

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report on rural Nova Scotia has been produced by the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) Project, a partnership between the Coastal Communities Network and the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University. The goal of this project is to increase the ability of rural communities to use social science research to influence policies that contribute to the health and sustainability of rural communities. This report is one of the tools produced by the RCIP Project to provide a baseline against which people living in rural Nova Scotia, as well as those who work in universities and government on behalf of those communities, will be able to measure future changes in rural communities. Data are synthesized in the report at national, provincial, regional, and county levels to “paint the landscape of rural Nova Scotia” in an effort to help rural communities understand and address the issues facing them.

The report is organized in five chapters that cover key dimensions of rural life – *Demography, Economy, Education, Environment, and Health*. Each chapter begins with *Fast Facts* that highlight some of the significant features of Nova Scotia’s rural landscape.

For example:

- Depending on how “rural” is defined, between 60% and 75% of Nova Scotia’s total population lives in rural areas.
- In rural Nova Scotia, the average age is higher than in urban areas and is increasing.
- Unemployment rates in rural Nova Scotia are substantially higher than the national average for rural areas.
- While the number of people employed in the fishery in the province has been decreasing, the total value of commercial fish landings has been increasing.
- Approximately two-thirds of students in public schools in the province attend rural schools.
- Average class sizes in rural Nova Scotia are smaller than in urban Nova Scotia at all grade levels.
- Nova Scotia’s mature forests have been largely depleted.
- Nova Scotia is leading the country in reducing the amount of solid waste disposed of in public and private facilities.
- Compared with other Canadians, rural Nova Scotians have particularly high rates of chronic illness such as cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.
- Rural Nova Scotians generally report high levels of social support.

This report is intended to be a starting point for discussion, analysis, and action. Questions are provided at the end of each chapter to facilitate discussion about what the data mean for rural communities.

An electronic version of this report can be downloaded from the RCIP website, [www.ruralnovascotia.ca](http://www.ruralnovascotia.ca), along with additional data that were collected, but not included in this report.



# INTRODUCTION

## WHY COMPILE A REPORT ON RURAL NOVA SCOTIA?

People who have lived for any length of time in small and rural communities across Nova Scotia will tell you that things have changed over the years. But not everyone will be able to tell you precisely how things have changed. The source of change may be a policy developed far beyond the boundaries of a rural community, but which greatly impacts the economy, quality of life, and sustainability of the community. The systematic collection of data and other research evidence is a central ingredient in promoting policy change for rural health and sustainability.

The goal of the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) Project, a partnership between the Coastal Communities Network and the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University, is to increase the ability of rural communities to use social science research to influence policy that contributes to the health and sustainability of rural communities. The RCIP project provides practical tools that communities can use to influence policy. This report is one of the tools produced by the RCIP Project to provide a baseline against which people living in rural Nova Scotia, as well as those who work in universities and government on behalf of those communities, will be able to measure future changes in rural communities. Data are compiled at the national, provincial, regional, and county levels to “paint the landscape of rural Nova Scotia” in an effort to help rural communities understand and address the issues facing them.

## WHERE IS RURAL NOVA SCOTIA?

Which communities qualify as “rural” in Nova Scotia has been a matter of endless discussion. The definition of “rural” has been debated for years.<sup>1</sup> Halifax, Dartmouth, and Bedford are certainly not rural areas. When it comes to smaller communities across the province, some people would argue that towns such as Truro (population 12,264), New Glasgow (population 10,060), or Amherst (population 9,718) are hardly rural.<sup>2</sup> Others would argue that such communities retain the “feel” of small towns, and would consider them as rural. There is no agreed-upon yardstick, no population benchmark, that we can use to label one community as “urban” and another, slightly smaller, community as “rural.” Therefore, a precise definition of what qualifies as “rural” in Nova Scotia is difficult to determine. So researchers and community developers must decide which definition to use. For the purposes of this report, we have – where the data allow – classified the urban areas of Halifax Regional Municipality (i.e. Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford) as “urban” and the rest of the province as “rural.”

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## DATA SOURCES

For each chapter of this report, numerous data sources have been consulted. These are secondary sources drawn from existing data sets. Unfortunately, data are not systematically collected on many issues relevant to rural communities, e.g., wharves. Therefore, we have chosen the most relevant data from available sources. Some of the most frequently referenced resources in the Demographics, Economy, Education, and Environment chapters include:

- Census of the Population (2001), Statistics Canada
- Statistical Profiles (2002), Nova Scotia Department of Finance
- CANSIM II Tables, Statistics Canada
- Nova Scotia Statistical Review (2002), Nova Scotia Department of Finance
- Statistical Summary 2001-2002, Nova Scotia Department of Education
- The State of the Nova Scotia Environment (1998), Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour
- GPI Atlantic reports

For the Health chapter, the main sources of data include:

- Canadian Vital Statistics Database
- Canadian Community Health Survey 2000/01

*See the endnotes for each chapter at the end of this report for details about data sources.*

## DATA LIMITATIONS

There are limitations in the collection and compilation of statistics, of which the readers of this report should be aware. For example, the Census undertaken by Statistics Canada is a large and complex process that is subject to some degree of error. Errors occur during data collection and the processing of data, such as:<sup>3</sup>

- coverage errors – when individuals or dwellings are missed during data collection, counted incorrectly or counted doubly;
- non-response errors – when individuals and/or households are absent and responses cannot be obtained;
- response errors – when an incorrect response is recorded;
- processing errors – when the information is incorrectly entered into the computer system;
- sampling errors – responses from a sample of individuals or households may differ from the responses if the entire populations were surveyed;
- errors may also occur due to the “random rounding”, “area suppression”, and “cell suppression” procedures that protect the confidentiality of respondents.

Reporting on the health of rural Nova Scotians is a challenge due to the nature of data collection. These limitations are discussed in further detail in the Health chapter .

Census and other data are constantly being updated. The data contained in this report represent the most up-to-date information available, but even as the report is being written, new data are being collected.

Recognizing the limitations of the data, this report uses the most reliable and current data possible. Readers should be aware of the data limitations and be cautious as they read and interpret the data.

## LIFE IN RURAL NOVA SCOTIA

What aspects of life in rural Nova Scotia should be examined in order to gauge the well-being or quality of life of our rural communities? What is easily measurable, and what is not? Though there are no easy answers to these questions, we have tried to take a broad approach that looks at the quality of rural living in our selection of data about the health and sustainability of rural Nova Scotia.

Health literature is beginning to recognize that quality of life is determined by more than just material factors. Social, economic, and environmental factors play a key role in quality of life. There is a link between health and social inequalities, and societal and economic structures have a direct impact on health. Factors such as wealth, poverty, job insecurity, education, social mobility, and stress contribute to the health and well being of people living in all communities, and some factors are more pronounced in rural communities.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the data we have selected reflect the conditions that impact our daily lives and our quality of life.

This report focuses on five key dimensions of rural life – demographics (i.e. population characteristics), economy, education, environment, and health. Each of these dimensions is addressed in the five chapters of the report. They are listed below, along with questions intended to spark discussion about life in rural communities in Nova Scotia.

**Demographics:** Are rural communities thriving or in decline? Are our small communities attractive places for the young people who grew up in them to begin families of their own? How is the trend toward urbanization affecting rural communities?

**Economy:** How are economic trends affecting the health of local, rural economies? Are current approaches to economic development working in rural Nova Scotia? Are our primary resource industries – fisheries, forestry, and agriculture – operating in a manner that will assure these resources will be there for the next generation?

**Education:** Are young people in rural Nova Scotia being equipped with the skills that will be demanded in the workplaces of the future? Does rural Nova Scotia get a fair slice of the educational pie? Are some areas lagging behind in the quality of education received?

**Environment:** How are Nova Scotia's environmental resources being managed? Are our conservation measures working to protect the environment? Will the natural beauty of Nova Scotia be sustained for future generations?

**Health:** What are the key factors that affect the health of people and communities?

How healthy are Nova Scotians living in rural communities compared to the rest of Canada? Is the availability and quality of health care in rural Nova Scotia improving or deteriorating?

## COMPLEX QUESTIONS

In seeking answers for the questions above, this report examines each topic separately while trying, at the same time, to maintain a broader vision that looks at the totality of factors that make up “quality of life” in rural Nova Scotia. The report is a first step in exploring these complex questions and a resource for individuals and organizations that want to determine whether their efforts to improve health and sustainability in rural communities are making a difference.

## ELECTRONIC VERSION

An electronic version of this document is available at [www.ruralnovascotia.ca](http://www.ruralnovascotia.ca). We collected far more data than we could use in this report. Consequently, we had to be very selective in what we have included here. The additional data not used in this report can be found on the website in downloadable format for easy access.