

Social Challenges in Moncton, New Brunswick: An Overview

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Abstract

Moncton, New Brunswick, a growing urban centre, faces significant and interconnected social challenges. This report provides an enhanced overview of key issues including homelessness, substance abuse, discrimination, public safety, social inequality, and the strain on mental health and social support systems. Drawing upon recent data and community reports, it highlights the escalating nature of these problems, the systemic factors contributing to them, and the efforts being made by various stakeholders to address the complex crisis. While community and municipal efforts are underway, the report underscores the need for coordinated, multi-level government and community responses focused on root causes and integrated support systems to build a more equitable and resilient community.

1 Introduction

Moncton, New Brunswick, like many Canadian cities, is experiencing rapid growth, which unfortunately coincides with a complex array of social challenges. These issues are deeply interconnected and require a comprehensive understanding to inform effective solutions. This report examines several critical areas impacting the well-being of Moncton residents: homelessness and housing instability, the opioid crisis, LGBTQ+ rights and discrimination, public safety, broader social inequality and discrimination, and the capacity of mental health and social support systems. Using recent data and insights from community stakeholders, this analysis aims to provide a more in-depth perspective on the multifaceted crisis facing the city.

2 Homelessness and Housing Instability

Homelessness in Moncton has reached critical levels, marked by a stark increase in the number of individuals experiencing housing instability. A point-in-time count in 2023 identified 337 individuals without stable housing, a substantial rise from 59 in 2016. [8, 36] Preliminary figures for early 2024 suggest this number has further escalated to approximately 550 people. [8] Data from the Human Development Council (HDC) tracks homelessness across New Brunswick's major cities, confirming a significant rise in the unhoused population, which more than doubled in Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John between 2022 and 2024, reaching 1,562 individuals experiencing homelessness for at least one day as of January 2025. [24, 37, 46]

Despite the availability of emergency shelter beds, including 319 shelter beds and a 35-seat warming centre, demand frequently outstrips capacity, leaving many unsheltered, particularly during harsh weather conditions. [8, 12] The crisis is exacerbated by root causes including a severe lack of affordable housing, low vacancy rates, rising rental costs, and inadequate social assistance rates that make market housing unattainable for many. [12, 14, 24, 32, 46] Furthermore, a significant proportion of the unhoused population, estimated at 65% across NB cities, experiences complex needs such as mental health issues, substance use challenges, and physical health problems, making stable housing particularly difficult to secure and maintain without integrated supports. [24, 46]

Addressing this issue is a shared responsibility. While the City of Moncton notes that direct jurisdiction over social services like housing subsidies and wrap-around support rests primarily with the provincial Department of Social Development, the city has actively worked to address the situation. [12, 19] This includes allocating significant funds, services, and staff time, increasing social grant funding to \$1.2 million (a 727% increase from 2014), providing locations for shelters, approving a year-round

drop-in centre, and financially supporting initiatives like Rising Tide Community Initiatives and the Humanity Project’s JOSH Project. [12, 33] The city is also developing an affordable housing policy and working with partners to implement a coordinated access system for housing and support services. [12, 14, 18] Community organizations play a crucial role, including street intervention programs like YMCA ReConnect, the Salvus Clinic offering health services, and the Greater Moncton Homelessness Steering Committee (GMHSC) coordinating efforts. [12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 23, 32, 39, 46] A “Housing First” approach, which prioritizes immediate housing coupled with support services, has been implemented and shown success in the Greater Moncton area. [16, 39] Despite these efforts, the scale of the crisis requires sustained and increased investment from all levels of government and continued collaboration with community partners. [12, 14, 18, 24, 33, 46]

3 Substance Abuse and the Opioid Crisis

New Brunswick continues to grapple with a significant substance abuse challenge, with the opioid epidemic having a particularly devastating impact. Fentanyl and its analogues are major contributors to overdose deaths. In 2023, 72 opioid-related deaths were recorded in the province, with 71 classified as accidental or pending investigation. [9] Of these, 54% were attributed to fentanyl or its analogues, representing the highest percentage to date. [9, 21, 25, 38] While provincial data for the latter part of 2024 is pending finalization, preliminary Q1 2024 data showed that fentanyl was still implicated in a high proportion (50%) of accidental or pending intent opioid toxicity deaths in the province. [9] The unpredictable nature of the illicit drug supply, often involving fentanyl mixed with other substances, significantly increases the risk of fatal overdose. Reports indicate that overdose fatalities continue to impact Moncton’s homeless community, with at least seven deaths reported in 2024 within this group.

Addressing the opioid crisis requires enhanced harm reduction services, including accessible naloxone distribution, overdose prevention sites (although provincial stance on these facilities is restrictive), and comprehensive treatment and recovery programs. The intersection of substance abuse with mental health and homelessness necessitates integrated support systems. [18, 24]

4 LGBTQ+ Rights and Discrimination

New Brunswick’s Policy 713, initially enacted in 2020, established minimum standards for schools to create safe, welcoming, inclusive, and affirming environments for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. The original policy required school personnel to use students’ pronouns and chosen names, provided for gender-neutral bathrooms, and supported Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) clubs. [3, 5, 11, 14, 17]

However, a review initiated in April 2023 by the provincial government led to significant revisions in June and August 2023. [3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 14] The revised policy introduced the requirement for parental consent for students under 16 to formally or informally change their name or pronouns at school and removed the clause stating students could participate in extracurriculars “consistent with their gender identity.” [3, 4, 5, 7, 14] These changes sparked widespread protests from students and advocacy groups who argued they rolled back basic rights and protections for transgender and gender non-conforming youth, potentially forcing them to come out to unsupportive families. [3, 4, 7, 11, 17] The New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate issued a scathing review, calling the revisions “more overtly discriminatory.” [3, 7] The changes have also prompted legal challenges from 2SLGBTQI+ organizations. [7, 11] Following the provincial election in October 2024, the incoming government has indicated plans to further revise Policy 713, aiming to align the policy with the recommendations of the Child and Youth Advocate’s office. [3, 7] This ongoing policy debate highlights the persistent challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in ensuring their rights and safety are protected within institutional settings.

5 Public Safety Concerns

Public safety in Moncton has been a significant concern, underscored by tragic events such as the 2014 shooting that resulted in the deaths of three RCMP officers, the city’s most severe act of gun violence in recent history. [2, 6, 10, 12, 13] This incident left a lasting impact on the community’s sense of security. [2, 12]

More recently, public safety discussions in Moncton have increasingly intersected with issues of homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health, particularly in the downtown area. The visible presence

of homelessness, open-air drug use, panhandling, and associated issues like vandalism and thefts contribute to community concerns about safety and security. [33] The City of Moncton’s Social Inclusion Plan acknowledges the need for a balanced and respectful approach to managing public spaces through community-based, proactive, and trauma-informed strategies, recognizing that these issues are complex and linked to underlying social challenges. [16, 18, 20, 33] Addressing public safety effectively requires not only law enforcement responses but also addressing the root causes of these issues through social support and integrated services. [18]

6 Social Inequality and Discrimination

Moncton is a diverse city, with visible minorities comprising approximately 14.9% of the population and Indigenous residents accounting for 2.7%. [27, 29] Despite this diversity, individuals from marginalized communities, including racialized groups, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, and the LGBTQ+ community, often face systemic challenges and discrimination. [7, 28, 34, 39]

While comprehensive, Moncton-specific data on hate crimes is not extensively documented, broader New Brunswick context indicates that the province experiences hate crime incidents. [4] National data shows significant increases in police-reported hate crimes targeting various groups, including those based on race/ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation in recent years. [4, 24, 31, 37, 40, 42] A 2021 report by New Brunswick’s Commissioner on Systemic Racism confirmed the existence of systemic and overt racism in the province and highlighted a lack of safety felt by many marginalized communities, recommending the development of a strategic plan to combat hate and discrimination. [27, 34, 35, 39, 47, 49] A report on newcomer services in Greater Moncton also highlighted a lack of dedicated initiatives addressing racism and discrimination, recommending the implementation of specific anti-racism strategies. [28, 31] Systemic issues can manifest as biases in access to housing, employment, healthcare, and support systems, perpetuating social inequality and making vulnerable populations more susceptible to issues like homelessness and poor health outcomes. The intersectional nature of discrimination means that individuals with multiple marginalized identities may face compounded challenges.

7 Mental Health and Social Support

The challenges of homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health are deeply intertwined, creating a complex web of needs for vulnerable individuals. Advocates and organizations, such as Ensemble Greater Moncton, Harvest House, the John Howard Society, Youth Impact Jeunesse, and the United Way-funded agencies like Atlantic Wellness Community Centre, work tirelessly to provide support. [12, 15, 17, 22, 23, 32] However, the demand for mental health and social support services significantly strains existing resources. [19, 20, 28, 30, 41, 45]

Access to timely mental health care is a critical issue. Wait times for mental health counselling in New Brunswick are considerably longer than the national average (66 days in NB compared to 22 nationally in 2023), indicating significant barriers to accessing care when needed. [5, 41, 44] There are acknowledged gaps in mental health and substance abuse services, and community-based organizations on the front lines are often underfunded, relying heavily on grants and donations. [20, 28, 30] The healthcare system as a whole is experiencing strain and staffing shortages, further impacting the delivery of both physical and mental health services. [5, 38, 41] Horizon Health Network provides some services, including Mobile Crisis Units offering timely interventions and various addiction and mental health programs, but capacity remains a challenge. [21, 32] The City of Moncton’s Social Needs Assessment also identified mental health and addictions as significant areas of concern, highlighting the need for increased funding and public awareness campaigns. [18, 20, 27, 30] Addressing these issues requires not only increased funding for services but also the development of integrated support systems that can address the complex and often co-occurring needs of individuals experiencing homelessness, addiction, and mental illness simultaneously. [20, 24, 28, 33, 46] Efforts to reduce the pervasive stigma associated with mental illness and addiction are also crucial to encourage help-seeking behaviour and foster community support. [18]

8 Root Causes and Systemic Issues

Many of the social challenges in Moncton are deeply rooted in broader systemic issues. Key contributing factors include:

- **Economic Factors:** The rising cost of living, a lack of adequate income support through social assistance, and a shortage of living wage jobs contribute to poverty and make securing affordable housing increasingly difficult. [12, 14, 24, 32, 42, 46]
- **Housing Market Dynamics:** Low rental vacancy rates, increasing property values, and insufficient investment in the creation of new affordable and supportive housing units create a severe housing crisis that is a primary driver of homelessness. [12, 14, 24, 46]
- **Gaps in Social and Healthcare Systems:** Long wait times for mental health and addiction services, insufficient funding for community-based supports, and a lack of integrated "wrap-around" services make it difficult for individuals with complex needs to access comprehensive care. [20, 24, 28, 30, 33, 41, 46]
- **Systemic Discrimination and Inequality:** Racism, discrimination based on identity (e.g., LGBTQ+, disability), and other forms of bias create barriers to accessing essential resources and opportunities, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. [7, 28, 34, 39]
- **Policy and Investment Priorities:** Critiques point to historical under-investment in social welfare and housing, suggesting that past policy choices have exacerbated current crises. [24] While recent commitments have increased, sustained political will and adequate funding are seen as essential for long-term solutions. [22, 33]

9 Community and Government Response

Addressing Moncton's social challenges requires a multi-pronged approach involving collaboration across government levels, community organizations, the private sector, and the public.

- **Municipal Efforts:** The City of Moncton plays a coordinating role, increasing social grant funding, supporting shelter and drop-in centre operations, investing in affordable housing initiatives, developing municipal policies related to housing and social inclusion, and advocating to other levels of government. [12, 20, 33]
- **Provincial Role:** The Department of Social Development is the lead provincial body for housing and social assistance. [12, 19] The provincial government is responsible for healthcare, including addiction and mental health services provided through regional health authorities like Horizon Health Network. [12, 21, 32] Political leaders have acknowledged the issues and discussed potential increases in support. [22, 34]
- **Community Sector:** A vital network of non-profit organizations provides frontline services, including emergency shelter (Harvest House), food security (Harvest Kitchen), outreach and support (YMCA ReConnect, Salvus Clinic), affordable housing development (Rising Tide), youth services (Youth Impact Jeunesse), support for women fleeing violence (Crossroads for Women), and funding for various social programs (United Way). [8, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 32, 39, 46] A new community incubator is also working to foster social enterprises addressing these issues. [13]
- **Advocacy and Collaboration:** Collaborative bodies like the GMHSC bring together stakeholders to advocate for systemic changes, such as increased provincial support for mental health and addiction services within shelters and the implementation of coordinated access systems. [14, 18, 46] Advocacy also continues regarding policy changes like Policy 713. [3, 7, 11]

Despite these diverse efforts, the scale and complexity of the challenges indicate that current resources and systemic approaches are insufficient to meet the growing needs. A more integrated, adequately funded, and collaborative strategy focusing on prevention and root causes is essential for creating sustainable change.

10 Conclusion

Moncton is confronting a significant and complex social crisis characterized by escalating homelessness, a persistent opioid challenge, ongoing struggles for LGBTQ+ rights, public safety concerns intertwined with other issues, and systemic discrimination that perpetuates social inequality. The strain on mental health and social support services is a critical barrier to addressing these problems effectively. These issues

are not isolated but are deeply interconnected, often compounding the challenges faced by vulnerable individuals.

Successfully navigating these challenges requires a sustained, coordinated, and compassionate response from all sectors. Efforts must focus not only on immediate needs like emergency shelter, harm reduction, and crisis intervention but crucially, on addressing the root causes. This necessitates significant and sustained investment in creating affordable and supportive housing, ensuring accessible and comprehensive mental health and addiction services, implementing robust anti-discrimination policies and initiatives, and fostering economic opportunities that ensure a living wage. Collaborative strategies involving all levels of government, dedicated community organizations, businesses, and residents are essential. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of these issues and implementing integrated, trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and human-rights-based approaches, Moncton can move towards building a more equitable, inclusive, and resilient community for all its residents.

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