

# RESEARCH UPDATE

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## BEST AND WORST PLACES TO BE A WOMAN IN CANADA

REVIEWED BY HARMONY MCRAE

If you've ever wondered where the best and worst place is for women in Canada, then look no further than the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2019 publication: "The Best and Worst Places in Canada to be a Woman in 2019." Overall, Edmonton was ranked 25th, or the second worst place in Canada to be a woman, followed only by Barrie, ON.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) ranked 26 cities across Canada using the Gender Gap Index, which analysed data in 5 domains: health, educational attainment, security, representation in leadership, and economics. Using data from 26 cities, this report is able to show local differences in ⅓ of the Canadian population, and provides an important measure of what cities are doing well, and areas for improvement.

Edmonton did well in one area, health, and not so well in all other areas: leadership, security, economics, and education. Throughout the report, Edmonton was highlighted with descriptions of positive changes, such as the Women's Advocacy Voice of Edmonton (WAVE) committee in the leadership domain, and the Women Building Futures group in education and economics. But the report also highlighted some of Edmonton's gender discrepancies, in this case a higher than average wage gap coupled with higher than average incomes. Basically, though there's lots of money in Edmonton, women don't have an equal share, a point on which more progress is sorely needed.

In the realm of health, Edmonton ranked 9th out of 26, mainly due to women's slightly longer life expectancy than men (84.5 to 79.7 years, respectively). However, despite women living longer, men were more likely than women to report their health being very good or excellent (66.4% vs 62.8%). The health domain also looked at self-reported levels of high stress for women, which was comparable to men's (21.5% to 20.5%, respectively), and self-reported pap testing, which was about average compared to other cities (12th out of 26).

One of the largest gaps was in the leadership and political empowerment domain, with Edmonton ranked 20th overall. Edmonton currently has only 2 women serving in 13 available city councillor positions, and only 6 of the 31 surrounding communities have female mayors. Female representation in management positions has improved slightly to 6.3%, however, still lags behind the national average. In terms of self-employed business owners, men still dominate at 69.4%, and the women's share has actually declined in recent years.

On the issue of personal security, Edmonton was ranked 21st, as unfortunately women still make up the vast majority of victims of intimate partner violence (82.2%), and sexual assaults (93.6%). Optimistically, Edmonton's rate of unfounded sexual assaults is 10% compared to 19% nationally, giving credit to the work of the Edmonton Police Service.

An area of interest in Edmonton is economics, in which the city is ranked 23rd out of 26. Gains have been modest since the recession, with about 10.4% more men employed than women in full-time work. The most interesting statistic here is the average income gap between men and women: men earned an average of \$54,410 compared to women's average of \$32,460, a staggering \$21,950 less per year. And though women's wages have increased

since 2012, they still only earn 63.7% of men's annual income. On the plus side, the proportion of women living in poverty is similar to men's (13.8% to 12.5%, respectively).

In education, Edmonton was ranked second lowest again at 25th out of 26. Part of this is due to the fact that while more women than men complete university, Edmonton has the largest gender gap for college completion. Additionally, many more men than women complete trades and apprenticeship programs, again having the largest gender gap of the cities surveyed.

While the report reflects high-level issues of gender disparity, it admittedly doesn't account for more individual differences for women of minority or Indigenous status, LGBTQ2S+ women, or women in more rural communities. In terms of policy implications, the CCPA recommends an enhanced long-form census to help Statistics Canada collect more robust data. Edmonton has a long way to go to reduce the gender inequities identified in this report, but having the report gives us a means to push for change, and a tool to track those changes over time.

*Publication Source:*

*Katharine Scott (2019). Best and Worst Place to be a Woman in Canada 2019, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: Retrieved from:*

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/03/Best%20and%20Worst%20Places%20to%20Be%20a%20Woman%202019.pdf>

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:**

*Harmony McRae is a Registered Nurse with a Master of Science in Global Health. She is currently co-leading a project on poverty and health equity. Her personal interests include music, dancing, food, friends and travelling.*

*REVIEWED BY JANINE ISAAC*

As Canada's population continues to grow from immigration flows and millennials having babies, child care services become heavier in demand. However, while some provinces have implemented new set-fee policies, MacDonald and Friendly (2019) indicate that child care fees continue to be on the rise in most of the country. Child care continues to be a financial burden for many families, especially for those with more than one child. This research review will provide an overview of MacDonald and Friendly's (2019) methodology and findings as well as a brief analysis on how Alberta compares to the other provinces in Canada in terms of child care fees and policy.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) conducts an annual survey of child care services across Canada. The survey results are used to determine comparative fees for infant, toddler, and preschool care, and does a cross-analysis with other issues related to delivery and funding of services. In past reports, these issues included analysing child care fees in rural areas, as well as how much low income families pay after subsidies. This year, finalized federal child care agreements under the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care were analysed to determine if the recent funding is making child care more affordable. In general, the annual survey is conducted to inform policy and research to deliver better tailored and affordable child care services across Canada.

MacDonald and Friendly's (2019) findings showed that Ontario cities, including Toronto and Mississauga, have the highest child care fees for infants and preschoolers throughout Canada. Conversely, Quebec cities, including Montreal and Gatineau, have the lowest child care fees for all age groups due to their implemented set-fee policy and subsidized market-priced child care fees. The authors also identified that since pre-schoolers make up a greater portion of child care, the change in fees for this age group are important to analyse for parents and policy-makers. In this case, in 17 of the 28 cities surveyed, fees rose faster than inflation. Toronto suburbs in particular saw severe fee hikes. In terms of the availability of space, wait lists were common throughout high-fee cities and were less prevalent in Edmonton and Richmond, BC. Because wait lists are so common, centers often charge parents to be put on one and can be a major contributing barrier to access. Thus, to increase affordability, Ontario banned the practice of charging wait list fees and the authors indicated that all other provinces would do well to follow Ontario's example.

In terms of how Alberta compares with the other provinces, fees have dropped by 6% due to starting the \$25-per-day program and expanding this policy to another 100 centers across the province in 2018. Edmonton showed higher participation rates compared to the rest of the province due to a significant reliance to its large YMCA network. Calgary implemented the \$25-per-day program in newer centers, which take longer to implement affordability policies. In general, while the \$25-per-day program has pushed fees down and moved towards better affordability for families, participation rates to implement set-fees is still low and indicates that families are paying higher market rates due to programs not qualifying for the set-fee policy. In terms of wait list fees, Edmonton and Calgary continue to charge families and the practice continues to be on the rise. Particularly in Edmonton, a spot on a waitlist can reach as high as \$200 and can be a significant barrier to many families, especially those with more than one child and those who are low-income.

Overall, MacDonald and Friendly (2019) indicated that although some provinces have set policy for affordability in child care services, the effect is different in all provinces and child care fees are still on the rise, as there is insufficient funding to enable a greater participation of centres to adopt set-fee policies. While recent federal and provincial funds have pushed forward efforts to create affordability by increasing funding, the survey conducted by CCPA is important to take into consideration as it can inform policy and research on how to move towards affordability, based on the successes of set-fee policies shown particularly in Quebec cities. Moreover, considering and analysing drawbacks such as wait list fees and low participation rates are important barriers to affordability in many child care centers across Canada.

*Publication Source:*

*David MacDonald and Martha Friendly (February 2019). Developmental Milestones: Child Care Fees in Canada's Big Cities 2018. Retrieved from:*  
<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/02/Developmental%20milestones.pdf>

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:**

*Janine Isaac recently finished her second degree at the University of Alberta in Human Geography and Planning. Her current research interests include women and children's rights and gender issues in planning policy, homelessness, and city housing.*

*REVIEWED BY RYAN DEXTER*

The National Research Project on Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy was developed in consultation with important stakeholders, such as “policy makers in government, practitioners and researchers working for non-governmental poverty reduction organizations, and community groups working in partnership with literacy organizations” (p. 5). The strategy identified 11 key findings and 11 recommendations.

The first key finding identified a “clear and well-established relationship between literacy skills and the experience of poverty” (p. 5). Not only is there a correlation between earnings and literacy level, but adults with low literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed and to stay unemployed longer (p. 5). The second key finding identified that “single-access points” (p. 6) and more intergovernmental coordination of literacy and poverty programming delivery would help individuals navigate the poverty reduction programs and services. Key finding number three identified the need for “sustainable and reciprocal partnerships” (p. 6) between local literacy and essential skills and poverty reduction service to help remove barriers to participation. The fourth key finding identified how “project-based funding has increased innovation” (p. 7) but also lead to decreased stability and sustainability of service providers. The fifth key finding identified how knowledge sharing amongst service providers and awareness raising amongst the public are important improvements necessary to increase the effectiveness of poverty literacy and essential skills programs. The sixth key finding identified how “learner-centered approaches” (p. 8) are most effective for adults with low literacy and essential skills levels, and that a holistic assessment of skills is required. The seventh key finding identified how the contextualization of program services to the learning goals of individuals accessing program services facilitates “transitions to employment or education” (p. 8). The eighth key finding identified that integrating services is a more successful way to help low-skilled adults to transition to employment. By combining community supports that target “food security, income supplements and housing” (p. 8) with literacy and essential skills delivery, program services are more effective. The ninth key finding identified that awareness and accessibility are the most significant obstacles for adults seeking to upgrade their literacy and essential skills. The tenth key finding identified that developing improved “self-esteem, resilience and self-confidence” (p. 9) are important for the delivery of literacy and essential skills programming. The eleventh key finding identified that the “outcome frameworks are often too narrow” (p. 9) and do not include the key indicators of success.

Along with the 11 key findings, the National Research Project on Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy also outlined 11 recommendations for policy makers, service providers, and other individuals and groups involved in the delivery of literacy and essential skills programming. The first recommendation suggests that governments in Canada should consider literacy as a basic human right. The second recommendation suggests that literacy should be recognized as a policy priority requiring coordinated cooperation across departments. The third recommendation suggests that literacy should be a central poverty reduction strategy given their close association. The fourth recommendation suggests policies and funding models should incentivize collaboration between service providers rather than competition. The fifth recommendation suggests that funding for literacy and essential skills should be both “sustainable and predictable” (p. 12) as well as “innovative” (p. 12), and suggests a “core-funding” (p. 12) model rather than a project-based funding model. The sixth recommendation suggests that the governments of Canada improve literacy and essential skills upgrading programs by encouraging greater collaboration between community

organizations, and increasing awareness of programs. The seventh recommendation suggests that “raising awareness and accessibility” (p. 13) of programs, by increasing resources for “outreach and communications strategies” (p. 13), should be a key priority. The eighth recommendation suggests that learner-centered approaches, which have deep appreciation and value for learners’ experience, should be used to maximize engagement, especially amongst marginalized groups. The ninth recommendation suggests program delivery should be contextualized to meet the learners’ goals, as this form of programming is more effective than a general curriculum. The tenth recommendation suggests literacy and essential skills service delivery should be integrated with community organizations’ service delivery to improve the quality of literacy and poverty reduction. The eleventh recommendation suggests outcome frameworks be improved by including “indicators of skills and psychological capital” (p. 14).

*Publication Source:*

*Frontier College (March 2019). Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy. Retrieved from: <https://www.frontiercollege.ca/getattachment/News/Blog/March-2019/Literacy-as-a-Poverty-Reduction-Strategy/Frontier-College-National-Research-on-Literacy-and-Essential-Skills-as-a-Poverty-Reduction-Strategy-Final-Report.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>*

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:**

*Ryan Dexter has volunteered with ESPC for several years. He enjoys participating and being involved in social justice work in his local community and working towards positive social change. .*

*REVIEWED BY SHAWNA LADOUCEUR*

Unlike the established homeless-serving system in Canada, which functions to mitigate homelessness with emergency services, Housing First is a promising program focused on ending homelessness. To date, Housing First programs have focused on the archetypal homeless individual — white, middle-aged men with concurrent substance use and mental health challenges. But research shows the experience of homelessness is very much a gendered experience, with violence and trauma as overarching themes for women and girls. Therefore, evaluations are needed to understand the efficacy of Housing First in this specific population with a mind to how enhanced models might better integrate gender-based practices. This evaluation attempted to do just that, focusing on the voices of women accessing a Housing First, Homes 4 Women (H4W), program during a two-year pilot in a mid-size Ontario city. Using a critical feminist lens, it examined program outcomes in terms of housing stability, housing choice, social well-being, and fidelity with proven Housing First principles.

The evaluation used a trauma-informed approach in interviewing the ten women (‘participants’) accessing this H4W program. All listed either social assistance or disability assistance as their primary source of income; most were mothers with little or no contact with their children; many identified living with addiction; and all indicated having experienced multiple traumas. In addition to shelter, most sought improved health and improved access to their children as priorities. Focusing on chronically homeless women with complex case histories, interviews highlighted many challenges to obtaining housing, including poverty, service limitations, and insufficient resources. Despite the complexity of these barriers, at the end of the two-year H4W program, six of the ten participants were successfully housed. Though a positive outcome, this evaluation also highlighted various tensions and noted room for improvements.

In terms of housing stability, participants focused strongly on the nature and quality of relationships with H4W staff as the reason for success. As one of the important tenets of the Housing First program, “the right support” often included frequent contact and communication with participants, noting a strong sense of interest in their well-being among H4W staff. Though an overall positive experience in this regard, this expanded role for H4W case workers after commencement of the program sometimes meant considerable difficulty connecting to this now-overstretched support system with participants noting this as a frustration.

With regard to housing choice, Housing First research has shown goals for housing do not work if they are not driven by client choice. Though H4W staff clearly indicated participant choice was always a priority, many participants felt required to follow staff recommendations despite concerns about the accommodation not meeting their needs. Simultaneously, staff felt pressured to achieve permanent housing outcomes in the context of limited resources. The associated power differential was detrimental to meeting the goal of housing choice. Wanting to appear grateful for receiving support, participants weighed the consequences of asserting their autonomy of choice.

With regard to social well-being, given the urgency of satisfying the immediate needs of women with street-involvement, there was limited consultation as to how this program would integrate with the community’s broader homeless-serving sector. This led to tensions related to both gaps, overlaps, and difficulties addressing either, as the program was insufficiently integrated with existing services prior to commencing participant intake. Participants noted some of the resources did not always meet promises. Though there was intense

collaboration with lead partners, some community partners saw the ultimate termination of the program as evidence of having been poorly conceived in terms of community-wide collaboration. That being said, recognition by this study of the ongoing trauma of grief and loss due to child apprehension, which arose repeatedly in participant interviews, instigated a community organization to start such a service before the study was even concluded. This positive development further highlights the benefit of striving for fully integrated partnerships within the community.

Though, as demonstrated by this evaluation, H4W does work for women it should also be noted that when poorly delivered, or delivered without consideration for gendered factors, it can put women at risk. Inconsistent communication and service provision can alienate women from service. Underdevelopment of appropriate skills and planning can put women in compromising situations. Though acceptable fidelity was achieved with adherence to proven Housing First principles, increased staff compliment, more time to understand policy and staff roles, to develop formal collaborative partnerships, and delaying intake until these issues are addressed would provide improvements. Given the overall success of this H4W program in housing complex and chronically homeless participants, future work is encouraged in exploring the unique needs of other specific populations.

*Publication Source:*

*Abe Oudshoorn et al (2018). Evaluation of a Housing First Program for Chronically Homeless Women, Journal of Social Inclusion. Retrieved from: <https://josi.journals.griffith.edu.au/index.php/inclusion/article/view/1095/973>*

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:**

*Shawna Ladouceur is a Registered Nurse who sees the impacts of the social determinants of health in ways that demand action. She has extensive experience working directly with vulnerable populations in the inner city. Her personal interests include skiing, hiking, biking, running, reading and travelling.*

Nutrition programs are being implemented across the world, but Canada is surprisingly the only G7 nation without a set national school nutrition program (Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019). Is it beneficial for Canada to have a national student nutrition program or is it an ineffective use of government spending? A review article written by Wyonch and Sullivan (2019) looks at the short- and long-term impacts of student nutrition programs on academic performance and health, as well as which communities would benefit more than others to have them implemented. The initial review of many studies from the United States and around the world showed that food programs have little impact on long-term food security in food insecure households. This means that although children are being fed with these nutrition programs during school, it is doing little to ensure that they live in a home with access to food regularly. Food is required for growth and development, as a study found that children with poor diets are more vulnerable to stunted growth and impaired cognitive development (Ke & Ford-Jones, 2015). Therefore, the need to provide food for undernourished children is apparent. However, the benefits of eating breakfast are seen only in children who are undernourished and are not certain in children who are not undernourished (Greenhalgh, Kristjansson, and Robinson, 2007; Oostindjer et al., 2017; Taras, 2005).

Another issue that nutrition programs attempt to tackle is childhood obesity. Unfortunately, studies show that nutrition programs have little impact on childhood obesity, but they do have a short-term impact on improving nutrition and relieving student hunger (Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019). In some studies, breakfast programs had no effect on the students' dietary intake for the day (Crepinsek, Singh, Berstein, & McLaughlin, 2006). Similarly, in a study conducted in Nova Scotia of grade 5 students, the student nutrition program found increased consumption of milk products, decreased consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, but no significant effects on obesity as it continued to rise (Fung, Mclsaac, Kuhle, Kirk, & Veugelers, 2013).

After reviewing many studies, Wyonch and Sullivan (2019) looked at the effects of a breakfast program on students' learning ability, test scores, and attendance in the Toronto School Board District. Schools in this district with higher suspension rates, absence rates, and that were located in lower income communities were more likely to provide meals for their students (Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019). This study compared schools with breakfast program to schools with no breakfast programs in place. The results of this study showed no improvements in students' academic performance that were statistically significant, and it showed inconclusive evidence on whether the breakfast programs increased attendance or learning skills (Muthuswamy, 2012).

The observed benefits of meal programs in schools are most apparent in low-income populations but the reasons as to why are still not known. Due to the stigma of utilizing meal programs, they are most successful when they are offered to all students of the same peer group free-of-charge (Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019). The review concludes by stating that the evidence that nutrition programs improve students' learning, obesity, or food insecurity is unsettled and not well understood yet. A possible reason as to why the evidence is uncertain could be that nutrition programs attempt to solve multiple issues (i.e., obesity and academic performance). Therefore it is difficult to measure the effects and more research is needed to accurately measure each underlying issue.

Another issue with this review of nutrition programs is that most of these studies are conducted in places other than Canada so research methods and policies might vary. A Canada-wide universal nutrition program is costly, needing about \$1.4 billion annually with a lot of the funds needing to be raised by communities. With the benefits of student nutrition programs being inconclusive, it may be more beneficial for Canada to utilize this money to implement policies that target the separate issues of childhood obesity, food insecurity in households, and academic performance (Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019). There is still a lot more research that needs to be done to show that nutrition programs are beneficial and should be implemented across Canada. Before expanding nutrition programs Canada-wide, funds and research should go into improving existing local programs in Canada.

*Publication Source:*

*Rosalie Wyonch and Abby Sullivan (February 2019). Health and Grades: Nutrition Programs for Kids in Canada. CD Howe Institute. Retrieved from:*

*[https://www.cdhowe.org/sites/default/files/attachments/research\\_papers/mixed/Commentary%20532%20compressed.pdf](https://www.cdhowe.org/sites/default/files/attachments/research_papers/mixed/Commentary%20532%20compressed.pdf)*

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH REVIEWER:**

*Yasmine Boulos has a passion for helping those that are disadvantaged. She currently works as a psychological assistant in the school system helping marginalized youth. She is volunteering to gain more experience in social policy planning.*

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“Through our research, analysis, and engagement, we hope to create a community in which all people are full and valued participants.”

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—The Edmonton Social Planning Council

## ABOUT ESPC

The ESPC is an independent, non-profit, charitable organization. Our focus is social research, particularly in the areas of low income and poverty.

We are dedicated to encouraging the adoption of equitable social policy, supporting the work of other organizations who are striving to improve the lives of Edmontonians, and educating the public regarding the social issues that impact them on a daily basis.

## OUR STAFF:

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**Justine Basilan**, Executive Assistant

## THE RESEARCH UPDATE:

The Edmonton Social Planning Council, in collaboration with our volunteers, strive to provide stakeholders and community members with up-to-date reviews on recently published social research reports.

Interested in volunteering? Email [johnk@edmontonsocialplanning.ca](mailto:johnk@edmontonsocialplanning.ca)