

Results of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Questionnaire

*A summary of the public consultation on
poverty reduction in Nova Scotia*



Prepared for: The Province of Nova Scotia - May 22, 2008

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Executive Summary

The Government of Nova Scotia is developing a Poverty Reduction Strategy, an initiative led by the departments of Community Services and Labour and Workforce Development.

As part of the strategy development, a consultation process was undertaken, which includes the development and distribution of a seven question survey designed to gauge the views of Nova Scotians on poverty issues in the province.

The questionnaire was developed and offered online through the government website and distributed to all Provincial buildings, the Department of Community Services and Access Nova Scotia offices and to stakeholder organizations throughout Nova Scotia. To increase awareness and participation, print ads were sent out in the first week of March and were placed in the Chronicle Herald and other daily and weekly newspapers around the province, notifying the public of the public consultation and directing them to the website and locations where copies of the questionnaire were available. Additionally, a 1-800 phonenumber was established where Nova Scotians that were unable to access the questionnaire through the aforementioned channels were able to request one be sent via mail. This line, which was noted in the advertising, resulted in roughly 100 additional surveys disseminated. The questionnaire portion of the public consultation closed on March 31, 2008.

The majority of forms were completed online, though some were filled out manually and delivered to the department. In total, close to 1,300 surveys were completed. While this is a relatively small sampling of the population, it isn't the only way the government has sought input. Government engaged with a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives from business, the academic community, labour and poverty advocates and other community organizations in November 2007 and January 2008. Many community-based organizations, such as HRM's Community Action Against Homelessness, conducted surveys and/or produced their own reports that were shared with Government and incorporated into its findings.

Building on this consultation, Bill 94 - An Act to Establish a Poverty Reduction Strategy Working Group, was passed unanimously on December 13, 2007 in the Legislature. The group, comprised of representatives from business, community, health, advocacy, labour and economic organizations, has been meeting bi-weekly since January 15, 2008. Its mandate is to compare and contrast programs and support offered in Nova Scotia, along with best practices in other jurisdictions, and review the results of the public consultation to make recommendations on strategies and priorities for action for the government to consider

addressing on the issue of poverty reduction, including recommending an implementation plan.

The survey questions were:

1. How does poverty affect you and your family?
2. The government works in a variety of ways to reduce poverty. Which programs work best for you? Why?
3. If the government could do one more thing to reduce poverty in the province, what should it be?
4. What would help reduce poverty in your rural areas?
5. What would help reduce poverty in our cities?
6. Reducing poverty costs money. We all pay for these programs through our taxes. What five things would reduce poverty, be a good use of our tax dollars and invest in the future?
7. Any other comments?

Responses to the final question ranged from a general cynicism about the intent of the survey to some personal offers of support to government to help tackle poverty issues. Some respondents stated that the survey should have been more widely distributed and the public more widely consulted. Many respondents also commented that the time for consultation had passed and that action should start. The comments seemed to indicate a general frustration with what some respondents see as an increasing gap between rich and poor.

Those comments are included in this document. The document also includes a description of the methodology, an analysis of the data and a breakdown of the survey responses.

Survey Response Breakdown

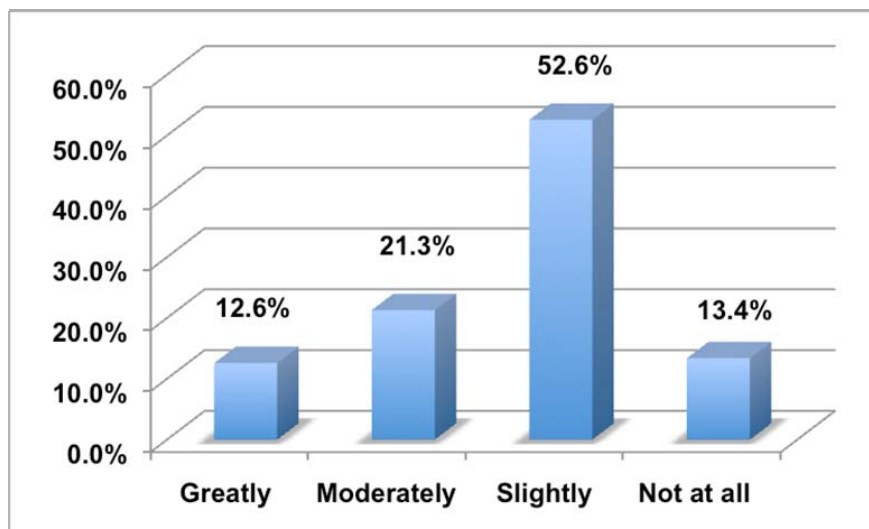
1. How does poverty affect you and your family?

Greatly: 162 (12.6%)

Moderately: 273 (21.3%)

Slightly: 673 (52.6%)

Not at all: 172 (13.4%)



2. The government works in a variety of ways to reduce poverty. Which programs work best for you? Why? (Many respondents listed more than one answer; therefore, total will not equal total respondents.)

Transportation:

13 (.9%)

Literacy/ training/
education:

112 (7.5%)

Housing:

87 (5.8%)

Income and
employment supports:

277 (18.5%)

Awareness and
collaboration:

65 (4.3%)

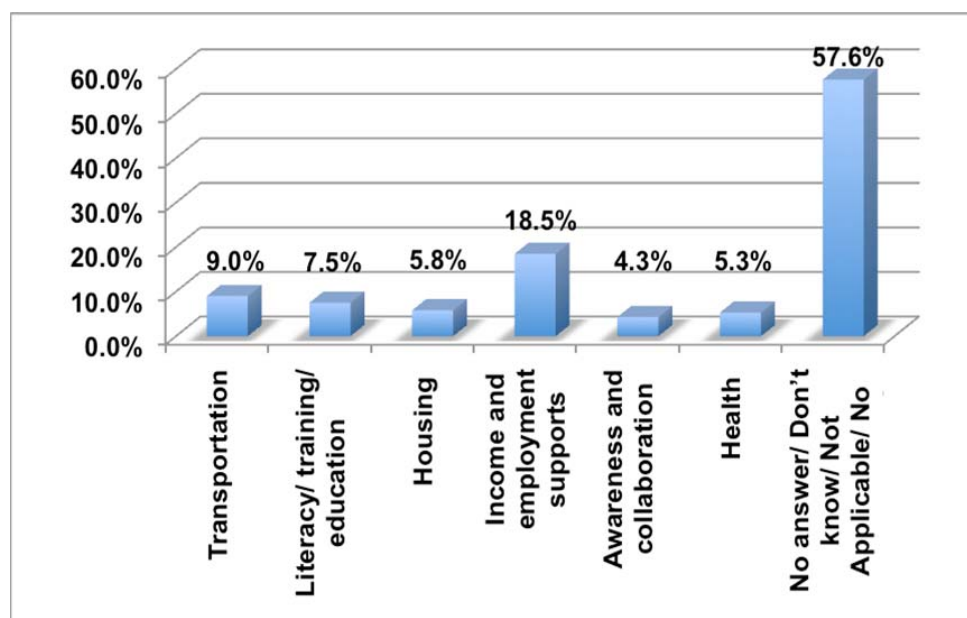
Health:

80 (5.3%)

No answer/ Don't

know/ Not Applicable/ No programs work:

863 (57.6%)



3. If the government could do one more thing to reduce poverty in the province, what should it be?

Transportation:
15 (1.1%)

Literacy/ training/
education:
165 (12%)

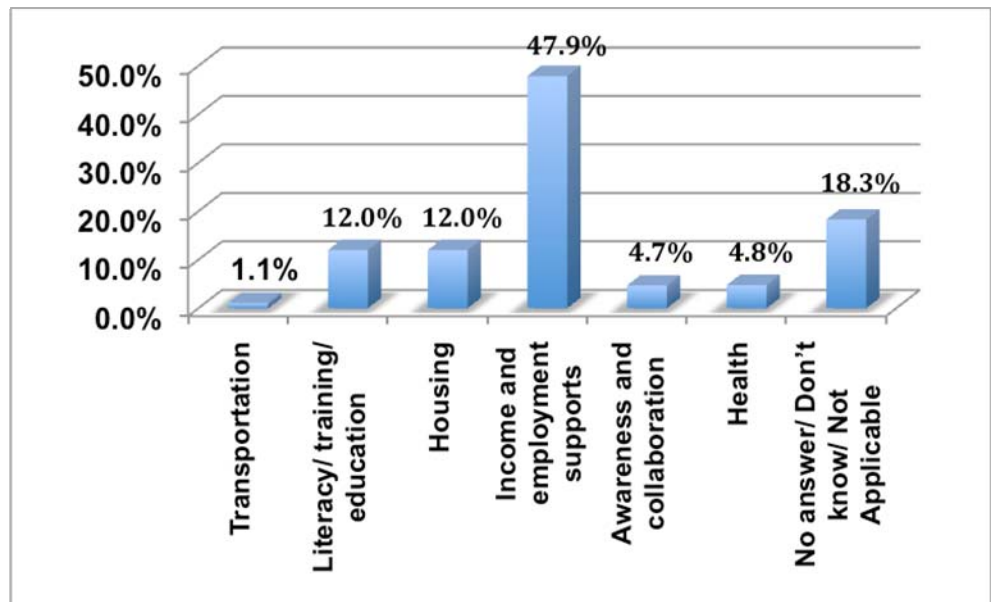
Housing:
164 (12%)

Income and employment
supports:
657 (47.9%)

Awareness and
collaboration:
64 (4.7%)

Health:
66 (4.8%)

No answer/ Don't know/
Not Applicable: 251 (18.3%)



4. What would help reduce poverty in our rural areas? (Many respondents listed more than one answer; therefore, total will not equal total respondents.)

Transportation:
259 (14.9%)

Literacy/ training/
education:
224 (12.9%)

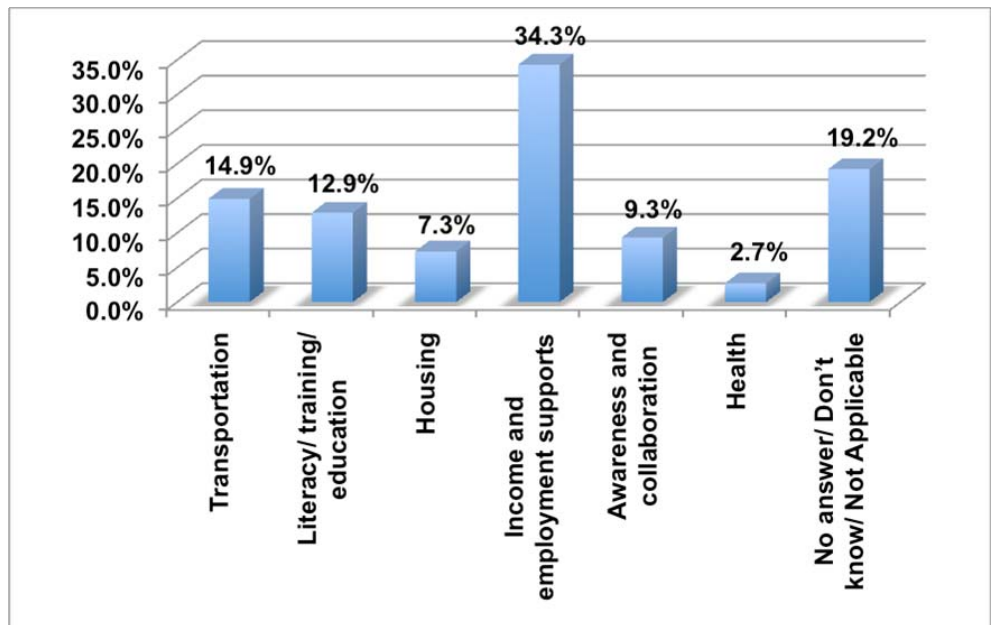
Housing:
127 (7.3%)

Income and employment
supports:
595 (34.3%)

Awareness and
collaboration:
162 (9.3%)

Health:
47 (2.7%)

No answer/ Don't know/
Not Applicable: 333
(19.2%)



5. What would help reduce poverty in our cities? (Many respondents listed more than one answer; therefore, total will not equal total respondents.)

Transportation:
74 (4.2%)

Literacy/ training/
education:
259 (14.7%)

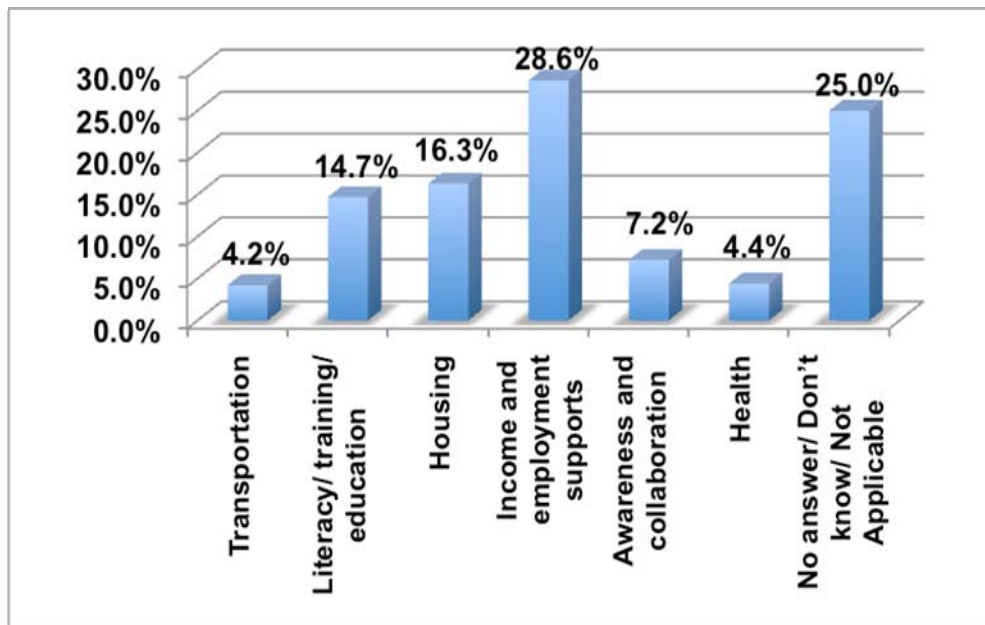
Housing:
287 (16.3%)

Income and employment
supports:
503 (28.6%)

Awareness and
collaboration:
127 (7.2%)

Health:
78 (4.4%)

No answer/ Don't know/
Not Applicable: 441 (25%)



6. Reducing poverty costs money. We all pay for these programs through our taxes. What five things would reduce poverty, be a good use of our tax dollars and invest in the future? (A significant minority of respondents gave five answers to this question.)

Transportation:
165 (6.1%)

Literacy/ training/
education:
574 (21.3%)

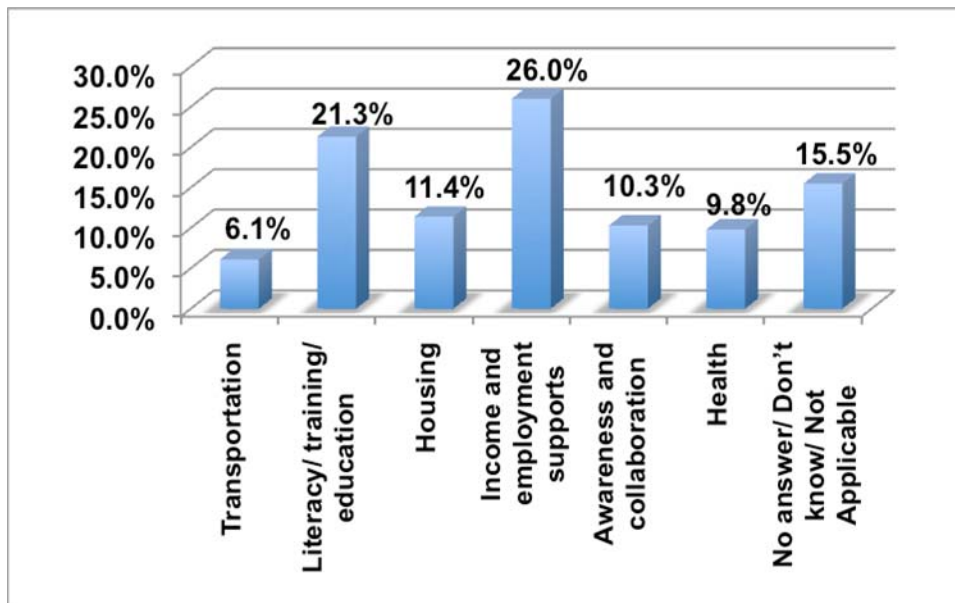
Housing:
307 (11.4%)

Income and employment
supports:
700 (26%)

Awareness and
collaboration:
277 (10.3%)

Health:
264 (9.8%)

No answer/ Don't know/
Not Applicable: 416 (15.5%)



Observations

The survey results indicate that while almost all of the respondents feel they are in some way affected by poverty, well over half were either unfamiliar with the government's programs and services, or believed that those government services and programs had no impact on poverty.

In order of responses, those who did answer the question, *Which programs work best for you? Why?*, said programs such as income and employment supports, literacy/training/education, housing, health, awareness and collaboration, and transportation worked best.

In answering the question, *If the government could do one more thing to reduce poverty in the province, what should it be?*, respondents listed income and employment supports, literacy/education/training, housing, health, awareness and collaboration, and transportation.

With regard to, *What would help reduce poverty in our rural areas?*, respondents overwhelmingly listed income and employment supports and transportation as the answers. These were followed by literacy/training/education, awareness and collaboration, housing and health. When asked the same question about poverty in the cities, income and employment supports led the list of answers, followed by housing, literacy/training/education, awareness and collaboration, health, and transportation.

The introductory statement to Question 6, *"Reducing poverty costs money"*, resulted in a number of respondents stating that they felt reducing poverty is an investment, not a cost. In response to the five things that would reduce poverty, a quarter of respondents cited employment and income assistance programs. Literacy/education/training programs, housing, awareness and collaboration, health, and transportation were also cited as good uses of tax dollars in reducing poverty.

Methodology

Nearly 1,300 Poverty Reduction Strategy Questionnaires were reviewed, encompassing six questions and one general comments section.

The first question in the questionnaire asked how poverty affected the respondent and their family. Given the wide range of possible answers, four levels of impact were developed: greatly, moderately, slightly and not at all. All of the responses to this question were assigned to one of these categories. Answers of 'greatly' were those indicating a constant struggle to pay bills or those stating that the respondent has inadequate housing. Answers considered 'moderate' included cases where the respondents' household wasn't directly impacted by poverty but who regularly provided support to a member of their family who was

living in poverty. Answers considered 'slight' were those from people not directly impacted by poverty but who indicated they felt its affects through work, volunteering in their community, through the taxes and other financial contributions they regularly make, and those who stated that poverty is a concern to them even if they don't directly feel its affects. The last category, 'not at all', only included responses that repeated identical or similar words (i.e., 'not at all', 'it does not', 'does not affect me', etc.).

Questions two through six included a series of open-ended questions that asked respondents questions about government programs or general areas of poverty. Just as the responses for question one varied considerably, so too did the responses for these questions. A system to categorize the wide range of answers was developed, using the categories or 'buckets' defined in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultations. These included: transportation; literacy/ training/ education; housing; income and employment supports; awareness and collaboration; and health. An additional category of 'no answer/ don't know/ not applicable' was added to account for responses that failed to answer the question or in which the respondent indicated they were unable to answer. This system of categorization worked well, considering almost all of the answers given fit easily into one of these categories.

For questions one through six, the numbers alongside the response indicates the number of respondents who gave that answer. The total number of responses in question one will add up to the total number of respondents (1280). However, the same cannot be said for the remaining questions, as many respondents gave more than one answer to the same question, even when directed to provide a certain number of answers. In the Analysis section that follows, a verbatim response is listed to start the analysis for each question that offers a good summary of the responses provided.

Responses to the final question, soliciting additional comments, were screened and select comments have been included in this document. They were selected for their views on this survey, thoughts on the issue of poverty in this province, additional suggestions for reducing poverty, and those that included contact information to request or offer additional communication. Each paragraph represents a separate response.

Analysis

Question 1 - How does poverty affect you and your family?

"As a family, we have an income we can live on, but we are called upon more and more often to help those who do not,

through service organizations, food banks, soup kitchens, people we know directly, extended family members."

Responses to the first question indicate that the vast majority of respondents (over 86%) are at least somewhat affected by poverty. Over 33% gave a response falling into the 'moderately' or 'greatly' categories, which indicates that poverty has an effect on either them or their extended family.

Question 2 - The government works in a variety of ways to reduce poverty. Which programs work best for you? Why?

"Programs helping me receive education and training and services around finding employment are very helpful. Knowing what is out there for employment and being able to access it is key!"

Over half, or 57.6%, of the completed questionnaires gave no response to question two, indicating that the respondents were not familiar with the government's programs, or that they didn't believe the government's programs had an impact on poverty. It's important to note that this proportion is based on responses, as opposed to respondents, as many people gave more than one answer. Over 18% said employment and income assistance was the most beneficial. However, there were numerous cases where the respondents went on to say that they didn't think the government's programs in this area were totally adequate.

Question 3 - If the government could do one more thing to reduce poverty in the province, what should it be?

"More funding (monthly living expenses) and an affordable housing strategy."

Close to half of the responses given to question three indicated that the one thing the province should focus on to reduce poverty is income and employment assistance. A response of 'don't know/ no answer' was the next most common response (251), followed by adequate housing (164). Providing free or subsidized transportation accounted for only one per cent of the answers.

Questions 4 and 5 - What would help reduce poverty in our rural areas? What would help reduce poverty in our cities?

"Better housing and an affordable, accessible public transportation system. Puerto Rico as a model we could learn from. They're called publicos. They're taxis that go around and serve rural areas. Of course, this would require some government subsidy because the low population base would not make it a sustainable business in our province. Think of the way it would open up opportunities for people. It would

transform our province. I think you should go for it, but don't nickel-and-dime the program as has been done in the past."

Answers to these questions were similar, with two noticeable exceptions. To reduce poverty in rural areas, transportation was much more commonly cited than in cities (259 to 74). The reverse was true in the number of responses for housing. In that case, respondents more commonly cited housing as a poverty reduction method for cities than in rural areas (287 to 127). Health programs were also cited more often as a program for cities than rural areas, with many respondents specifically describing mental health as an issue in cities.

Question 6 - Reducing poverty costs money. We all pay for these programs through our taxes. What five things would reduce poverty, be a good use of our tax dollars and invest in the future?

"More support to families, single mothers, children. How can we reduce poverty if the families living in it are not educated on ways to make their lives better financially."

Some began their responses by stating their belief in poverty reduction programs as an investment, not a cost. The most popular answer to this question, making up 26% of the responses, included employment and income assistance programs. That was followed by literacy/ education/ training programs (21.3%), no answer/ not applicable (15.5%), housing (11.4%), awareness and collaboration (10.3%), health (9.8%), and transportation (6.1%).

Additional Comments

Question 7 - Any other comments?

"The plight of the disabled is one that is overlooked by government. It makes me sad that the government thinks anyone who has two arms that work should be able to get out and support themselves. The general public looks at the physically challenged as a person with no education, mentally deficient and a drain on society. Most want to be active, participating, contributing members but need the support of government and the public and acceptance by employers that these folks can be an asset."

"You can't just throw money at a problem and expect it to go away. You need to invest the money in things like education and means of transportation for these people so they can get into the work force support themselves and their children and have good self worth and respect. Their children may be able to see this and break the cycle of poverty also with the governments help."

"Great to have the opportunity to voice concerns. Suggest doing this via posting in the paper and asking for hard copy feedback. Those living in poverty don't all have access to this survey. Most public forum etc. thank you"

"Although it costs more to taxpayers - poverty is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. Those who live in poverty use more of our health care services. Due to their living conditions and poor eating habits (because unhealthy food is cheaper to buy) they experience higher rates of many illnesses and diseases, including cancer, heart attacks, depression, anxiety and many more. Also children are more likely to suffer from injuries as well. For the children that grow up in poverty they are likely to continue living in poverty their entire lives - because they do not know any better and are unlikely to be able to achieve a higher level of education to find better paying work. They also are more likely to have children at a younger age and continue the cycle of poverty again. The message is simple - if poverty is not addressed with an integrative and preventative approach how are those living in it going to overcome it and be able to be self-sustaining. Poverty is an issue I am very passionate about and I am interested in knowing how Nova Scotia plans on addressing this issue. I realize I do not need to identify myself but this is an issue that must be addressed!"

"I think it is commendable that the government wants to do something about poverty. However, as a person who has worked primarily with poor people for the last 20 years, I can only say that I feel it is getting worse. The gap between the rich and poor is widening and people are feeling pretty desperate. Please don't let this be a study that sits on a shelf: do something with the results - anything would be a push in the right direction. Thanks!"

"As a 30 year veteran in the Human Services field, working face-to-face in the living rooms of poverty and with youth at risk, feel free to contact me for any support and or consultation."

"It is about time this is happening. The number of poor and working poor is increasing steadily. Despite the PR the provincial and federal government try to spin, the current policies and programs are making minute changes, and not really altering the system."

"I believe that this is a very complicated issue. The students that I have met in my years in adult education were often living below the poverty line. They lack the training and skills to be able to budget their money, and it often seems that they are one missed check away from being in a very precarious position (e.g. homeless). I believe that we need to help people to help themselves by providing good incentives for

returning to school and training to help secure better employment. There also has to be a better system in place for those struggling to make ends meet in minimum wage jobs, whether it be increasing minimum wage or having more government support of small business to help this situation."

"We must reward partnership development of the numerous organizations addressing poverty. Agencies in targeted communities receiving incentives to advance poverty reduction though collaborative practice would assist in developing creative solutions to long-term challenges. The same approach should be expected by government departments."

"I just think it is really important not to just throw money at the problem. Sustainable solutions are required. The vast majority of low-income families do not take advantage of the system. They want to be self-sufficient and there should be no shame associated with asking for help."

"I want to say most of my life I have lived in poverty, it has been very challenging to say the least but I am inspired and encouraged by the positive developments in Community Supports and I hope you will give more funding to them all as they are making a big difference in the lives of those living in poverty, with disability and Mental illness! Thank you there is still room for improvements though and ask us the stakeholders for our advice! Thank you!"

"Our poor have low self-esteem. We must have a province of people who are proud of themselves and this beautiful province we live in. Have help for mental health problems and programs for esteem building."

"Please see the worth of education. My life has been changed forever. I came back to school with bruised self-esteem and no hope. I am now a confident, productive Nova Scotian."

"Cost of energy is going to be one of the major issues of the next decade along with global warming. The poor will be most drastically affected. Lets create businesses and jobs that respond to these issues and become a province that leads in these areas. Involve those in poverty in responding to these issues."

"It would probably be helpful for Nova Scotia to set up randomly-chosen Citizens' Assembly to help the Government hear a representative set of voices on the question of poverty in Nova Scotia. The people serving on this would have to be randomly selected - to get a fair cross-section of children, youth, middle- and older-age people, and for a fair representation of income groups. The people on this Assembly could serve for three-year terms - one third being replaced with a new, randomly selected group each year (to provide a

balance of consistency and 'new blood'). And they would need their costs of service reimbursed."

"I'm curious to see how you will compile your survey results as they are so open ended. I also really hope it did not cost a lot of money to implement this survey. The NS Child Poverty Report Card, the NS Participatory Food Security Projects, National Council on Welfare, Halifax Coalition Against Poverty, etc. all have wonderful recommendations on how to reduce poverty in our province. I truly hope the government is listening."

"This questionnaire is slanted toward people who are directing experiencing poverty which is important, but there should have been more effort to encourage comments from the other segments of our society. Only when governments are convinced that there is widespread support to reduce/eliminate poverty (and I believe there is more public support than the government realizes) will action be taken. Perhaps you should do another questionnaire stating that you want to hear from people who are not on programs."

"We need to make sure that the plan is sustainable. That we are not going to put a strategy in place and fund it for two years. This does not work for these issues. We also need to make sure that this strategy works in partnership with all the other work that is going on in the Province. Such as the food costing research, the work the NGOs have undertaken. This cannot be successful as a separate initiative it needs to integrate with and build upon all the other work that is going on."

"While it's not a panacea for overcoming poverty, access to free adult education programs for all Nova Scotians would certainly help. The NSSAL is a good program but students still have to find a way to get there and without public transit in most rural communities that's a problem. We also need to make sure that persons on welfare are able to go back to school, no matter how long the program they enroll in - right now a two year program is allowed, we need to allow all programs."

"Poverty is a vicious cycle, which is my belief, starts at an early age, and is influenced by environment. Education is only one tool to break the cycle, but is extremely important, and has long-term effects. While we as a province struggle to invest our dollars wisely in the education of our youth, there is much more that can be done to provide the supports for them to succeed. We have experienced difficulty recruiting professionals to specialized areas, and I believe that there should be a focus on recruiting immigrants to NS. After all, we, or our relatives/families, were at one time, all immigrants to Canada, and we should welcome them to participate in the growth of our province."

"Although there is great need among many people for the support they receive through social services, more social services won't fix the problem of poverty. While DCS is a key player in the NS Poverty Reduction initiative, the strategy needs to come from all departments and sectors, including business, labour, community agencies, students, parents, etc. It's a daunting task but has to be done well if it's going to succeed."

"If there is any way that I can become involved in this process, I would be quite interested. I hope that something is actually going to be done to address the reality of poverty in this province."

"I teach adult upgrading to low level learners many of whom have an excellent work ethic. They need chances to be in the workplace and get basic reading and numeracy skills at the same time. DCS, provincial literacy organizations and employers can work together in this. This will get them out of the ruts they are in and will make better use of money divvied out by Dept. of Community Services offices. They could be given extra social assistance by doing this as an incentive. Perhaps the improved minimum wage will help."

"Poverty is a vast topic but very prevalent here in Nova Scotia. More money is needed just to try and get near the poverty line. Money is a start, and then the front line workers need to be educated about the issues their clients are facing. The helplessness and hopelessness needs to be worked on before people can get an education or job. When a person is down for so long it's hard to get back. There are some people, yes, who abuse the system, some because of necessity and some just do. Those that just do ruin it for the many others who are honest and very humble in their situation. It is those people who fall through the cracks, and there are many. So, it's important to focus on helping in a positive way as opposed to the negative aspects of dealing with people. Who wants to be on welfare? I wish I wasn't."

"I don't mind paying taxes. I'd sooner pay taxes and see these improvements happen. It might seem silly, but removing taxes on feminine hygiene products could go a long way. It's a necessary item for women to buy, and they are not cheap. It doesn't seem fair to tax women for something that is necessary for their inclusion in society."

"Dr. Patty Williams should be on the poverty reduction working group. There is a new study released by Health Canada or PHAC I think that looks at the links between the social determinants of health and economic change. It would be an interesting study to consult as the working group seeks to identify which changes can have the most positive impact on health in NS"

"There are many different levels of poverty, there are the down and out people living on the streets. There are the single

parents who have government funded housing, but still live from hand to mouth. The more insidious poverty is found among the working poor, who live from paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford all the extras, but still pay taxes. As one who fits into this category, it is frustrating to go to my job every day and provide services to people on Social Assistance who are abusing the system. Many of these people are using the system when they are capable of working. They won't take a job because they haven't the qualifications for a high paying job, but what they don't seem to realize is that every one has to start from somewhere. It's too easy to be handed a cheque every month and then try to stretch it along, that part is hard. If people could find something constructive to do, it could benefit everyone. In some countries, women are helped with food and shelter, but they attend a special school where they learn to sew uniforms or to clean in homes. When the women who sew learn their trade, they are provided with a small loan to buy their own sewing machine, and they work from home. Slowly they build their business and eventually they can become self-supporting. In the same way, the women who are taught to clean can build a clientele, if people would learn trades and take jobs that others might think to be demeaning, then a self-supporting society could be built. When poor people are given money, they don't appreciate it as much as if they had worked for it. It then becomes a lifestyle and this cycle needs to stop."

"This was an interesting survey and I'd like to know the results. How can I find out?"

"This survey was a bit annoying in terms of all the open-ended questions. Many of the questions were vague, repetitive, or dealing with the humongous issue of poverty that could not possibly be captured in a few sentences. Who structured this survey, and are these questions backed up by literature? Most people, who would feel comfortable and have the time to answer a survey such as this one, probably aren't living in poverty!!! You should be surveying those in actual need. Hold focus groups, talk to local shelters, and organizations that help those in need. Talk to the people and find out what they want or don't want."

"There are people that as in all sectors, will abuse the system. I believe that a closer check on people in the system would stop a lot of the abuse. It appears that everyone knows someone that is getting money (Social Assistances) but it continues. Employees to get paid to check and stop abuse."

"Please have sessions in all parts of the province to release the findings of this research. Let people respond and be heard. This could be the spark that starts many discussions and releases some optimism in our province but that won't happen without opportunity to engage."

"Rural poverty is much different than urban poverty. The changing face of family has impacted children. The struggles of rising oil costs, transportation, food costs, the very unreasonable costs of milk. Children so influenced today by Internet and face book. So many schools without Family Studies Programs and teens with eating disorders. I am very interested in this topic. We work with children everyday and I find it odd that the schools are not on this task force. I am interested in receiving any up-dates or future questionnaires. I think it very important that the gov't of Nova Scotia address poverty. We live in a province of great potential and I have found that business and community respond to requests to help children and their families. It's the bigger organizations that are suppose to help children and families that are not up to the plate."

"The Nova Scotia Child Benefit was introduced in 1998. There has not been a rate increase nor has the income ceiling been raised in 10 years. This program was a joint initiative with the federal government aimed at reducing child poverty. If we want to reduce child poverty, this benefit needs to be indexed annually as is the NCB."