



Communities Ending Poverty: 2021 Progress & COVID-19 Update



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Communities Ending Poverty members worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to mitigate its effects as much as possible for their communities. Some have even made progress toward their poverty reduction goals. This report explores how the overall trajectory of poverty in Canada seems to be changing since 2019 and celebrates the ways in which, despite many challenges, members pivoted to support resilient communities and have local poverty reduction impacts.

OVERVIEW

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, the [Tamarack Institute](#) had been celebrating Canada achieving the [lowest level of poverty](#) in the country's history. It had seemed like the *end* of poverty was in sight.

Instead, 2020 and 2021 reversed [many of the successes](#) around poverty and inequality made in the last several years. Based on current community stories, when Statistics Canada data becomes available for 2020 and 2021, we expect to see income, housing and food insecurity have risen; a decrease in physical, mental and emotional well-being; and developmental losses for toddlers six years and under.

Due to the lack of new information on Canada's Official Poverty Line ([Market Basket Measure](#)) and

complimentary population-level data from Statistics Canada, and due to members' efforts being reprioritized from evaluation and reporting to emergency response, this second annual CEP Impact Report serves as a COVID-19 update as opposed to a full impact report.

What's in a name?

On May 6, 2021, Vibrant Communities' 'Cities Reducing Poverty' became 'Communities Ending Poverty' to reflect the growing number of small, rural and remote communities joining the network and to recognize that widespread appetite to reduce poverty had been created and that it was now time to push to the end of poverty.

COMMUNITIES ENDING POVERTY

Over the last 10 years, CEP has grown from 13 Trail Builder communities that prototyped a collaborative approach to reducing poverty to 90 communities building a movement to end it.

As backbone for the network, CEP's deep desire is to end poverty in Canada by building the capacity of 100 cities and communities through peer and expert learning.

Learning opportunities are designed to support members to do the following:

- Develop and renew their common agenda
- Measure and communicate their impact
- Build financial and leadership sustainability

Members are encouraged to embed three key strategy elements in their efforts to 'move the needle' on poverty:

- Raising the awareness and will to act on poverty
- Systems and policy change
- Implementing and scaling niche innovations (projects, programs and services)

The past 18 months have tested the foundations of the CEP movement. Though the pandemic limited members' capacity to engage in strategic learning, many drew on the collaborative practices, partnerships and innovative

The Communities Ending Poverty Theory of Change

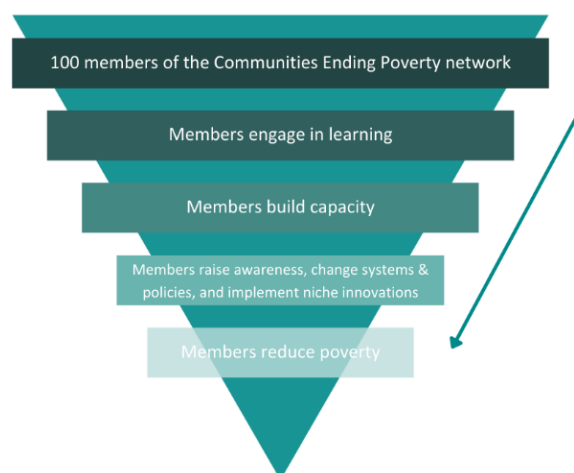


Figure 1: CEP Theory of Change

thinking they had already developed as part of building their community plans. When the pandemic hit, members shifted to poverty mitigation and supporting a quick exit out of poverty for the newly vulnerable.

Having not been through a public health pandemic of this magnitude before, the CEP network was eager to learn from each other about what other cities and communities were doing and what was working. CEP members contributed support, encouragement and new ideas for others to try.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, several communities were still able to make progress towards their capacity-building goals:

- 29 members created, updated or began creating/updating their strategy
- 18 wrote an impact or annual report
- 8 developed more financial sustainability
- 8 improved their leadership sustainability

At the same time, it should be noted that, despite some improvements, even more CEP members said the leadership of the poverty reduction efforts was less sustainable in 2021 than in 2019.



COMMUNITIES ENDING POVERTY PIVOTS

Strategy Changes

As COVID-19 spread rapidly, so too did the response. While many members paused most or all of their regular activities and shifted to emergency responses, 82% of the 45 members with a strategy reported they were, for the most part, still operating under the domains of work of their existing poverty reduction plans.

At the same time, their activities, the way they worked, their work's beneficiaries or their partners had often shifted. This finding indicates the root causes of poverty have held stable and that, despite shifts in which populations were most impacted and the exacerbation of issues, poverty itself remained relatively unchanged. The only two new domains of work that saw a significant increase across the network from 2020 to 2021 (1) are Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and (2) Access to Technology.

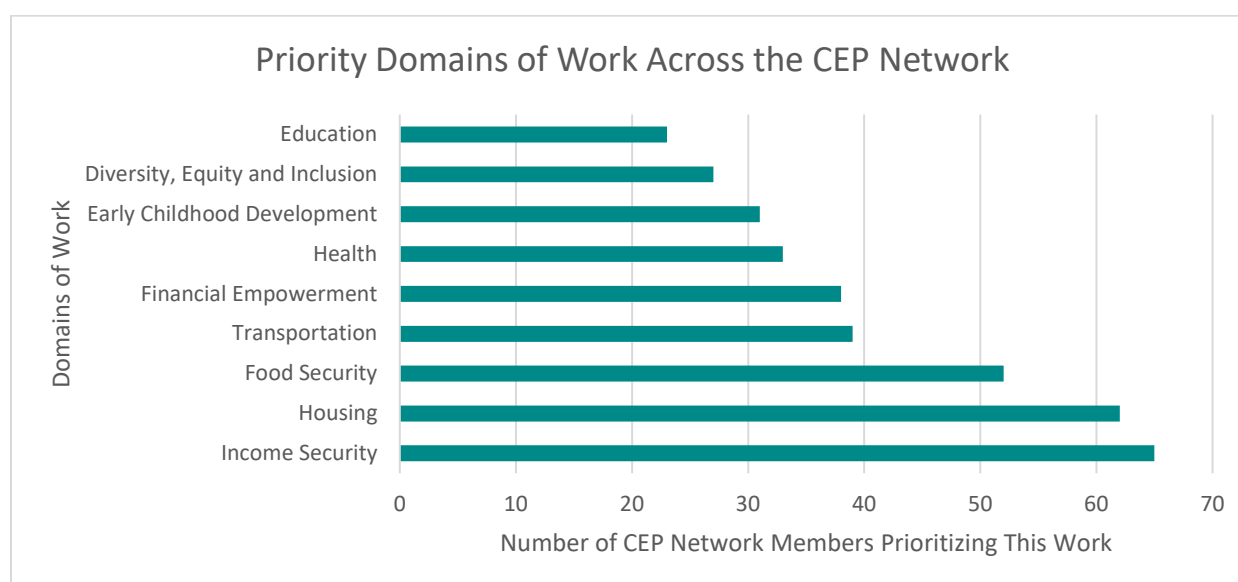


Figure 2: CEP Priority Domains of Work

Immediate Impacts for Individuals and Families

The quick collaborative actions, information-sharing, policy advocacy, and program and service adaptations by CEP collaboratives and their partners undoubtedly prevented many people from falling into poverty and helped newly vulnerable households to quickly escape it. Some communities even managed to make positive progress towards ending poverty.

Big wins by CEP members included the following:

- Several communities functionally reduced or ended chronic homelessness.
- The number of Living Wage employers increased sharply, elevating more than 200 employees'

wages in British Columbia alone.

- Households gained hundreds or thousands of dollars – and millions collectively for their communities – through the Community Volunteer Income Tax Clinic Program and other financial empowerment efforts.
- Robust collaboratives formed to keep families from going hungry during isolation and government-mandated shutdowns.
- New partnerships and new types of collaboration were created, such as taking a person-centered approach.

For the sake of communication, the following section categorizes outcomes into the above domains of work. It should be noted, however, that each must be conceived of as part of a complex interconnected pathway out of poverty and that none of these strategies, in isolation, will end it.



Figure 3: CEP Member Map ([Click to enlarge](#))

INCOME SECURITY

Between 2015 and 2019, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty rates were on a downwards trajectory in Canada and sat at the lowest in recorded history.

While the 2020 and 2021 Statistics Canada Market Basket Measure (MBM; Canada's official poverty line) figures have not yet been published,

the [Seymour Financial Wellbeing Index](#) offers a complimentary measure. According to the November 2021 Summary Report, a person living with low income is defined as an individual whose total before-tax income is less than \$25K per year (or \$50K in households with more than one person). Between 2018 and 2020, this index captured an 8% rise in the percentage of the population in low income, which then levelled off in 2021.

[Unemployment in Canada](#), a driver of income insecurity, hit nearly 13.7% at the height of COVID-19. Though it has now dropped to 6.9%, the current rate is still well above Canada's pre-pandemic unemployment rate low of 5.4%, which was recorded as the [lowest in over 40 years](#).

Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic have not been felt equally; inequality is growing. Early job loss was sustained primarily by:

- [young Canadians](#) aged 15–24;
- [women](#) who bear the brunt of caregiving; and
- [visible minorities](#) who are more likely to work in affected industries, such as food and beverage.

In addition, compared to the Canadian average, [low-income households](#) reported the greatest income decreases.

Wins that *are* being celebrated include increased support for

individuals looking to find work, either to upskill or to re-skill, and working with employers to pay Living



Figure 4: Canada's official poverty rate – Source: [Statistics Canada](#)

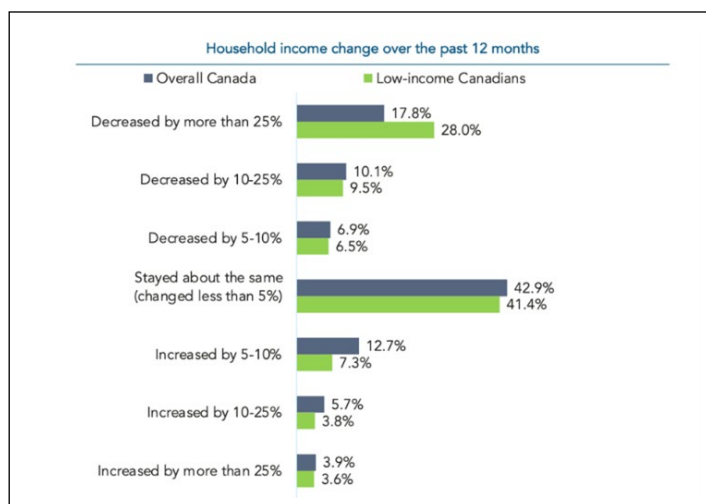


Figure 5: Household income change over 12 months – Source: [Seymour Financial Wellbeing Index](#)

Wages to their employees, which ensures that someone working full-time and year-round is able to make ends meet and advancing Basic Income awareness.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESSES

Throughout the pandemic, a large number of organizations stepped up to become Living Wage employers, which has provided tangible benefits to many low-wage workers. Since the onset of the pandemic, **BC's Living Wage for Families**, which works with 13 local communities, has [reported](#) that, between 2020 and 2021, they nearly doubled the rate of Living Wage employers being certified. They have now reached a total of 300 Living Wage employers that are supporting 31,712 employees to earn a Living Wage. As a result of these employers becoming certified, 213 workers received a pay bump this year. For those that were working at BC's minimum wage, this increase equates to a \$7,826 increase per worker over the full year.

Alberta also made progress in Living Wage, with the province's [Living Wage Network](#) securing its first Coordinator through collaborative community efforts by [End Poverty Edmonton](#), [Vibrant Communities Calgary](#), the [Alberta Living Wage Network](#) and the [Edmonton Social Planning Council](#). The network supported and launched calculations for what constituted a Living Wage in various communities (ranging from \$16.80 to \$37.40 per hour across the province) and brought employers into the poverty reduction conversation through a Living Wage certification program.

Basic Income Alberta (BIA) has credited local organizations, such as Vibrant Communities Calgary and End Poverty Edmonton, for their support and leadership in helping BIA [develop and distribute excellent communication packages](#) in support of Basic Income. These organizations have also supported BIA to engage politicians from all political parties and all levels of government to better understand the concept of a Basic Income and its benefits. An initiative to survey and gauge the level of support for Basic Income in the province provided key information to help with their messaging and to build additional support.

An example of training and employment support comes from BC's rural and industrial **Kootenay and Boundary region (BC)**, where [The Skills Centre](#) works to build workplace skills through training and social development programming. The Skills Centre's work contributes to poverty reduction by supporting residents to access learning opportunities and build capacity to be active, engaged citizens in the community and economy. Despite living in a region faced with rising unemployment rates, 87 participants in The Skills Centre's programming still found work or increased their capacity in employable skills.

Seventy-four youth created training plans and completed a combination of:

- workshops on soft skills, resumes, cover letters and interviews;
- training on essential workplace skills; and
- computer support.

Youth participants received support to participate in employment through wage subsidies, gas cards, bus tickets and assistance obtaining required clothing and gear. Between 2019 and 2021, 73% of those youth found sustainable employment.

Another 33 mature workers (97% of participants) from three different programs completed short-term training and gained an occupational certificate on topics such as first aid, the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) and food handler safety.



HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Prior to COVID-19, a housing crisis [existed in many cities](#) and [rural communities](#) across Canada. In February 2020, the [City of Ottawa](#) was the first to declare a state of emergency on housing and homelessness after seeing a 14.8% increase in the affordable housing waitlist over the previous three years and almost 100 people forced to sleep outside during the winter after shelters had filled up. [Vancouver's](#) affordable housing and homelessness situation was getting worse despite their 10-year Housing Strategy, and many rural areas across Canada have reported a [vacancy rate](#) of less than 2%.

Between 2020 and 2021, [the Seymour Financial Wellbeing Survey](#) found a 9% increase amongst low-income Canadians who reported that housing was a problem for them personally. In combination with stories from the CEP network about increases in tent encampments and rising income insecurity, it is likely that COVID-19 is exacerbating homelessness and core housing needs. [A 2020 report](#) by housing and homelessness researcher Nick Falvo indicates that we may not see the pandemic's full impact on homelessness for another five years, as demonstrated by previous recessions.

Still, there are signals of hope. The Government of Canada has allocated more funding to prevent and reduce homelessness, including [\\$393.7M](#) as part of the COVID-19 emergency response and [\\$2.5B in new funding](#) in the 2021 Federal Budget. And by December 2021, the Government of Ontario is requiring every municipality to develop a [By-Name List](#), identifying people experiencing homelessness in a community by name, and to do a homelessness enumeration, or a snapshot in time of people experiencing homelessness in a community. These are key first steps in tracking real-time data across the province.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESSES

In collaboration with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness' [Built For Zero Canada](#) movement, several communities have adopted Coordinated Access as a high-impact, evidence-based approach to ending homelessness. These communities have realized major success through:

- coordinating intake points where housing assessment and shelter diversion is done, if possible;
- creating a Quality By-Name List which provides as real-time data;
- prioritizing access to housing supports based on community criteria; and
- collaborating creatively with partners to provide wraparound supports.

Specific successes included:

- **Medicine Hat (AB)**, which functionally [ended chronic homelessness](#);
- **London (ON)**, which functionally [ended veteran homelessness](#);
- **Guelph-Wellington (ON)**, which reduced [chronic youth homelessness](#) by 76% and overall chronic homelessness by 25%; and
- **Dufferin County (ON)**, which reduced [chronic homelessness by 50%](#) and decreased the average number of households on the centralized waitlist for community housing.

Edmonton (AB) has housed [12,872 people since](#) 2009, including 806 people from January to July 2021, through Housing First and related programs. Unfortunately, despite the impressive number of people being housed, homelessness in Edmonton has still grown by 90% since 2019.

Several communities took upstream action, as they worked with landlords and tenants, and prevented evictions to stop the trauma of experiencing homelessness before it could occur.

This upstream action included the following efforts:

Dufferin County (ON)

Housing Services hired a [Landlord Liaison](#) to better engage landlords and provide support if and when issues arise to prevent eviction. Housing Services also collaboratively funded two Housing Support Workers with the Dufferin Area Family Health Team, which have helped to keep people in their homes by providing crisis intervention support and referrals to local community supports such as medical services, food banks, mental health supports and support when applying for rental assistance. In 2020, 39 clients were housed from the By-Name List and have not returned to the list.



OpportUNITY Iowa's [New Iowans Working Group](#) launched a 24/7 [Housing Interpretation Hotline](#) to support better communication between newcomer tenants and their landlords. This work included

answering questions, enforcing rules, providing tenants with help to navigate resources, ensuring notices are understood and explaining cross-cultural differences. Since the hotline's launch in 2019, partners report it has improved quality of living and basic human rights for newcomers. The collaborative's [Housing Working Group](#) prevented a further 500 evictions between May and November 2020 by offering funding to families being threatened with eviction following a moratorium on evictions.

Edmonton's (AB) [Community Bridge](#) eviction support program doubled the loan amount available to clients in 2020. During this same period, the organization quadrupled its applications, noting a shift in clientele following the initial onset of COVID-19. In previous years, 76% of clients were recipients of Alberta's [Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped](#) (AISH). This figure dropped to 36% of clients in 2020, as the proportion of applicants from lower middle-income backgrounds increased.

Finally, communities are building the infrastructure needed to house people.

Moncton's (NB) Rising Tide Community Initiatives Inc. arose from conversations around the City of Moncton's [Social Inclusion Plan](#). The non-profit organization devised a plan to build or renovate affordable housing units while also taking on the role of managing them. From 2020 to 2021, its leaders rallied the municipal, provincial and federal governments to contribute towards the cost of executing the plan. As a result of the plan, the city has started building enough units to house 50% of all people who were homeless in Moncton as of June 2021.

The Saint John (NB) Land Bank obtained the title to eight vacant and derelict properties in the city's North End with funding from the [Social Innovation Fund](#) (now administered by the [Greater Saint John Community Foundation](#)), in-kind sponsorship from Rehabitat and the support of the City of Saint John. The organization's goal was to repurpose the properties as diverse mixed housing, green spaces and development projects. The motivation for this project is that buildings that sit vacant for years increase the likelihood of criminal activity and fire while devaluing the neighbourhood around them. These buildings are often also located in areas with existing infrastructure (i.e., sewers, sidewalks, parks) and proximity to services (i.e., schools and hospitals) where cities would naturally like to increase density.

In 2020, The Land Bank offered two of its vacant properties in the North End to Rehabitat, which developed a 14-unit dwelling that included 12 subsidized rental units.

EDUCATION

Prior to the pandemic, despite overall increases to high school graduation rates, literacy and numeracy rates [amongst 15-year-olds were declining](#). Over the last 18 months, members have noted that the move to online learning has impacted children, youth and adults unevenly.

Communities told stories about various barriers to education during the pandemic:

- Some students flourished in an online setting while others who normally did well at school in person were struggling.
- Some parents could provide at-home school support while others were limited by their time capacity and/or education level.
- Some students had difficulty accessing the Internet or found it was fully unavailable where they lived.
- Many apprenticeships were put on hold indefinitely and many extracurricular activities moved online or stopped entirely.

Overall, the [number of young people aged 15 to 29](#) out of work and school jumped between 2019 and 2021 in all provinces and territories except Manitoba. By 2021, these rates dropped or levelled off in most places, with the exception of Ontario, Saskatchewan, the Yukon and Nunavut, where the disengagement trend has continued to rise.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESSES

In the face of challenging circumstances, lots of great work was also done to help adults, children and youth to learn and thrive from 2020 to 2021.

Saint John's (NB) [Anglophone South School District](#) (ASD-S) continues to demonstrate the benefits of using differential funding models in schools. Through the Government of New Brunswick's Social Innovation Fund (now administered by the Greater Saint John Community Foundation), the ASD-S added a Speech-Language Pathologist to its teaching staff to improve oral language development amongst low-income children in the school.



During COVID-19, this teacher collaborated with literacy and numeracy leads to create daily activities as part of a home-based learning package for children. In fall 2020, the ASD-S launched an oral assessment to approximately 700 students, which provided speech data for teachers on each child. Teachers

reported that they liked having the information to guide planning and instruction, form/plan intervention groups and determine who should be referred for further assessment.

Simcoe County's (ON) municipally administered [Social and Community Investment Fund](#), which funds community-based projects to assist low-income individuals, funded two educational programs:

- A newcomer program supporting children and their parents to understand the Canadian school system (i.e., participation in parent-teacher interviews) and to get ready to start school
- An early years program that provides experiential activities, developmental screening, referrals and parental skill development to support kids aged 1–6

As a result, 174 children learned new skills or experienced increased school success.

Simcoe County's (ON) Social and Community Investment Fund also financed multiple employment training programs, including one in which participants became Team Assistants for a children's program. Those receiving employment training learned new skills that enabled 34 of the participants to further their education or obtain employment.

OpportUNITY Iowa (USA) played a significant role in shedding light on the issue of newcomers with credentials, degrees or professional designations earned from their former countries but not recognized in the United States. This work aims to enhance the employability of local newcomers and provide the community with access to expertise that is going underutilized.

In 2019, legislation backed by local organizations was proposed to members of the Iowa General Assembly to ensure certification of existing degrees and to expedite the process for training new Iowans in professionalized fields, particularly in health care.

The work was expedited in 2020 as a potential response to COVID-19, and OpportUNITY Iowa has been credited by stakeholders for its significant contribution to bringing the conversation to the table amongst policymakers.

While the bill was ultimately unsuccessful, this work is part of OpportUNITY Iowa's New Iowans Working Group's ongoing efforts to help highly educated clients find employment that is better aligned with their skills and education. Since 2017, they have helped over 100 clients.

FOOD SECURITY

[Food insecurity was on the decline prior to 2020](#), with both food bank visits and unemployment rates having decreased from 2018 to 2019. When the pandemic struck, food banks across Canada braced for an influx of users, immediately anticipating lay-offs and lockdowns to cause a surge in food insecurity; in one-quarter of cases, early usage spiked by more than 25%.

However, as the COVID-19 response strengthened from March to June 2020, [53% of food banks](#) saw a decrease in usage from the previous year. Food Banks Canada suggests that the [Canada Emergency Response Benefit](#) and the [Canada Child Benefit](#) were examples of good public policy on income security reducing food insecurity, coupled with pop-up community food programs and the impact of lockdowns restricting movement. With COVID-19 income supports finished, eviction moratoriums ending and debt deferrals done, however, food banks are [now reporting a rise in usage](#).

CEP MEMBER SUCCESS STORIES

During the height of COVID-19 closures and lockdowns, CEP received numerous stories from across Canada of poverty reduction collaboratives pivoting to run or participate in emergency food provision for residents.

Increased food insecurity is often the canary in the coalmine for housing crisis, as a food budget is the first place a person can quickly cut costs.

– [End Poverty Edmonton](#), 2021

These stories included the following:

The [Greater Saint John Emergency Food Program](#) was a neighbourhood-level Collective Impact initiative that brought together organizations that had previously been working together through Living SJ. With families already struggling to make ends meet and the added pressure of children staying home from school, [Inner City Youth Ministry](#) packed and delivered bagged lunches to children who normally accessed school meal programs.

The initiative soon morphed into a bigger operation, serving more clients and bringing on more partners as closures increased. Non-profits that were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions supported with deliveries, and the collective secured a bigger packing and distribution space out of a cruise ship terminal, switched from volunteer-based operations to obtaining redeployed staff from various non-profits, and expanded services to adults and seniors throughout the community. Organizations that hadn't been involved in food security pitched in to fill gaps so that household needs were being met. The work was highly client-centered rather than organizational mission-driven.

By early April 2020, the emergency collective had already served 1,998 individuals in 629 households, with an average of 125 deliveries per day.



In **Chatham-Kent (ON)**, the [Prosperity Roundtable](#) gathered data on the local COVID-19 situation and, upon analysis, decided to focus their efforts on launching a [Mobile Food Market](#). The Mobile Food Market aimed to bring fresh, affordable produce to rural residents who did not have access to grocery stores or emergency food services.

By 2021, the Market had expanded from five pick-up locations to 15. The organizers formed partnerships with local farmers and found that, in addition to food security, they were also supporting food literacy. Clients shared stories about being introduced to vegetables they had never consumed before, children researched new recipes and seniors made meals for friends and neighbours to connect with one another during physical distancing measures.

In November 2021, the Mobile Market transitioned into two programs to better coordinate food access:

- A harvest bucks program, where community members can take tickets to any grocery store to access fresh, local produce in their community
- A hosting program to help local volunteer clubs maintain stable produce market locations in communities considered to be food deserts (i.e., no grocery store).

Simcoe County's (ON) [Social and Community Investment Fund](#) supported a number of food security initiatives during COVID-19 that included the following:

- Affordable markets
- U-Haul produce deliveries
- Student nutrition produce boxes delivered to schools or homes
- Workshops that also provided healthy lunches
- Grocery card distributions

One program noted that their adaptation to contactless delivery during COVID-19 enabled families to stay at home and stay safer during the pandemic. It also reduced emotional and financial stress as families knew that they would be guaranteed fresh, healthy grocery essentials throughout the year. In total, 3,363 participants accessed or reported increased access to healthy food.

FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Asset resiliency was on the rise from 2016 to 2019, with [67.1% of Canadians](#) able to weather a three-month income loss shock without falling below the [Low Income Measure, After-Tax](#) (LIM-AT). Oddly, household debt [had also been rising](#) over the same timeframe. While the reason for these simultaneous trends is unknown, possible explanations include:

- families [saving less](#) in the lower three of Canada's five income quintiles;
- households using debt to repay other debt – especially with falling interest rates making borrowing easier; and
- the rise in high-cost payday lending.

During COVID-19, similar to the surprise of food banks seeing fewer patrons in 2020, consumer debt (excluding mortgage debt) actually [decreased by 18.3% from February 2020 to January 2021](#). This was in stark comparison to the rise in consumer household debt by an average of 20.7% per year over the last two decades. Statistics Canada and field experts again credit the CERB with providing income security, coupled with closures and policies that allowed debt deferral, for temporarily staving off a debt crisis.

However, more than a year into COVID-19, emergency savings are being depleted, low-income individuals increasingly only have [three week's worth of savings](#) and the CERB program has now come to an end.

Communities across Canada have been responding to income security with financial empowerment practices for many years, such as advocating for payday lending regulations, increasing access to safe mainstream financial products, building financial literacy skills and supporting low-income households with tax filing to maximize their cash returns. The Community Volunteer Income Tax Program (CVITP) served [490,680 people](#) in 2020 with the help of 18,960 volunteers from 3,810 organizations across Canada, despite pivoting to virtual, drop-off and telephone support.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESS STORIES

The Counties of Leeds and Grenville's (ON) CVITP clinics, supported by 24 volunteers, brought an estimated \$24M in tax refunds, benefits and transfer payments into the community across 2,700–3,000 low-income tax filers. The [Volunteer Centre of St. Lawrence-Rideau](#), the region's lead program agency, collaborates with community partners across the counties to bring tax help to congregate areas and make services more accessible (i.e., at local legion branches, long-term care homes, grocery stores and food banks). Partnerships mean there is also frontline service staff in different agencies that refer clients to the Volunteer Centre for income tax support.

In 2020, the initiative expanded into financial literacy and empowerment to support clients with tools, resources and coaching to help them make informed decisions about spending the money they receive back at tax time. To date, 194 people participated in 41 workshops to develop confidence, knowledge

and healthy habits and reported the following in the first six months:

- Paying off credit card debt
- Opening savings accounts
- Accessing government benefits that they were previously unaware of
- Reducing the frequency of impulse purchases and the costs of monthly bills

Calgary (AB) [more than doubled](#) its local [Canada Learning Bond](#) (CLB) uptake rate from 20% to 52% between 2008 and 2020, and now has one of the highest CLB uptake rates in the country. Approximately 70,900 children are receiving \$35M in grants – a huge rise from the \$2.5M claimed in 2008. The city boosted its uptake rate by running a [StartSmart](#) program to support families living on low income to open Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs) for their children, by building community capacity to collaboratively scale RESP uptake by training staff from partnering agencies to host their own workshops and sign-up events, and by recommending policy changes to decision-makers.

Saint John's (NB) Transitioning to Work, led by the [Saint John Learning Exchange](#), developed a culture of coaching and goal-setting amongst 236 participants in 2020, showing that financial incentives for setting and achieving goals can lead to positive behavioural change. Participants achieved increasingly high-level goals, such as graduating, obtaining a driver's license, enrolling in post-secondary education and obtaining employment. Upon achieving their goals, many participants set *more* complex goals and were willing to invest their incentive earnings to meet them. In 2020, they pivoted by employing a variety of workshops, distance learning packages and tools to deliver the curriculum.



HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

From January to November 2020, Canada saw [12,067 more deaths](#) than in an average year. Despite the recurring mantra during the COVID-19 pandemic that “We’re all in this together,” visible minorities were overrepresented in COVID-19 cases in regions like Toronto. [In July 2020](#), for example, people of colour comprised 50% of the city of Toronto’s population but 83% of its reported COVID cases. Not only did COVID-19 infect racialized peoples at a higher rate, but the severity was also greater, as Black communities and Indigenous people already tended to have higher rates of underlying health conditions stemming from long-term systemic marginalization and the stress [caused by systemic racism](#).

This higher infection rate among communities with a greater proportion of visible minority groups can be seen across Canada and is also reflected in a higher mortality rate among COVID-19 cases – twice as high as those with the lowest proportion. In [Ontario and Quebec](#), the mortality rate was three times as high as the lowest ones, and in BC it was [ten times higher](#).

Low-income individuals were also over-represented amongst COVID-19 cases. In Toronto, for instance, they comprised 30% of the city’s population, yet made up [51% of reported cases](#) by July 2020.

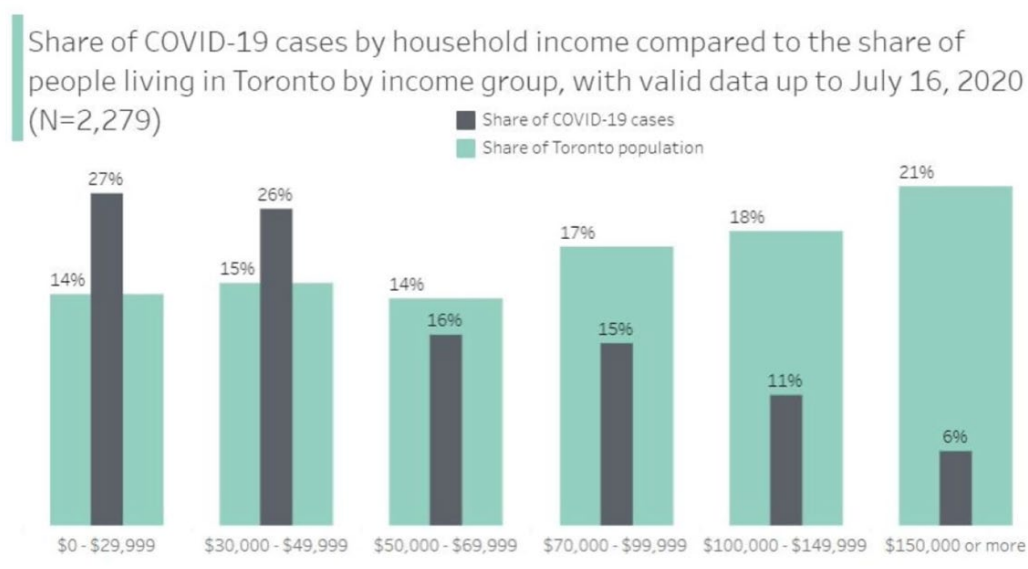


Figure 7: Share of COVID-19 cases by household income compared to the share of people living in Toronto by Income Group, July 16, 2020 – Source: [City of Toronto](#)

During a period when many key physical health indicators, such as life expectancy, unmet health needs, obesity and self-perceived health, trended positively prior to COVID-19, reports of mental health challenges were also on the rise. United Way Centraide’s 211 telephone helpline received [a 30% increase](#) in calls from 2019 to 2020, particularly for searches for counselling (a 276% increase), mental health care facilities (a 112% increase) and mental health assessment and treatment (a 105% increase).

Police records show similar trends, as they responded to an [8% increase in calls over the first eight months](#) of the pandemic, despite declines in reported shoplifting, breaking and entering, motor vehicle theft, assaults and sexual assaults. The call increases primarily came from wellness checks, mental health/crisis calls and domestic disturbances.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESSES

Member collaboratives acted quickly to support basic needs and social connections for their clients and residents across their communities. They adapted programs under many different poverty domains to help keep people safe and create better access to health and mental health care.

Members of the **Dufferin County (ON) Equity Collaborative** partnership, realizing that many residents rely on hospital emergency rooms for primary care access, employed a health equity lens and increased utilization of acute care in the community. This included an increase in community and mobile testing and assessment by 10% and an increase in the proportion of non-affiliated and non-rostered patients accessing cold, cough and flu clinics by 30%. The partners increased flu clinic usage by opening up access to individuals that weren't already patients of the Family Health Team; launched an awareness raising campaign over social media, partner websites and in the newspaper; and created a 1-800 telephone number for individuals without a family doctor to make an appointment.

In **Simcoe County (ON)**, 69 participants reported having an increased sense of wellness in 2020 due to connecting with peer support outreach workers; being exposed to new foods; and accessing emergency services, good food boxes and workshops that were funded by the Social and Community Investment Fund. The peer support outreach worker program also supported 26 individuals to feel more socially connected.

Saint John (NB) became the first community in Canada to adapt the U.S. evidence-based [Self-Healing Communities Model](#) (SHCM) to tackle Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs, such as abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, have been evidenced as the most powerful determinant of the public's health. The SHCM model is designed to transform a community's culture, dramatically impacting how people who have experienced ACEs live, work and access supports. It recognizes that direct service interventions alone are not enough to produce transformative health improvements and population-based change, and that they cannot address the scope of problems generated by ACEs.

The funding provided by the Government of New Brunswick's Social Innovation Fund helped community partners exceed their targets in 2020, training 338 individuals and 29 Master Trainers to help organizations embed the SHCM science into their policies and practices.



EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

During the pandemic, there was a substantial drop in childcare enrollment, a trend that [UNICEF is concerned](#) will have irreversible negative impacts on the young children not in care. This is particularly true for low-income households, which tend to have fewer resources and often rely on childcare to help meet their child's or children's developmental needs.

While the drop in enrollment was due to many different factors including job loss, health and safety concerns and/or parents working from home, [a 2020 survey from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) found that the biggest factor was the high cost of childcare in relation to household budgets. This was illustrated best in Quebec, where affordable, operationally funded, set-fee centres saw almost no reduction in enrolment, if any, compared to the fund-the-parent market-fee centres that experienced a significant drop.

Following Quebec's \$8/day daycare success, other provinces began introducing or piloting subsidies, including B.C.'s \$200/month prototype and New Brunswick's sliding scale subsidies. In 2021, the Federal Government pushed the movement ahead by committing to \$10/day daycare across the country.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESSES

In communities, members are continuing to make the case for affordable childcare and are providing extra enriching programs for children, as well as skills-building for parents and families.

Iowa's (USA) Child Care Group contributed to policies preventing low-income Iowans from experiencing the childcare cliff effect. This effect occurs when families accessing the public [Child Care Assistance program](#) achieve a certain income threshold that then makes them ineligible for the benefit even though they still do not make enough money to make up the difference in losing that benefit. Families end up financially worse off and the program becomes a disincentive to attaining better work.

The Working Group held five lobby days with legislators from 2016 to 2017 to raise awareness about the lack of accessible and affordable childcare services for low-income families in three communities. In December 2016, three bills were filed by the minority party in the House and Senate, and though they didn't advance, they responded to the Working Group's specific request to expand eligibility as well as to increase childcare provider wages.

In 2017, \$7.6M was added to the Department of Human Services budget to extend eligibility and help more families access childcare. Finally, on July 1, 2020, the [Child Care Assistance Plus Program was introduced](#), which raised the eligibility threshold and allowed families to gradually step down off the assistance program. Parents were also supported to advance their careers and take better paying jobs. The one-year time limited access to the program was also eliminated.

United Way Regina (SK) prioritizes helping children achieve developmental milestones on time and to start school ready to succeed. This includes [funding partners' programs](#) such as [Big Brothers Big Sisters of Regina and Area](#) and the [Regina Early Learning Centre](#). From 2020 to 2021, 94.2% of children served by five programs improved their behaviour or impulse control, 88.8% of children served by four programs improved their language and cognitive development and 89.5% of children served by four programs improved their gross and fine motor skills.



INCREASING CAPACITY

One of the biggest pivots made by poverty reduction collaboratives was helping to build capacity in the community during COVID-19. While members have often operated on a shoestring budget to address some of society's biggest social challenges, the federal and many provincial/territorial governments provided large one-time lump sum funding to communities to adapt their operations to support people safely. This was particularly welcomed as many businesses and individuals were unable to donate as much due to everyone's shared uncertain future.



Local United Ways and Community Foundations, which are major partners of many member collaboratives, took on the role of administering federal funding for the first time, and several municipalities adapted their community fund requirements, all helping their local social support systems continue to serve people in need.

Members also shared stories of a shift in human resources. Seniors, who comprise a large portion of the voluntary sector, were no longer available, but out-of-work adults and some youth offered new types of skills and support. As Public Health partners were completely redeployed for the COVID-19 response, many partners reported that the shift to virtual work supported *different* partners to participate in collaborative discussions. This was particularly noted by those in a rural context and among small grassroots organizations that usually had time or distance barriers to attending in-person.

CEP MEMBER SUCCESS STORIES

Members adapted new funding and resource opportunities with their communities, many with longer-term positive implications for their poverty reduction work, such as new partners at the table.

Specific examples include the following:

The Dufferin County (ON) [Equity Collaborative](#) saw increased funding under their already established domains, which helped partners both set up and expand programs and services during COVID-19, and are hoping to continue in some ways after. They also noted that COVID-19 was a driver for greater levels of information-sharing amongst partners that has been quick and detailed and has led to a greater awareness and understanding of poverty-related issues. Moreover, the use of technology in a rural area saved travel time, which has led to greater collaboration amongst partners.

[United Way of the Alberta Capital Region](#) distributed \$6.5M in Edmonton and \$980K in northern parts of the province as COVID-19 response funding. In addition, the **[Edmonton Community Foundation](#)** increased their grant funding from \$355K to more than \$1M for food distribution.

New Brunswick created more purchasing power in communities by rallying local food banks across the province to make their purchases through the **[New Brunswick Food Depot Alimentaire](#)**. This shared effort towards bulk buying has created more efficiencies in the local food systems, so that each food bank can access goods below market price and are saved the extra trips to the grocery store.



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Stories and statistics thus far indicate that poverty levels are increasing. Signals indicate increasing rates of low income, inequality being exacerbated, housing becoming a challenge for more people, food insecurity rising with the end of CERB, rising mental health challenges and important early years milestones that are going unnurtured due to a lack of high-quality supports.

From what we have learned from working with our members, we recommend the following next steps.

Collecting data

There is a renewed sense of urgency for quality data gathering with the rise in newly vulnerable individuals and families. This data would help to measure if and how different demographics are recovering from the pandemic. Dis-aggregable data will be important to narrow down who is now living in poverty, what their experience has been and what the new breadth and depth of the situation is.

To date, this data is particularly missing for small and rural communities, Indigenous and racialized peoples, newcomers and LGBTQIA2+ communities. Once there is a better understanding of *who* is in poverty, how many people and why, pathways out of poverty can be developed to wrap support around populations with different intersecting challenges.

Sustaining intersectoral collaboration

Collective Impact initiatives to end poverty can be strengthened in the coming years by building on some of the approaches that were developed during the pandemic.

The person-centered approach, which meets people where they're at and adapts programs, services and changes systems to fill gaps to create an exit out of poverty, was particularly noted as a new impactful way of thinking and collaborating during the pandemic.

In addition, the new collaborative partnerships that were developed during the COVID-19 response can be carried forward. The widespread sense of interconnected interests and alignment across all sectors – business, governments, non-profit organizations and residents – that supported millions of Canadians to stay afloat during the pandemic is important to sustain and build from to have the same kind of impact on ending poverty post-pandemic.

Spreading momentum

Over the course of the pandemic, collaboratives in this sector were typically supporting the movement by offering direct emergency response, which meant providing immediate benefits to individuals and families and supporting communities to be resilient. Another scenario was where partner organizations were taking a direct response, meaning that backbone staff were still able to focus on strategic work and

capacity as planned.

Looking beyond the pandemic, the feelings of vulnerability and interconnectedness and the ways in which all sectors can come together to accomplish big things is part of Canadians' recent collective memory. Poverty reduction has always been critically important to solve; the opportunity in front of poverty reduction organizers is figuring out how to sustain the widespread feeling of *urgency* too.

METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Methods

The Communities Ending Poverty 2021 Progress and COVID-19 Update Report was constructed using lessons from the Getting to Impact course taught by the Tamarack Institute's Associate Evaluator Mark Cabaj and Director of Evaluation Jean-Marie Chapeau. The stories of local data were gathered from Communities Ending Poverty member impact reports, primarily from those members that had participated in the 2019 or 2020 expert-and-group coaching series and completed an impact or update report for 2020.

Updates to the [Dimensions of Poverty Hub](#)'s national-level indicators will not be available until 2022. In the meantime, this report drew on Statistics Canada data and research commissioned or conducted by national non-profit thought leaders in their fields, such as the [Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness](#), [Prosper Canada](#), [Food Banks Canada](#), [United Way Centraide](#) and the [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#). We then juxtaposed the data with trends in observances that Communities Ending Poverty members have been sharing with the network over the past 18 months.

Limitations

The 2021 Progress and COVID-19 Update Report uses different measures than the 2020 Impact Report in an effort to tell the story of what members are seeing locally across Canada to flag early indicators of crises and to recognize and celebrate success where they have occurred.

Readers should take caution in comparing the two reports. For instance, the Seymour Financial Wellbeing Survey derives its data from a sample of 3,000–5,000 Canadians each year and defines *low income* as before-tax income from all sources. The Market Basket Measure, on the other hand, tracks *absolute poverty* after tax and social contributions and surveyed 47,000 households in 2019. While the Seymour Financial Wellbeing Survey provides us with helpful year-over-year data trends in the interim to see how people on low income fared during the pandemic and substitute our knowledge of absolute poverty with low income, it cannot be compared to the Market Basket Measure directly.

Another limitation stems from how data fluctuates among locally based poverty reduction initiatives. For instance, Simcoe County's data does not track unique participants within each program or between

programs, meaning some individuals or families could benefit from a program more than once and/or from more than one program at a time and could thus be counted as beneficiaries multiple times. Caution should be used when reading this data.

Further limitations to the data gathered in this report include the following:

Timeframes

As much as possible, data timeframes were pulled from January 2020 to November 2021. However, some data, particularly from communities reporting on population-level impact in their communities, report on results that are the accumulation of years of efforts up until 2020 or 2021, making achievements uneven amongst members. National-level data this year was primarily pulled from sources referencing 2020 and 2021, with comparisons to 2018 and 2019 to gauge the level of change.

Subjectivity

This report was written by the Communities Ending Poverty team for Communities Ending Poverty members with one of the main goals being to celebrate their individual and collective achievements despite overall increases in poverty reduction due to COVID-19.

Attribution

With the limited capacity of lead researchers, Tamarack Institute and non-profit Communities Ending Poverty members, it was not possible to conduct a full-fledged contribution analysis determining which specific members have contributed to national and population-level changes under each of the domains and to what degree. Rather, this report describes population-level trends and provides real examples from local communities that depict how it is probable that the progressive accumulation of small- to medium-sized outcomes at the local level builds towards better well-being for all and how these outcomes are setting the stage for pandemic recovery.

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