarks, to fast track the end of child poverty. The Nova Scotia's Legislative Assembly must play a stronger leadership role to ensure our children are not left behind as children in other provinces move forward.

## EXAMINING THE RECORD

In 1989 the Canadian House of Parliament, by unanimous vote, resolved to “achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000.” Unlike the United States and some other countries, Canada has no official, government-mandated poverty line. The Canadian Council on Social Development, the National Council of Welfare, key anti-poverty groups (such as Campaign 2000) and many government and university-based researchers use “Low Income Cutoffs” (LICOs) as “poverty lines”. LICOs are familiar, widely used and provide a consistent series of estimates over time. Reliable estimates of the numbers and prevalence of persons living below these cutoffs are released annually by Statistics Canada.<sup>1</sup> Readers with an interest in Poverty definitions should find “Re-Defining Poverty” informative.<sup>2</sup>

The prevalence of child poverty in Canada and Nova Scotia for the 1989 – 2001 period is displayed in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup> During these 13 years, the prevalence of children experiencing poverty increased slightly in Canada and more dramatically in Nova Scotia.

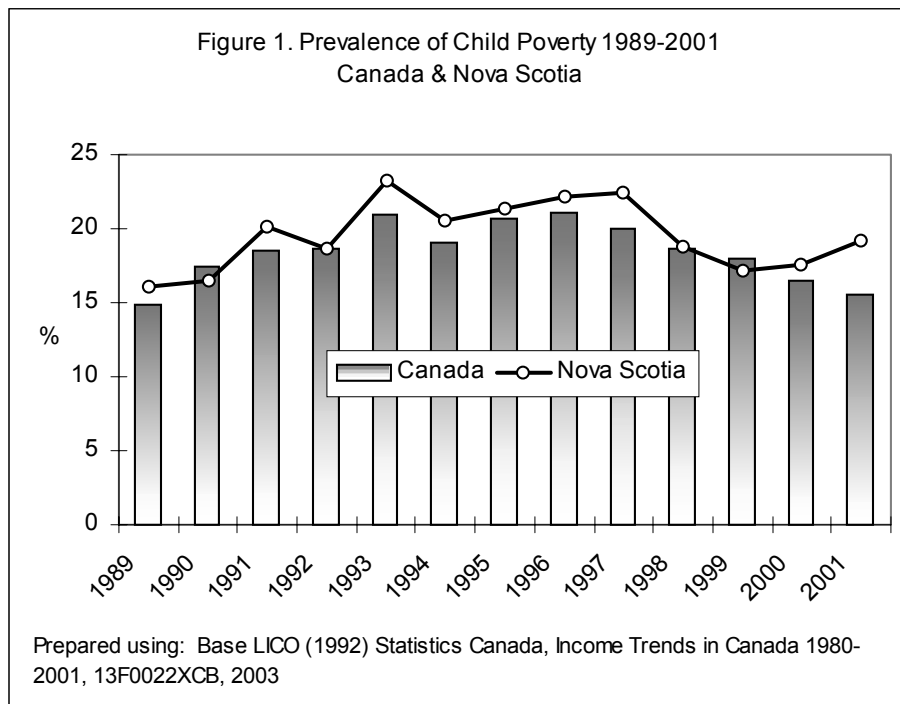


Figure 1 shows that the prevalence of poverty in Nova Scotia tends to remain above the Canadian average. It also shows that a greater increase has been experienced in Nova

<sup>1</sup> Since 1989 the before-tax (or base) LICO has been used as a measure of poverty to allow progress on the promise to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000 to be consistently tracked. The before-tax LICO is widely accepted as a fair and relative measure that identifies those substantially worse off than average and more likely to encounter greater difficulty in achieving healthy outcomes. Statistics used in this report are based on the before-tax Low Income Cutoffs.

<sup>2</sup> *Defining and Re-Defining Poverty: A CCSD Perspective*, Canadian Council on Social Development, Ottawa, 2001

<sup>3</sup> This report draws heavily on *Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003*.

Scotia than Canada over this period. Nova Scotia's rate rose (by 19.3%) from 16.1% in 1989 to 19.2% in 2001. In comparison Canada experienced a relatively small increase (4.7%) from 14.9% in 1989 to 15.6% in 2001. Overall, we see an increasing rate in the first years, followed by decreases during more recent years.

Table 1 shows the respective increases in the prevalence and numbers of children experiencing poverty in Canada and Nova Scotia have increased. In both Canada and Nova Scotia greater numbers of children lived in families where incomes fell below the base low income cutoff in 2001 than did in 1989.

	1989		2001	
	Number	%	Number	%
Canada	990,000	14.9	1,071,000	15.6
Nova Scotia	36,000	16.1	38,000	19.2

Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003.

Table 2 gives us a record of the overall change (increase or decrease) in child poverty for Canada, the Atlantic and Prairie Regions, and for all provinces during these 13 years.

1989			2001			%Change 1989-2001	
Province	%	Ranking	Province	%	Ranking	Province	Change
ON	11.4	Least	PE	12.5	Least	AB	-24.6 Greatest Decrease
PE	12.6		ON	13		SK	-18.1 Decrease
BC	14.2		AB	14.1		NB	-17.6 Decrease
<b>CANADA</b>	<b>14.9</b>		NB	14.5		<b>PRAIRIES</b>	<b>-16.6</b> Decrease
QB	15.9		<b>CANADA</b>	<b>15.6</b>		PE	-0.8 Decrease
<b>NS</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>5th Lowest</b>	<b>PRAIRIES</b>	<b>16.6</b>		<b>ATLANTIC</b>	<b>2.9</b> Increase
<b>ATLANTIC</b>	<b>17.3</b>		BC	17		MB	4.7 Increase
NB	17.6		SK	17.6		<b>CANADA</b>	<b>4.7</b> Increase
AB	18.7		<b>ATLANTIC</b>	<b>17.8</b>		NF	10.2 Increase
NF	19.6		QB	17.8		QB	11.9 Increase
<b>PRAIRIES</b>	<b>19.9</b>		<b>NS</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Highest</b>	ON	14.0 Increase
MB	21.5		NF	21.6		<b>NS</b>	<b>19.3</b> <b>Increase</b>
SK	21.5	Most	MB	22.5	Most	BC	19.7 Greatest Increase

Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003.  
Shaded areas give Canadian and Regional averages. Bolded areas highlight Nova Scotia.

This comparison of changes between 1989 and 2001 shows an increase in six, and a decrease in four, of the ten provinces with regard to the prevalence of child poverty. The blended result is an overall increase in the Canadian and Atlantic Region averages and a decrease in the Prairie Region.

During the 1989 – 2001 period, Nova Scotia lost rank relative to other provinces when its child poverty rate increased. In 1989 Nova Scotia was among the five provinces with the least child poverty; in 2001 we were third worst. Nova Scotia experienced a 19.3%

increase, from a rate of 16.1% in 1989 to 19.2% in 2001. British Columbia was the only province to experience a greater increase in child poverty for the 1989 – 2001 period than Nova Scotia.

Figure 2 shows the prevalence of child poverty in 1989 and 2001 in the four Atlantic Provinces. Little change is seen for Prince Edward Island children (a 0.8% decrease). However, a sizeable decrease (-17.6%) is seen for New Brunswick children, compared to an increase for Newfoundland (10.2%) and the highest increase among Atlantic Provinces for Nova Scotian children (19.3%).

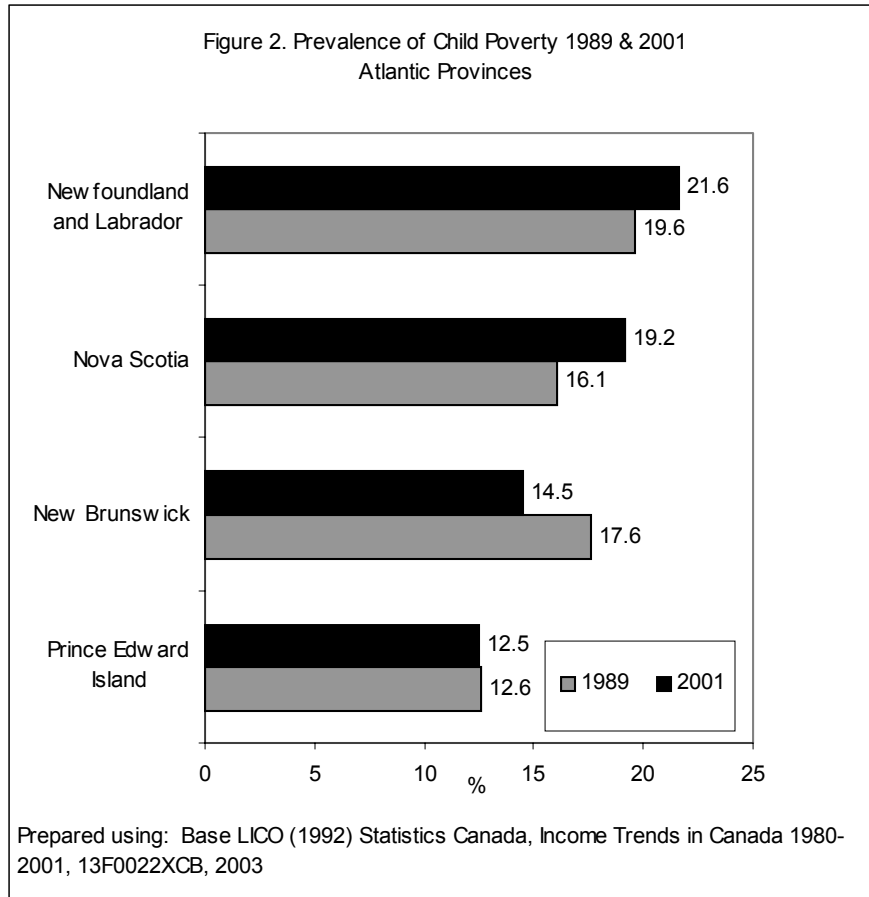
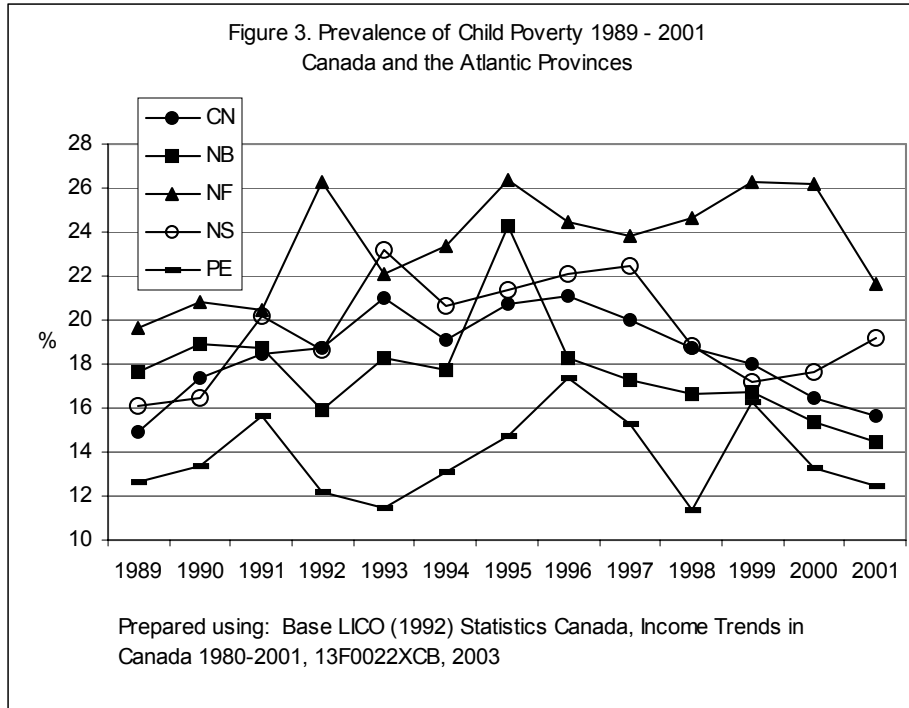


Figure 3 allows a comparison of the year-by-year prevalence of child poverty in Canada and other Atlantic Provinces. It demonstrates a strong tendency for rates in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland to remain above the national average while rates for New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island tend to be lower.



### A SUSTAINABLE DECLINE: 1996 – 2001?

Table 3 gives information for the period 1996 – 2001, notable as the time when child poverty rates began to decline across all provinces. This table ranks provinces with regard to the percentage change.

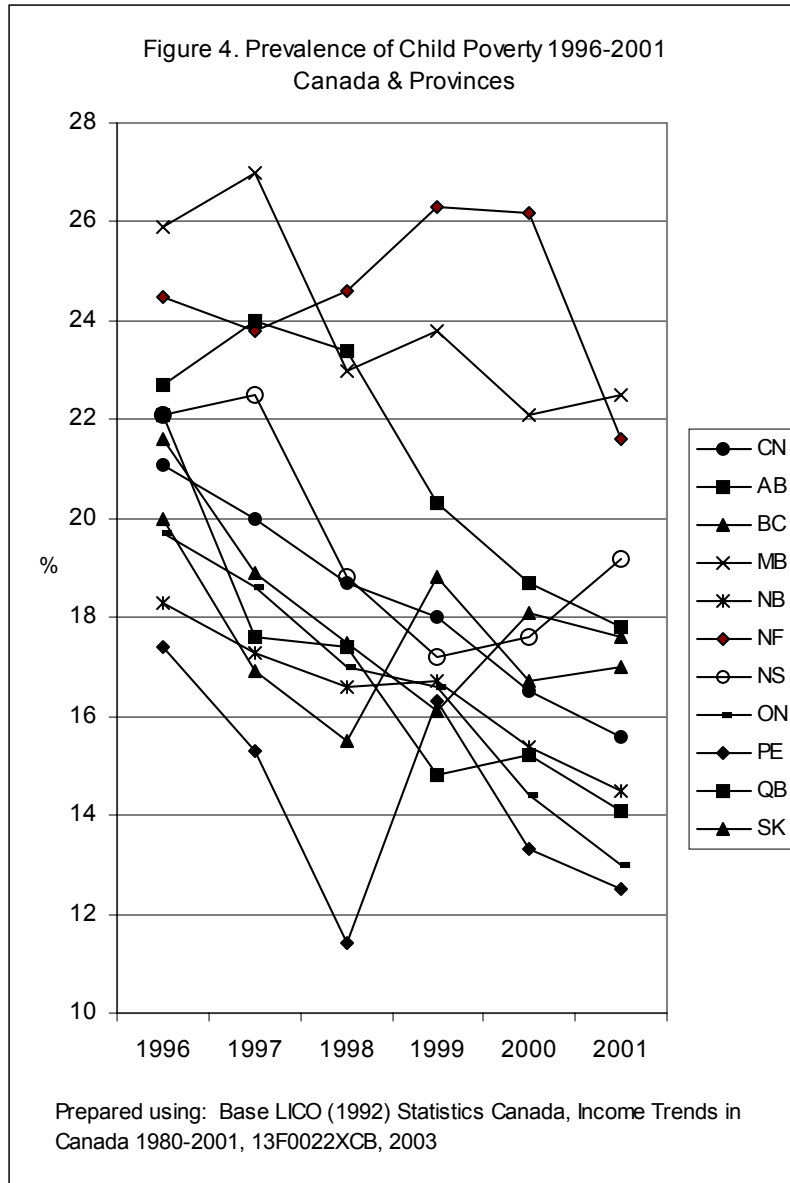
	1996 (%)	2001 (%)	Difference	% Change
Alberta	22.1	14.1	-8	-36.2
Ontario	19.7	13	-6.7	-34.0
Prince Edward Island	17.4	12.5	-4.9	-28.2
Canada	21.1	15.6	-5.5	-26.1
Quebec	22.7	17.8	-4.9	-21.6
New Brunswick	18.3	14.5	-3.8	-20.8
Saskatchewan	21.6	17.6	-4	-18.5
British Columbia	20	17	-3	-15.0
Manitoba	25.9	22.5	-3.4	-13.1
Nova Scotia	22.1	19.2	-2.9	-13.1
Newfoundland and Labrador	24.5	21.6	-2.9	-11.8

Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003

Again we see a poor performance for Nova Scotia in this timeframe when overall rates were in decline. Only Newfoundland's decrease (-11.8%) was smaller than the decrease (-13.1%) experienced in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia's decrease was approximately half that of the Canadian average (-26.1%).

Figure 4 shows progress on a year-to-year basis for the 1996-2001 period. While it demonstrates the overall decrease in child poverty rates between 1996 and 2001, it also shows what may be a disturbing turn in events for Nova Scotia in the two most recent years.

When the last years (1999 – 2001) of the 1996-2001 period are examined, we see that 9 provinces and the Canadian average continued to show an overall decrease in the prevalence of child poverty. The sole exception for this 2-year span is Nova Scotia where we see an increase from 1999 to 2000 and again from 2000 to 2001.



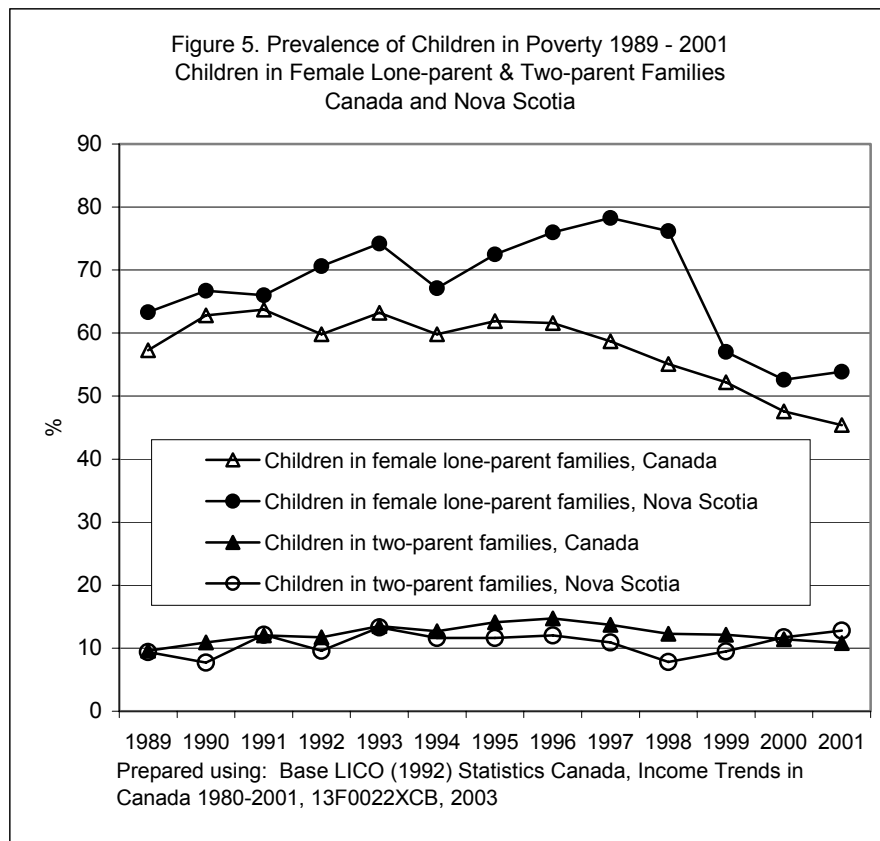
A note of caution must be made regarding the decline of child poverty in recent years. When Canada made its promise to end child poverty in 1989, the child poverty rate was

at a low (both in Canada and Nova Scotia) relative to the previous decade (1980 – 1989). During 1980 – 1989, rates rose, then they fell. This mirrors the pattern we see for 1989 – 2001 (See Figure 1). Therefore, we must not assume the recent declines reported in Table 3 will be sustained, particularly if there are downturns in the economy.

The respective rates of decline (1996 – 2001) can be used to chart the time when the prevalence of child poverty for all provinces will fall to single digit rates (if these same rates of decline are sustained). At these rates of decline, it will be 2032 before all provinces reach the modest goal of having child poverty rates below 10%. By 2004, Ontario, the province with the highest rate of decline (-36.2%), would be the first to see the prevalence of child poverty fall below 10%. It would take Nova Scotia until 2025 to move into a single digit status at its 13.1% rate of decline and additional decades to achieve the real goal of eliminating child poverty altogether.

### FEMALE LONE-PARENT FAMILIES AT GREATEST RISK

Figure 5 demonstrates the increased vulnerability to poverty of children living with lone-parent mothers.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal, disabled and visible minority children are also at increased risk. Current statistics were not available at the time of publication of this report. This report will be updated when figures are available.

In 1989, Nova Scotian children living in a family headed by a female lone-parent were 6.7 times more likely to experience poverty than children living in a two-parent family (63.3% versus 9.4%). In 2001, Nova Scotian children living in a family headed by a female lone-parent were 4.2 times more likely to experience poverty than children living in two-parent families (53.9 versus 12.8%).<sup>5</sup> The number of poor children in female lone-parent families was 14,000 in 2001 while the number in two-parent families was 21,000.

Table 4 shows the percentage changes in the prevalence of child poverty at the beginning and end of the 1989 – 2001 period. It shows that the decrease in the likelihood of poverty affecting children living with lone-parent mothers in Nova Scotia (like Canada) was due in part to a decrease in the prevalence of poverty among these children (14.8%) between 1989 & 2001 and an increase (36.2%) in the prevalence among children in two-parent families.

Family Type	Geography	1989 (%)	2001 (%)	% Change
Female lone-parent families	Nova Scotia	63.3	53.9	-14.8
Female lone-parent families	Canada	57.3	45.4	-20.8
Two-parent families	Nova Scotia	9.4	12.8	36.2
Two-parent families	Canada	9.6	10.8	12.5

Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003

## FAMILIES NEED A FAIRER MARKET SHARE

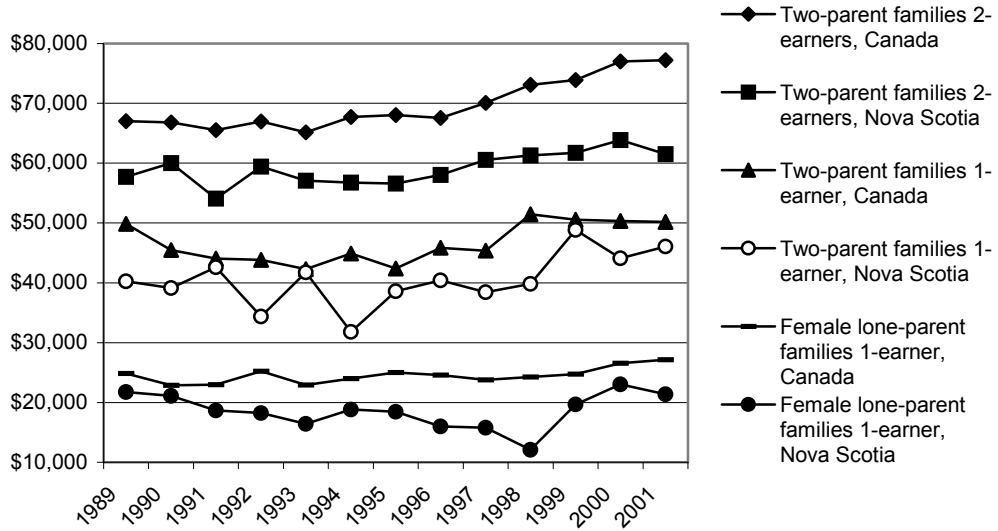
In reviewing the greater likelihood of poverty among children living with lone-parent mothers, it is noteworthy to see how market income is distributed among different family types. Figure 6 shows that families with female lone-parent earners have the lowest access to market (earned) income among all types of families with earners. Also, female lone-parent families have substantially lower market incomes than two-parent families where only one parent is an earner. This graph clearly indicates the enormously protective influence of having two working parents in a family.

A fairer share of market income, particularly for those in lower wage employment is needed. This is especially so for women. Many reports have provided analyses related to the impact of gender on the ability to earn an income. According to the Labour Force Survey (2003), for Nova Scotia during 2002 the bottom 25% of women earners were paid less than \$7.94 per hour compared to \$9.96 for men.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The number of children living in all other types of economic families, such as families headed by male lone-parents is too unreliable to be published due to sample size.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, 71M0001XCB, Ottawa, 2003. Note. The bottom income quartile refers to those included in the bottom 25% of earners.

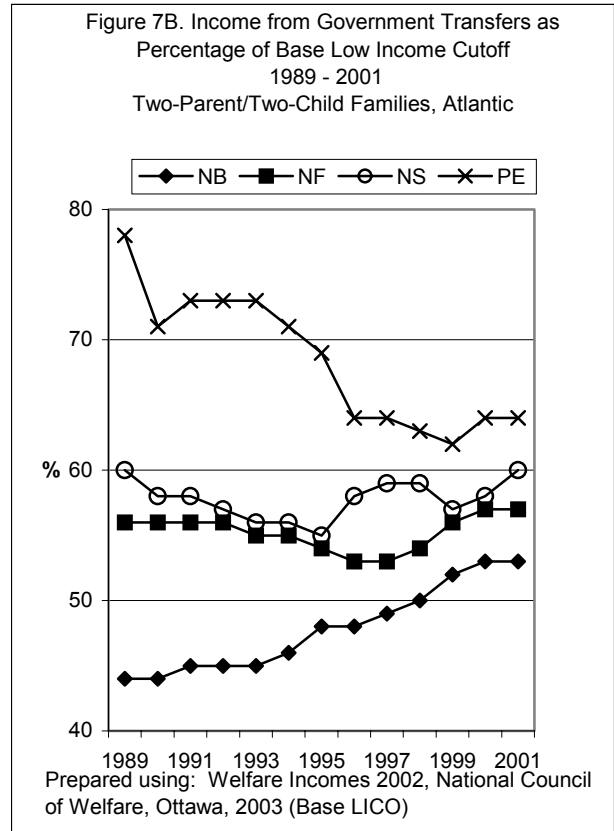
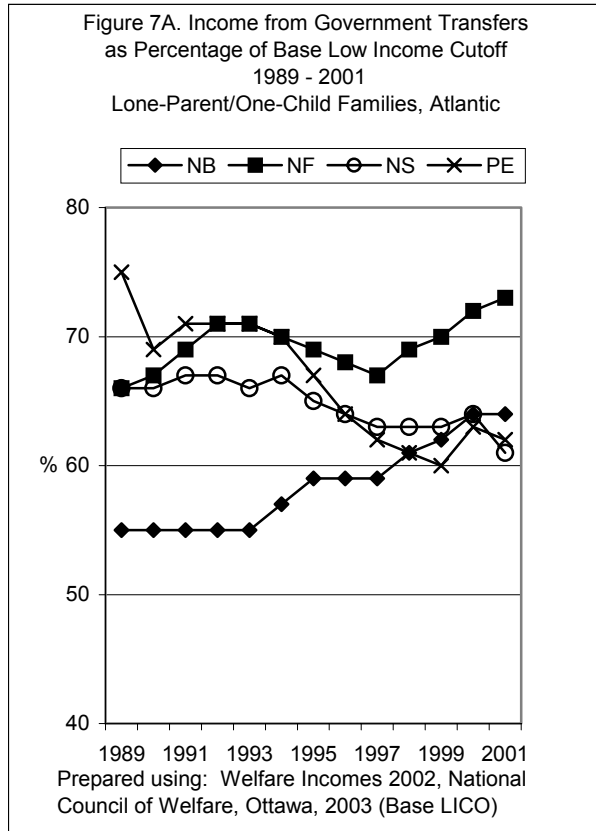
Figure 6. Average Market Income 1989 - 2001  
Two-Parent & Female Lone-Parent Families with 1 or 2 Earners  
Canada and Nova Scotia



Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003

## LOW SOCIAL ASSISTANCE LEVELS CREATE INCOME GAPS

Figures 7 A & B demonstrate increases and decreases in family income from all sources of federal and provincial government benefits. These rates are expressed as a percentage of the base low income cutoff. For both types of families in New Brunswick and Newfoundland government transfers increased during these 13 years.<sup>7</sup>



Decreases were experienced for both family types in Prince Edward Island. In Nova Scotia one-parent/one-child families experienced a decrease in government transfers, whereas there was no change for two-parent/two-child families when 1989 and 2001 were compared. It is disappointing that government transfers fell for a number of family types during a period committed to eliminating child poverty.

This period of time also saw the range of income from government transfers become narrower for both types of families across the Atlantic Provinces. Families in seven of the eight cases examined in Figures 7 A & B have less than 65% of the base low income cutoff as family income. In three cases family income is 50% or less of the base low income cutoff.

<sup>7</sup> The income charted is basic federal/provincial social assistance, federal/provincial child tax benefits (e.g., the National Child Benefit) and provincial tax credits.

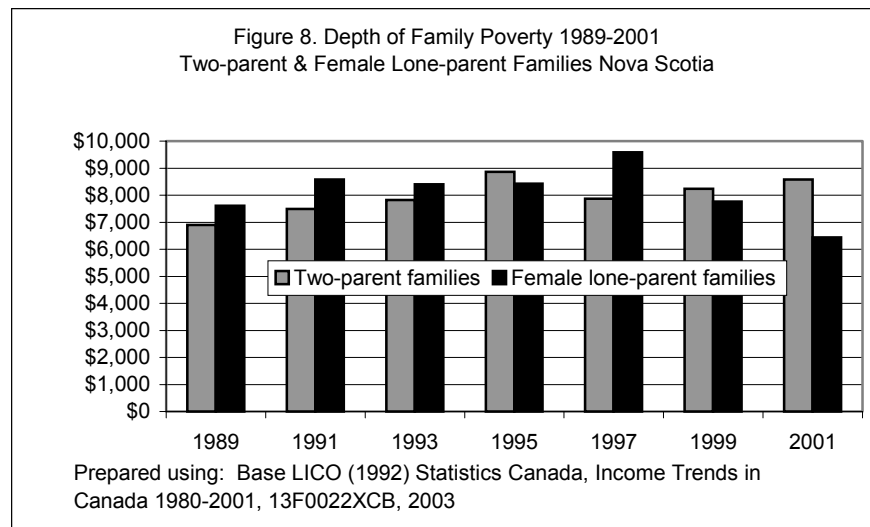
## LARGE INCOME SHORTFALLS FOR POOR FAMILIES

The “prevalence” of child poverty informs us about the *likelihood* of a child being poor. On the other hand, the “low income gap” speaks to the *degree* of poverty – or the size of the shortfall in a family’s income with regard to the low income cutoff that applies to that family. The “income gap” is the amount of additional income a family would require to reach its particular low income cutoff. Table 5 shows the average income gap for two types of Canadian families.<sup>8</sup> In Nova Scotia, the average shortfall per year in family income for 2001 was \$6,441 (\$537 per month) for families headed by a lone-parent mother and \$8,583 (\$715 per month) for two-parent families.

	1989	2001
Nova Scotia two-parent families	\$6,900	\$8,583
Canada two-parent families	\$9,394	\$10,265
Nova Scotia female lone-parent families	\$7,610	\$6,441
Canada female lone-parent families	\$9,276	\$8,886

Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003

Figure 8 tracks the average income gap for two-parent and female lone-parent families in Nova Scotia who are below the low income cutoff.<sup>9</sup> These income gaps over the 1989 – 2001 period have remained large enough to create great difficulty for both parents and children. Annual shortfalls are roughly equivalent to the cost of several months’ rent or even the full cost of healthy food for one year.



<sup>8</sup> The number of children living in male lone-parent families is too unreliable to be published because of small sample size.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The types of negative impacts for children that can be related to shortfalls in family income were researched by Ross & Roberts (1999).<sup>10</sup> According to this study, poor children have an increased exposure to serious health and social outcomes such as less likelihood of having nutritious food; annual trips to the dentist; and/or the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities. As well, poor children are more likely to visit the hospital emergency room; have delayed vocabulary scores and low math scores, and to fail elementary and grade school; and/or to face poorer employment prospects.

Table 6 gives information regarding how much additional income is currently needed to raise all families with children above the base low income cutoff. The total, \$147 million, is equivalent to the tax cut announced by the Government of Nova Scotia for the year 2004. As a further point of comparison, Nova Scotia's aggregate income gap can also be expressed as 7% of estimated health expenditures for our province's fiscal year 2003 – 2004.

	Income Gap	Number of Families	Aggregate Gap
Lone-parent families	\$6,745	9000	\$60,705,000
Two-parent families	\$8,583	10000	\$85,830,000
Totals		19000	\$146,535,000

Prepared using: Base LICO (1992) Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, 2003  
 Note. Income Gap and Number for Lone-Parents includes both male and female lone-parents.

## ENDING CHILD POVERTY

Addressing child poverty is crucial to ensuring that the potential and long-term health of Canada's youngest citizens is not compromised. Most remarkable in this review of the years 1989 through 2001 is the decline that began in 1996 and resulted in decreased rates of child poverty for all provinces during the latter part of the 1989 – 2001 period. The up, then down, up, then down pattern in the child poverty rate for the two decades (1980 – 2001), prompts us not to assume the decline of recent years will be sustained if we do not prioritize positive actions for families and children and aggressively pursue the goal of lifting families out of poverty.

This report has shown that if the rate of decline achieved during the 1996 – 2001 period is sustained, the prevalence of child poverty will not move into single digit status for Nova Scotia until the year 2025, with all provinces achieving this result by 2032. This is slow progress indeed for a country that sought to achieve the elimination of child poverty by the year 2000. Additional action is required to accelerate the decline of child poverty.

A comparison of strategies in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia may provide helpful information for Nova Scotia. From 1989 – 2001, New Brunswick experienced an overall

<sup>10</sup> David Ross & Paul Roberts, *Income and Child Well-being: A New Perspective on the Poverty Debate*. Canadian Council on Social Development, Ottawa, 1999.

decrease in child poverty (-17.6%) while Nova Scotia had an increase (19.3%). As well, the rate of decline for New Brunswick (-20.8%) for the 1996 – 2001 period was much greater than Nova Scotia's rate of decline (-13.1%). This indicates there could be valuable lessons to be learned from a neighbouring province – one that is closest to us geographically and in population size.

The overall decreases seen in each province over the last several years likely have been influenced by economic growth during this period. They may also indicate that new social expenditures and programs, like the National Child Benefit and its supplement, as well as the Early Childhood Development Initiative, are beginning to have a positive impact. These initiatives came into fuller effect between 1996 and 2001. Reasons for the overall decrease are likely multifaceted and may differ from province to province.

A full determination of the reasons for the welcome decreases in child poverty between 1996 and 2001 and the disappointing rate of progress in most provinces regarding the goal of reducing child poverty are clearly beyond the scope of this report. Key stakeholders, especially government ministries entrusted with the economic well being of children and families, need to examine, in-depth, the factors that relate to changes in the prevalence of child poverty.

If we want to design a plan aimed at eliminating child poverty, the first thing we need to look at is the ability of a family to earn sufficient income to stay above the low income cutoff. Workman and Jacobs (2002) reviewed changes in the Nova Scotia minimum wage rate for the last two decades (1977 – 2000).<sup>11</sup> Their study found that, when the minimum wage was stated in constant dollars, the rate had actually declined by over 20% (the current Nova Scotia minimum wage is \$6.25 per hour for experienced and \$5.80 for inexperienced workers).

Related to the issue of market income is who gets awarded child custody. Given that male parents as a group have greater access to market income, increases in the award of custody to lone-parent fathers over mothers could also affect the rate of child poverty. It is notable that the number of lone-parent fathers in Canada has almost doubled during the period under review from 57,000 in 1989 to 111,000 in 2001.<sup>12</sup>

A preliminary look at the role of government transfers (federal and provincial) in offsetting market shortfalls shows that various rates and policies are present (e.g., in many provinces there is no clawback of the National Child Benefit to families who are receiving provincial social assistance whereas in some provinces, such as Nova Scotia, dollars are clawed back). We have seen that in the Atlantic provinces some social assistance rates for families with children have increased between 1989 and 2001 while in others, rates have decreased.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thom Workman and John Jacobs, Undermining Wages in Nova Scotia, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Halifax, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Background Table T902: "Estimated Number of Families by Selected Economic Family Types", in Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1980-2001, 13F0022XCB, Ottawa, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> National Council of Welfare, National Council of Welfare Reports: Welfare Incomes 2002, Ottawa, 2003.

Factors related to a family's participation in the labour market, such as the availability of dependable childcare services, are also of utmost importance. Again we know that provincial allocations to regulated childcare can vary greatly from province to province. Allocations for each child aged 0 – 12 years range from \$980 in Quebec to only \$91 dollars in Nova Scotia (Canadian average is \$386).<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, there is the issue of the social environment created by governments and communities for families struggling at the bottom end of the income ladder. Do hostile environments, like the poor-bashing described by Jean Swanson (2001), create migration away from some provinces towards others?<sup>15</sup>

The areas of inquiry raised above are not exhaustive. To set strategic directions, we need to fast-track key inquiries and follow this with a full and focused discussion. The elusive goal of ending child poverty in every Canadian province and territory can only be resolved through aggressive benchmarks that can deliver speedy progress and be easily measured on an annual basis. The troubling social phenomenon of child and family poverty in a nation as wealthy as ours must be ended much sooner than it will be if current trends continue.

In 2002, the Canadian government promised to develop a national plan of action to address concerns raised, at the United Nations Special Session on Children, about our nation's lack of progress on reducing child poverty. This plan was due for release by the end of 2003. This release was recently delayed, with a new date set for early 2004.

We have promises to keep, both as Canadians and Nova Scotians. Nova Scotia's Legislative Assembly must play a stronger leadership role to ensure our children are no longer neglected.

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Friendly, Jane Beach & Michelle Turiano, Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, University of Toronto, Toronto, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Swanson, Poor Bashing: The Politics of Exclusion, Between the Lines Publishing, Toronto, 2001.