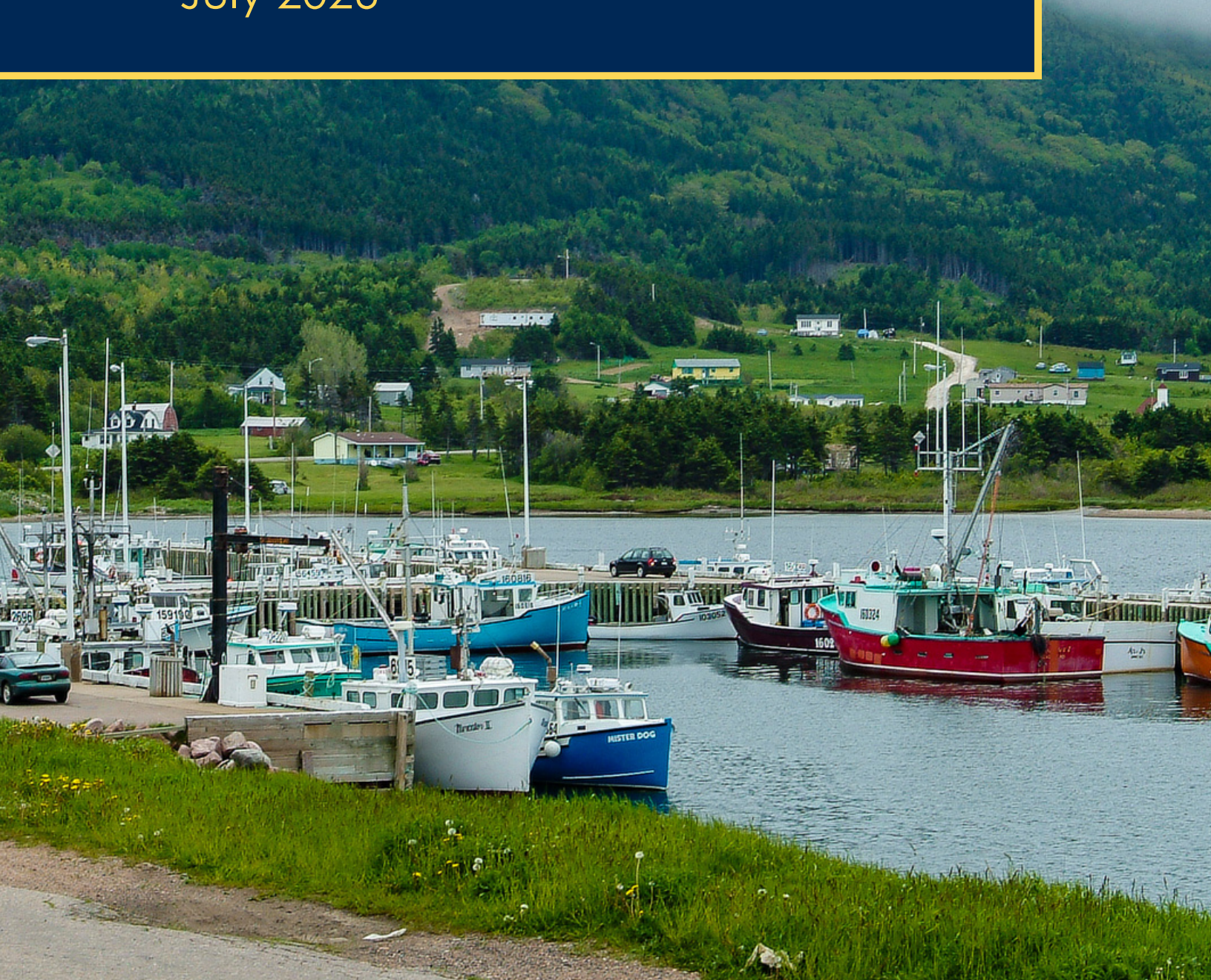




Ecology Action Centre

Energy Poverty in Cape Breton

Key Findings of the
People for Policy Project
July 2026



Households spending 6 per cent or more of after-tax household income on home energy needs (heat and electricity) are considered by Efficiency Nova Scotia to be living in energy poverty. This is the standard most used by energy analysts; other versions range from 5.4 per cent to 10 per cent with some variation in what aspects of energy use they include.

Energy poverty rates are high throughout Nova Scotia but exceptionally so in CBRM.

- **54 per cent** of all CBRM households lived in energy poverty in April 2026 versus **40 per cent** for Nova Scotia which has one of the highest rates among all provinces (Efficiency Nova Scotia).
- **9 of 10** communities with the highest energy poverty rates in the province are in CBRM (Efficiency One, December 2023).
- Among low-income households in CBRM, **60 per cent** live in energy poverty; **one in four pay 15 per cent or more** of household income for home energy needs (Statistics Canada, Census 2021).

“Energy poverty occurs when an individual or household struggles to pay their energy bills while maintaining a basic standard of living.”

- Efficiency Nova Scotia





Three main factors contribute to the high levels of energy poverty in CBRM:

- **Lower incomes**

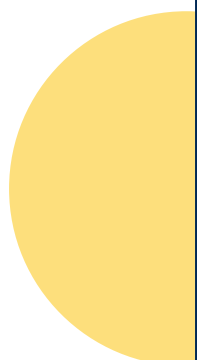
In 2023, **25.7 per cent** of CBRM residents were living in low income versus 18.6 per cent for Nova Scotia and 17 per cent for Canada (Statistics Canada).

- **Heating with fuel oil**

32 per cent of Nova Scotians heat with fuel oil vs. 3 per cent of Canadians overall; Nova Scotians heating with fuel oil pay **\$1,593** more than those using electrical heating. (Residential Heating Fuel and Equipment; Heat, Housing and Affordability in Atlantic Canada).

- **Older housing stock**

Homes built before 1996 consume nearly twice as much energy as homes built since then; **67 per cent** of CBRM homes were built before 1980 and nearly 90 per cent were built before 2000 (Heat, Housing and Affordability in Atlantic Canada; Statistics Canada).



Unaffordable home energy costs force people into 'heat or eat' choices with respect to other essential expenditures such as for rent, food, medication and hygiene. Efforts to cope negatively impact people's physical and mental health, housing security and relationships with family and friends.



For local residents, energy poverty looks like:

- Recurring illnesses from living in the cold
- Buying oil by the jerrycan to get by
- Limiting household living space to one or two rooms to conserve energy
- Repeated borrowing from family and friends
- Mounting, unrepayable debt
- Risk of disconnection or eviction
- Living in constant vigilance, survival and stress!

Some affordable energy programs, such as HomeWarming, are highly regarded but are not reaching a substantial portion of the population they are meant to serve; others are seen by residents experiencing energy poverty as 'better than nothing' band-aids falling far short of what is needed (for instance, a \$400 one-time-per-year heating assistance rebate amounts to a small fraction of household energy costs and does nothing to address underlying causes).



"I think that grants and rebate programs... don't structurally deal with the issue on a permanent basis."

"The people should be in control of [their] basic human needs."

- People for Policy participants



Overall, people are seeking affordable energy on a sustainable basis and want more say in how their energy needs are being addressed. Change of this sort is possible but requires concerted efforts from government, community and private partners.

Key areas for attention:

- **Energy navigators** – Despite their need for assistance, many residents do not know about available programs or are unable to navigate their way through eligibility requirements, program applications and contracting of retrofit and clean energy services. A robust, coordinated system of community-based energy navigators, like what has been used in the Energize Bridgewater initiative, is needed to facilitate access to available programming.
- **Landlord engagement** – Renters in CBRM experience exceptionally high rates of energy poverty. Unfortunately, renters often cannot access energy retrofit and clean energy programs due to lack of necessary landlord support. Improved incentives and/or government legislation is needed to ramp up landlord participation in energy affordability programs so the needs of renter households can be met.
- **Public/community ownership of energy systems** – New technologies are offering communities and households much more say over how their energy is produced and distributed, and control over the associated costs. Unfortunately, Nova Scotia's energy system is currently controlled by one large private utility with its own priorities and interests. Efforts are needed to expand the use of municipal, co-operative and non-profit energy systems through which local residents can better control the cost and other aspects of the energy they need.

