

Energy poverty in Canada: An overlooked health and equity issue

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As many as one in five Canadian households can be considered to be in energy poverty, according to researchers from McGill University.

Energy poverty occurs when households cannot afford or access the levels of energy necessary to meet their [daily needs](#), live decent lives, and maintain healthy indoor temperatures all year round. More Canadians potentially suffer from [energy poverty](#) than from food insecurity.

Energy poverty as a predictor of poor health

"Earlier research has shown that a cold indoor temperature is associated with an exacerbation of some chronic diseases, so energy poverty is cause for concern," says Mylène Riva, the Canada Research Chair in Housing, Community and Health, an associate professor in the Department of Geography and the senior author on a recent study in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.

"In another study, we are conducting in a small town in rural Canada, as many as 8% of participants reported having seen their breath inside their homes in winter."

Indeed, the researchers found that, compared to those who were able to access and afford the energy services they needed, energy poverty was associated with a greater likelihood of poorer self-rated general and [mental health](#). These factors are known to be strong predictors of higher levels of illness and an increased risk of hospitalization and death.

Higher levels of energy poverty in rural areas

The research also shows that there are higher levels of energy poverty in [rural areas](#) in Canada, where the population tends to be older, living in larger households, and facing greater income insecurity.

"For example, we found that in a small town in Nova Scotia, where

around 40% of the population faces energy poverty, one household in three reported having to cut into their grocery spending to pay their utility bills," adds Laurianne Debanné, a Ph.D. student in Health Geography at McGill who has been studying energy poverty in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, for the past three years.

Current Canadian energy efficiency programs failing to address energy insecurity

The researchers highlight the fact that programs and policies to advance energy transition—for example, those targeting [energy efficiency](#) in the housing sector—tend to be accessible to homeowners rather than renters and could potentially create or exacerbate social and health inequities if their benefits are not distributed equitably across the population.

"Households facing energy poverty start at a disadvantage in the energy transition. To prevent and reduce energy poverty and increase [energy security](#) across the country, programs and policies should address the main drivers of energy poverty, factors such as dwelling conditions and their energy efficiency, lower incomes, and the [energy costs](#) borne by ratepayers and end-users," says Riva.

"Given the high proportion of Canadian households facing energy poverty, with demonstrated implications for population health, the results from this study make a strong case for energy poverty to be included in discussions about a just energy transition towards future climate resilience in Canada."

More information: Mylène Riva et al, Energy poverty: an overlooked determinant of health and climate resilience in Canada, *Canadian Journal of Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.17269/s41997-023-00741-0](https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-023-00741-0)

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